

THE BAD PLACE



DEAN R. KOONTZ

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G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS

New York

G. P. Putnam's Sons
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Also by Dean R. Koontz

MIDNIGHT

LIGHTNING

WATCHERS

STRANGERS

TWILIGHT EYES

DARKFALL

PHANTOMS

WHISPERS

THE MASK

THE VISION

THE FACE OF FEAR

NIGHT CHILLS

SHATTERED

Teachers often affect our lives more than they realize. From high school days to the present, I have had teachers to whom I will remain forever indebted, not merely because of what they taught me, but because they provided the invaluable examples of dedication, kindness, and generosity of spirit that have given me an unshakable faith in the basic goodness of the human species. This book is dedicated to:

David O'Brien
Thomas Doyle
Richard Forsythe
John Bodnar
Carl Campbell
Steve and Jean Hernishin

*Every eye sees its own special vision:
every ear hears a most different song.
In each man's troubled heart, an incision
would reveal a unique, shameful wrong.*

*Stranger fiends hide here in human guise
than reside in the valleys of Hell.
But goodness, kindness and love arise
in the heart of the poor beast, as well.*

—The Book of Counted Sorrows

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1

THE NIGHT was becalmed and curiously silent, as if the alley were an abandoned and windless beach in the eye of a hurricane, between the tempest past and the tempest coming. A faint scent of smoke hung on the motionless air, although no smoke was visible.

Sprawled facedown on the cold pavement, Frank Pollard did not move when he regained consciousness; he waited in the hope that his confusion would dissipate. He blinked, trying to focus. Veils seemed to flutter within his eyes. He sucked deep breaths of the cool air, tasting the invisible smoke, grimacing at the acrid tang of it.

Shadows loomed like a convocation of robed figures, crowding around him. Gradually his vision cleared, but in the weak yellowish light that came from far behind him, little was revealed. A large trash dumpster, six or eight feet from him, was so dimly outlined that for a moment it seemed ineffably strange, as though it were an artifact of an alien civilization. Frank stared at it for a while before he realized what it was.

He did not know where he was or how he had gotten there. He could not have been unconscious longer than a few seconds, for his heart was pounding as if he had been running for his life only moments ago.

Fireflies in a windstorm. . . .

That phrase took flight through his mind, but he had no idea what it meant. When he tried to concentrate on it and make sense of it, a dull headache developed above his right eye.

Fireflies in a windstorm. . . .

He groaned softly.

Between him and the dumpster, a shadow among shadows moved, quick and sinuous. Small but radiant green eyes regarded him with icy interest.

Frightened, Frank pushed up onto his knees. A thin, involuntary cry issued from him, almost less like a human sound than like the muted wail of a reed instrument.

The green-eyed observer scampered away. A cat. Just an ordinary black cat.

Frank got to his feet, swayed dizzily, and nearly fell over an object that had been on the blacktop beside him. Gingerly he bent down and picked it up: a flight bag made of supple leather, packed full, surprisingly heavy. He supposed it was his. He could not remember. Carrying the bag, he tottered to the dumpster and leaned against its rusted flank.

Looking back, he saw that he was between rows of what seemed to be two-story stucco apartment buildings. All of the windows were black. On both sides, the tenants' cars were pulled nose-first into covered parking stalls. The queer yellow glow, sour and sulfurous, almost more like the product of a gas flame than the luminescence of an incandescent electric bulb, came from a streetlamp at the end of the block, too far away to reveal the details of the alleyway in which he stood.

As his rapid breathing slowed and as his heartbeat decelerated, he abruptly realized that he did not know who he was. He knew his name—Frank Pollard—but that was all. He did not know how old he was, what he did for a living, where he had come from, where he was going, or why. He was so startled by his predicament that for a moment his breath caught in his throat; then his heartbeat soared again, and he let his breath out in a rush.

Fireflies in a windstorm. . . .

What the hell did that mean?

The headache above his right eye corkscrewed across his forehead.

He looked frantically left and right, searching for an object or an aspect of the scene that he might recognize, anything, an anchor in a world that was suddenly too strange. When the night offered nothing to reassure him, he turned his quest inward, desperately seeking something familiar in himself, but his own memory was even darker than the passageway around him.

Gradually he became aware that the scent of smoke had faded, replaced by a vague but nauseating smell of rotting garbage in the dumpster. The stench of decomposition filled him with thoughts of death, which seemed to trigger a vague recollection that he was on the run from someone—or something—that wanted to kill him. When he tried to recall why he was fleeing, and from whom, he could