

**JONATHAN
KELLERMAN**

**A
COLD
HEART**

BALLANTINE BOOKS • NEW YORK

**JONATHAN
KELLERMAN**

**A
COLD
HEART**

BALLANTINE BOOKS • NEW YORK

A Ballantine Book
Published by The Random House Ballantine Publishing Group

Copyright © 2003 by Jonathan Kellerman

A Cold Heart is a work of fiction. Names, places, and incidents either are a product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

All rights reserved under International and Pan-American Copyright Conventions. Published in the United States by The Random House Ballantine Publishing Group, a division of Random House, Inc., New York, and simultaneously in Canada by Random House of Canada Limited, Toronto.

Ballantine and colophon are registered trademarks of Random House, Inc.

www.ballantinebooks.com

Book design by C. Linda Dingler

The Cataloging-in-Publication Data for this title is available from the Library of Congress.

ISBN 0-345-45255-0

Manufactured in the United States of America

First Edition: May 2003

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

To the music men:

*Larry Brown, Rob Carlson, Ben Elder, Wayne Griffith,
George Gruhn, John Monteleone, Gregg Miner, John Silva,
Tom Van Hoose, Larry Wexer.*

And to the memory of Michael Katz.

1

The witness remembers it like this:

Shortly after 2 A.M., Baby Boy Lee exits the Snake Pit through the rear alley fire door. The light fixture above the door is set up for two bulbs, but one is missing, and the illumination that trickles down onto the garbage-flecked asphalt is feeble and oblique, casting a grimy mustard-colored disc, perhaps three feet in diameter. Whether or not the missing bulb is intentional will remain conjecture.

It is Baby Boy's second and final break of the evening. His contract with the club calls for a pair of one-hour sets. Lee and the band have run over their first set by twenty-two minutes, because of Baby Boy's extended guitar and harmonica solos. The audience, a nearly full house of 124, is thrilled. The Pit is a far cry from the venues Baby Boy played in his heyday, but he appears to be happy, too.

It has been a while since Baby Boy has taken the stage anywhere and played coherent blues. Audience members questioned later are unanimous: Never has the big man sounded better.

Baby Boy is said to have finally broken free of a host of addictions, but one habit remains: nicotine. He smokes three packs of Kools a day, taking deep-in-the-lung drags while onstage, and his guitars are notable

for the black, lozenge-shaped burn marks that scar their lacquered wood finishes.

Tonight, though, Baby Boy has been uncommonly focused, rarely removing lit cigarettes from where he customarily jams them: just above the nut of his 62 Telecaster, wedged under the three highest strings, smoldering slowly.

So it is probably a tobacco itch that causes the singer to leap off-stage the moment he plays his final note, flinging his bulk out the back door without a word to his band or anyone else. The bolt clicks behind him, but it is doubtful he notices.

The fiftieth Kool of the day is lit before Baby Boy reaches the alley. He is sucking in mentholated smoke as he steps in and out of the disc of dirty light.

The witness, such that he is, is certain that he caught a glimpse of Baby Boy's face in the light and that the big man was sweating. If that's true, perhaps the perspiration had nothing to do with anxiety but resulted from Baby Boy's obesity and the calories expended on his music: For 83 minutes he has been jumping and howling and swooning, caressing his guitar, bringing the crowd to a frenzy at set's end with a fiery, throat-ripping rendition of his signature song, a basic blues setup in the key of B-flat that witnesses the progression of Baby Boy's voice from inaudible mumble to an anguished wail.

*There's women that'll mess you
There's those that treat you nice
But I got me a woman with
A heart as cold as ice.*

*A cold heart,
A cold, cold heart
My baby's hot but she is cold
A cold heart,
A cold, cold heart
My baby's murdering my soul . . .*

At this point, the details are unreliable. The witness is a hepatitis-stricken, homeless man by the name of Linus Leopold Brophy, age thirty-nine but looking sixty, who has no interest in the blues or any other type of music and who happens to be in the alley because he has been drinking Red Phoenix fortified wine all night and the Dumpster five yards east of the Snake Pit's back door provides shelter for him to sleep off his delirium tremens. Later, Brophy will consent to a blood alcohol test and will come up .24, three times the legal limit for driving, but according to Brophy "barely buzzed."

Brophy claims to have been drowsy but awake when the sound of the back door opening rouses him and he sees a big man step out into the light and then fade to darkness. Brophy claims to recall the lit end of the man's cigarette glowing "like Halloween, you know—orange, shiny, real bright, know what I mean?" and admits that he seizes upon the idea of panhandling money from the smoker. ("Because the guy is fat, so I figure he had enough to eat, that's for sure, maybe he'll come across, know what I mean?")

Linus Brophy struggles to his feet and approaches the big man.

Seconds later, someone else approaches the big man, arriving from the opposite direction—the mouth of the alley, at Lodi Place. Linus Brophy stops in his tracks, retreats into darkness, sits down next to the Dumpster.

The new arrival, a man, also good-sized, according to Brophy, though not as tall as Baby Boy Lee and maybe half of Baby Boy's width, walks right up to the singer and says something that sounds "friendly." Questioned about this characterization extensively, Brophy denies hearing any conversation but refuses to budge from his judgment of amiability. ("Like they were friends, you know? Standing there, friendly.")

The orange glow of Baby Boy's cigarette lowers from mouth to waist level as he listens to the new arrival.

The new arrival says something else to Baby Boy, and Baby Boy says something back.

The new arrival moves closer to Baby Boy. Now, the two men appear to be hugging.

The new arrival steps back, looks around, turns heel and leaves the alley the way he came.

Baby Boy Lee stands there alone.

His hand drops. The orange glow of the cigarette hits the ground, setting off sparks.

Baby Boy sways. Falls.

Linus Brophy stares, finally builds up the courage to approach the big man. Kneeling, he says, "Hey, man," receives no answer, reaches out and touches the convexity of Baby Boy's abdomen. He feels moisture on his hand and is repelled.

As a younger man, Brophy had a temper. He has spent half of his life in various county jails and state penitentiaries, saw things, did things. He knows the feel and the smell of fresh blood.

Stumbling to his feet, he lurches to the back door of the Snake Pit and tries to pull it open, but the door is locked. He knocks, no one answers.

The shortest way out of the alley means retracing the steps of the newcomer: walk out to Lodi Place, hook north to Fountain, and find someone who'll listen.

Brophy has already wet his pants twice tonight—first while sleeping drunk and now, upon touching Baby Boy Lee's blood. Fear grips him, and he heads the other way, tripping through the long block that takes him to the other end of the alley. Finding no one on the street at this hour, he makes his way to an all-night liquor store on the corner of Fountain and El Centro.

Once inside the store, Brophy shouts at the Lebanese clerk who sits reading behind a Plexiglas window, the same man who one hour ago sold him three bottles of Red Phoenix. Brophy waves his arms, tries to get across what he has just seen. The clerk regards Brophy as exactly what he is—a babbling wino—and orders him to leave.

When Brophy begins pounding on the Plexiglas, the clerk considers reaching for the nail-studded baseball bat he keeps beneath the counter. Sleepy and weary of confrontation, he dials 911.

Brophy leaves the liquor store and walks agitatedly up and down Fountain Avenue. When a squad car from Hollywood Division arrives,

Officers Keith Montez and Cathy Ruggles assume Brophy is their problem and handcuff him immediately.

Somehow he manages to communicate with the Hollywood Blues and they drive their black and white to the mouth of the alley. High-intensity LAPD-issue flashlights bathe Baby Boy Lee's corpse in a heartless, white glare.

The big man's mouth gapes, and his eyes are rolled back. His banana yellow Stevie Ray Vaughan T-shirt is dyed crimson, and a red pool has seeped beneath his corpse. Later, it will be ascertained that the killer gutted the big man with a classic street fighter's move: long-bladed knife thrust under the sternum followed by a single upward motion that slices through intestine and diaphragm and nicks the right ventricle of Baby Boy's already seriously enlarged heart.

Baby Boy is long past help, and the cops don't even attempt it.

2

Petra Connor, barely out of her no-guys phase, knew the pantsuit had been a stupid idea.

Three-month no-guys phase. The way she saw it, she deserved more self-indulgence than that, but her forgiving nature had taken over, and now she could look at carriers of Y chromosomes without wanting to punch them.

She was the only female detective working nights at Hollywood Division, and pretending to be nice was hurting her facial muscles.

The first month of the phase had been spent convincing herself it wasn't her fault. Even though here she was, barely thirty and a two-time loser in the Serious Relationship Sweepstakes.

Chapter One: the rotten husband. Chapter Two was even worse: the boyfriend who'd gone back to his ex-wife.

She'd stopped hating Ron Banks. Even though he'd been the one to come on to *her*, had pursued her gently but unrelentingly. Weakening her resistance by being courtly and caring and tender in bed, a genuine nice guy.

Like so many nice guys, essentially weak.

Some would say Ron had done the right thing. For himself. For his daughters.

Something else that had attracted Petra to him: terrific father. Ron was raising Alicia and Bea while his ex, a Spanish beauty, trained horses in Majorca. Two-year-old divorce, you'da thought it would stick.

Sweet little girls, six and seven. Petra had allowed herself to become attached to them. Pretending . . .

Petra had endured a hysterectomy at a freakishly young age.

Toward the end, when Ms. Caballera was laying on the pressure big time—calling Ron ten times a day, talking dirty to him, e-mailing him bikini shots, *begging*—he'd been a basket case, crippled by conflict. Finally, Petra shoved him in the right direction, and he took leave from his Sheriff's Homicide job in order to sort things out and flew to Spain with the girls.

To Petra, Spain had always meant art. The Prado, Degas, Velasquez, Goya. She'd never been there. Had never been out of the country.

Now, Spain meant *over*.

Ron called Petra once, breaking into sobs. *So sorry, baby, so, so sorry, but the girls are so happy, I never realized how unhappy they were . . .*

The girls had always looked okay to Petra, but what did she know about kids, barren thirty-year-old spinster that she was.

Ron stayed in Spain for the summer and sent her a consolation gift: stupid little carving of a flamenco dancer. Castanets and all. Petra broke off the limbs and tossed it in the trash.

Stu Bishop, her longtime partner, had bailed on her, too. Resigning a promising career to care for a sick wife. Oh, that spousal obligation.

Soon after, she switched to the night shift because she couldn't sleep anyway, felt in synch with the special poison that scented the air when Hollywood streets turned black.

Comforted by the sorrows of people in a lot worse shape than she.

During the ninety days of the no-guys phase, she caught three 187s, worked them all solo because staffing was thin and she didn't protest when the nightwatch commander raised the possibility. Two were easy-solves that had gone down on Hollywood's east end: a liquor-store clerk shooting and a knifing at a Latino dance club, multiple witnesses all around, both files closed within a week.

The third was a whodunit, an eighty-five-year-old woman named Elsa Bragoon found bludgeoned in her apartment on Los Feliz Boulevard.

That one took up most of the ninety days, a lot of it spent chasing false leads. Elsa had been a drinker with an abrasive personality who quarreled at every opportunity. She'd also taken out a hundred-thousand-dollar term life-insurance policy on herself last year, and the beneficiary was a do-nothing son caught in a stock-market bind.

But none of that panned out, and Petra finally put the case to rest by running meticulous checks on every habitue of the apartment complex. A handyman hired by the landlord turned out to have a record of indecent exposure, sexual assault, and burglary, and his eyes jumped to Mars when Petra interviewed him in his filthy downtown SRO. Subsequent, skillful interviewing by Detective II Connor brought the jerk around.

Three for three. Petra's overall solve-rate was approaching the champ's—Milo Sturgis's over in West L.A.—and she knew she was fast-tracking to DIII, might make it by year's end, was sure to incur lots of envy among her colleagues.

Good. Men were . . .

No, enough of that. Men are our biological partners.

Oh, Lord . . .

Day Ninety, she decided that bitterness was eroding her soul and resolved to be positive. Returning to her easel for the first time in months, she tried painting in oils, found her sense of color wanting, switched to pen-and-ink and filled pages of bristol board with tight, hyperrealistic faces.

Children's faces. Well drawn but tacky. She ripped the drawings to shreds, went shopping.

She needed to go for color, one look in her closet made that painfully obvious.

Her casual clothes consisted of black jeans and black T's and black shoes. Her work duds were dark pantsuits: a dozen black, two navy blues, three chocolate browns, one charcoal. All slim-cut to fit her skinny frame, all designer-labels that she purchased at discount outlets

and the Barney's warehouse sale and last-day markdowns wherever she found them.

She drove from her Wilshire District apartment to the big Neiman Marcus in Beverly Hills and splurged on a half-price Vestimenta soft wool number.

Silk-lined lapels, ticket pocket cut on the bias, strong shoulders, pegged trousers.

Powder blue.

She wore it that night and drew shocked looks from the other detectives. One wiseass covered his eyes, as if shielding himself against glare. Another said, "Nice, Petra." A couple of others whistled, and she grinned at the lot of them.

Before anyone else could crack wise, phones began ringing, and the squad room filled with the business of death. Taking her place at her metal desk, in a corner next to the lockers, Petra shuffled paper and touched a powder blue sleeve and figured she knew what was running through the guys' heads.

Morticia changes her style.

Dragon Lady comes up for light.

She came across funereal, but a lot of it was biology. She had sharp features, ivory skin, thick, straight jet hair that she kept in a glossy wedge cut, deep brown eyes that leaned toward piercing.

Kids brought out the softness in her, but now Alicia and Bea were out of her life and Billy Straight—a young boy she met working a case who'd touched her heart—was nearly fourteen, had found himself a girlfriend.

Billy never called her anymore; the last time Petra had phoned him, more silence than conversation had passed between them.

So she supposed she could be forgiven a Dragon Lady persona.

The D.A.'s office had faxed her some questions on the Elsa Brigoon case—stuff the novice ADA could've known from reading the file. But she answered anyway and faxed back her replies.

Then her phone rattled and a patrol officer named Montez went on about a 187 cutting on Fountain near El Centro and Petra was out of the station in a flash.

She arrived at the scene and conferred with the assistant coroner. He informed her that the morgue was backlogged and the autopsy would take a while. But cause of death didn't look to be any great mystery.

Single knife wound, exsanguination, most of the blood pooled beneath the DB, establishing the kill spot. Petra, in powder blue, was glad there wasn't more gore.

Then she read the victim's license and got sad because, for the first time since she'd been a detective, this was a name she recognized. She'd never been into the blues—not musically, anyway—but you didn't have to be to know who Edgar Ray Lee was.

AKA Baby Boy. The driver's license in his pocket just stated the basics: male Caucasian, a DOB that put him at fifty-one. Height: six-two, weight: two-seventy. Petra thought he looked bigger than that.

As she recorded the data in her pad, she overheard someone—one of the morgue drivers—remark that the guy was a guitar god, had jammed with Bloomfield, Mayall, Clapton, Roy Buchanan, Stevie Ray Vaughan.

Petra turned and saw a ponytailed and bearded ex-hippie type in morgue coveralls staring at the body. White ponytail. Wet-eyed.

"Talented," she said.

"Those fingers," said the driver, as he unfolded a black plastic body bag.

"You play?" Petra asked him.

"I noodle. He *played*. He—those fingers were . . . magic." The driver dabbed at his eye, yanked angrily at the bag, virtually ripped it open. *Zzzzzzip*.

"Ready?" he said.

"In a sec." Petra crouched by the body, took in the details, again. Jotted in her pad.

Yellow T-shirt, blue jeans, shaved head, tiny chin beard. Tattoos blued both arms.

Ponytail walked away looking disgusted. Petra continued studying. Edgar Ray Lee's mouth hung open exposing broken and rotted teeth that made Petra think: *Junkie?* But she spotted no track marks among the tattoos.

Baby Boy hadn't been dead more than an hour, but his face had al-

ready taken on that greenish gray pallor. The EMTs had cut the shirt around the stab wound. Three-inch vertical slit up the belly, gaping at the edges.

She sketched the wound and slipped the pad back into her purse. She was stepping away when a photographer behind her announced, "I want to make sure my lighting was okay." He moved in, lost his balance, fell on his ass. Slid feetfirst into the blood pool.

His camera landed on the asphalt and rattled ominously, but that wasn't Petra's concern.

Crimson splotches and speckles decorated her pants. Both trouser legs ruined.

The photographer lay there, stunned. Petra did nothing to help him, muttered something sharp that widened his eyes and everyone else's.

She stamped away from the scene.

Her own damn fault, going for color.

3

Petra worked the case hard, doing all the usual procedural things as well as researching Baby Boy Lee on the Internet. Soon, she felt immersed in her victim's world, wondered what it had been like to be Edgar Ray Lee.

The bluesman had started out upper-middle class, the only child of two professors at Emory University in Atlanta. Ten years as a child prodigy on violin and cello had ended when Edgar's teenage rebellion aimed him at guitar and landed him on a Greyhound to Chicago, where he found a whole new lifestyle: Living on the streets and in borrowed cribs, sitting in with the Butterfield Blues Band, Albert Lee, B. B. King, and any other genius who happened to be passing through. Developing his chops but picking up bad habits.

The older musicians recognized the chubby kid's talent right away, and one of them gave him the nickname that stuck.

Baby Boy spent two decades scratching a living as a sessions sideman and a bar-band front man, endured big promises that petered, cut records that went nowhere, finally recorded a top-40 hit with a Southern band called Junior Biscuit. The song, penned, sung and guitar-riffed by the big man, was a gut-wrenching lament entitled "A Cold

Heart”—the very same ditty Baby Boy had played moments before his death.

The song made it to 19 on the Billboard Top 100, stayed on the charts for a month. Baby Boy bought himself a nice car and a whole bunch of guitars and a house in Nashville. Within a year, all the money was gone, as Lee kicked up his pattern of voracious womanizing and dining, and polydrug use. The next several years were a blur of fruitless rehab stints. Then: obscurity.

No relatives called about the case. Lee’s parents were both dead, he’d never married or sired a child. That, God help her, made her care about him deeply, and the image of his corpse stayed in her head.

The usual procedural things were: having Baby Boy’s apartment taped off before dropping in for a personal look-through, interviewing Baby Boy’s band mates, his manager, the owner of the Snake Pit, bouncers and bartenders and cocktail waitresses, the few patrons who’d stuck around to gawk at the crime scene and had gotten their names on a list.

No one had any idea who’d want to hurt Baby Boy. Everyone loved Baby Boy, he was a great big kid, naïve, good-natured, would give you the shirt off his back—would give you his *guitar*, for God’s sake.

The high point of usual procedure was an hour in a tiny, close interview room, in the company of star witness Linus Brophy.

When Petra first heard about an eyewitness, her hopes had surged. Then she’d talked to the homeless man and realized his account was next to worthless.

Brophy’s description boiled down to a tall man.

Age? No idea.

Race? No idea.

Clothing? Not a clue.

It was real dark, Detective Lady.

If that wasn’t enough to endear her to Brophy, the bum had a media jones, kept pestering her, wanting to know if someone from TV would be talking to him. Petra wondered how long till Brophy tried to peddle a screenplay. Hawking his story to the tabloids: I WATCHED ALIENS MURDER BABY BOY LEE.