

Dark Rivers of the Heart

Dean Koontz

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**DARK
RIVERS
OF THE
HEART**



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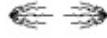
DEDICATION

ALSO BY DEAN KOONTZ

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

EXCERPT FROM ODD APOCALYPSE

PART ONE



On a Strange Sea

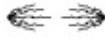
All of us are travelers lost,
our tickets arranged at a cost
unknown but beyond our means.
This odd itinerary of scenes
—enigmatic, strange, unreal—
leaves us unsure how to feel.
No postmortem journey is rife
with more mystery than life.

—*The Book of Counted Sorrows*

Tremulous skeins of destiny
flutter so ethereally
around me—but then I feel
its embrace is that of steel.

—*The Book of Counted Sorrows*

ONE



With the woman on his mind and a deep uneasiness in his heart, Spencer Grant drove through the glistening night, searching for the red door. The vigilant dog sat silently beside him. Rain ticked on the roof of the truck.

Without thunder or lightning, without wind, the storm had come in from the Pacific at the end of a somber February twilight. More than a drizzle but less than a downpour, it sluiced all the energy out of the city. Los Angeles and environs became a metropolis without sharp edges, urgency, or spirit. Buildings blurred into one another, traffic flowed sluggishly, and streets deliquesced into gray mists.

In Santa Monica, with the beaches and the black ocean to his right, Spencer stopped at a traffic light.

Rocky, a mixed breed not quite as large as a Labrador, studied the road ahead with interest. When they were in the truck—a Ford Explorer—Rocky sometimes peered out the side windows at the passing scene, though he was more interested in what lay before them.

Even when he was riding in the cargo area behind the front seats, the mutt rarely glanced out the rear window. He was skittish about watching the scenery recede. Maybe the motion made him dizzy in a way that oncoming scenery did not.

Or perhaps Rocky associated the dwindling highway behind them with the past. He had good reason not to dwell on the past.

So did Spencer.

Waiting for the traffic signal, he raised one hand to his face. He had a habit of meditatively stroking his scar when troubled, as another man might finger a strand of worry beads. The feel of it soothed him, perhaps because it was a reminder that he'd survived the worst terror he would ever know, that life could have no more surprises dark enough to destroy him.

The scar defined Spencer. He was a damaged man.

Pale, slightly glossy, extending from his right ear to his chin, the mark varied between one quarter and one half an inch in width. Extremes of cold and heat bleached it whiter than usual. In wintry air, though the thin ribbon of connective tissue

contained no nerve endings, it felt like a hot wire laid on his face. In summer sun, the scar was cold.

The traffic signal changed from red to green.

The dog stretched his furry head forward in anticipation.

Spencer drove slowly southward along the dark coast, both hands on the wheel again. He nervously searched for the red door on the eastern side of the street, among the many shops and restaurants.

Though no longer touching the fault line in his face, he remained conscious of it. He was never unaware that he was branded. If he smiled or frowned, he would feel the scar cinching one half of his countenance. If he laughed, his amusement would be tempered by the tension in that inelastic tissue.

The metronomic windshield wipers timed the rhythm of the rain.

Spencer's mouth was dry, but the palms of his hands were damp. The tightness in his chest arose as much from anxiety as from the pleasant anticipation of seeing Valerie again.

He was of half a mind to go home. The new hope he harbored was surely the emotional equivalent of fool's gold. He was alone, and he was always going to be alone, except for Rocky. He was ashamed of this fresh glimmer of optimism, of the naivete it revealed, the secret need, the quiet desperation. But he kept driving.

Rocky couldn't know what they were searching for, but he chuffed softly when the red landmark appeared. No doubt he was responding to a subtle change in Spencer's mood at the sight of the door.

The cocktail lounge was between a Thai restaurant with steam-streaked windows and an empty storefront that had once been an art gallery. The windows of the gallery were boarded over, and squares of travertine were missing from the once elegant facade, as if the enterprise had not merely failed but been bombed out of business. Through the silver rain, a downfall of light at the lounge entrance revealed the red door that he remembered from the previous night.

Spencer hadn't been able to recall the name of the place. That lapse of memory now seemed willful, considering the scarlet neon above the entrance: THE RED DOOR. A humorless laugh escaped him.

After haunting so many barrooms over the years, he had ceased to notice enough differences, one from another, to be able to attach names to them. In scores of towns, those countless taverns were, in their essence, the same church confessional; sitting on a barstool instead of kneeling on a prie-dieu, he murmured the same admissions to strangers who were not priests and could not give him absolution.

His confessors were drunkards, spiritual guides as lost as he was. They could never tell him the appropriate penance he must do to find peace. Discussing the meaning of life, they were incoherent.

Unlike those strangers to whom he often quietly revealed his soul, Spencer had never been drunk. Inebriation was as dreadful for him to contemplate as was suicide. To be drunk was to relinquish control. Intolerable. Control was the only thing he had.

At the end of the block, Spencer turned left and parked on the secondary street.

He went to bars not to drink but to avoid being alone—and to tell his story to someone who would not remember it in the morning. He often nursed a beer or two through a long evening. Later, in his bedroom, after staring toward the hidden heavens, he would finally close his eyes only when the patterns of shadows on the ceiling inevitably reminded him of things he preferred to forget.

When he switched off the engine, the rain drummed louder than before—a cold sound, as chilling as the voices of dead children that sometimes called to him with wordless urgency in his worst dreams.

The yellowish glow of a nearby streetlamp bathed the interior of the truck, so Rocky was clearly visible. His large and expressive eyes solemnly regarded Spencer.

“Maybe this is a bad idea,” Spencer said.

The dog craned his head forward to lick his master’s right hand, which was still clenched around the wheel. He seemed to be saying that Spencer should relax and just do what he had come there to do.

As Spencer moved his hand to pet the mutt, Rocky bowed his head, not to make the backs of his ears or his neck more accessible to stroking fingers, but to indicate that he was subservient and harmless.

“How long have we been together?” Spencer asked the dog.

Rocky kept his head down, huddling warily but not actually trembling under his master’s gentle hand.

“Almost two years,” Spencer said, answering his own question. “Two years of kindness, long walks, chasing Frisbees on the beach, regular meals...and still sometimes you think I’m going to hit you.”

Rocky remained in a humble posture on the passenger seat.

Spencer slipped one hand under the dog’s chin, forced his head up. After briefly trying to pull away, Rocky ceased all resistance.

When they were eye-to-eye, Spencer said, “Do you trust me?”

The dog self-consciously looked away, down and to the left.

Spencer shook the mutt gently by the muzzle, commanding his attention again. “We keep our heads up, okay? Always proud, okay? Confident. Keep our heads up, look people in the eye. You got that?”

Rocky slipped his tongue between his half-clenched teeth and licked the fingers with which Spencer was gripping his muzzle.

“I’ll interpret that as ‘yes.’” He let go of the dog. “This cocktail lounge isn’t a place I can take you. No offense.”

In certain taverns, though Rocky was not a guide dog, he could lie at Spencer’s feet, even sit on a stool, and no one would object to the violation of health laws. Usually a dog was the least of the infractions for which the joint would be cited if a city inspector happened to visit. The Red Door, however, still had pretensions to class, and Rocky wouldn’t be welcome.

Spencer got out of the truck, slammed the door. He engaged the locks and security system with the remote control on his key chain.

He could not count on Rocky to protect the Explorer. This was one dog who would never scare off a determined car thief—unless the would-be thief suffered an extreme phobic aversion to having his hand licked.

After sprinting through the cold rain to the shelter of an awning that skirted the corner building, Spencer paused to look back.

Having moved onto the driver’s seat, the dog stared out, nose pressed to the side window, one ear pricked, one ear drooping. His breath was fogging the glass, but he wasn’t barking. Rocky never barked. He just stared, waited. He was seventy pounds of pure love and patience.

Spencer turned away from the truck and the side street, rounded the corner, and hunched his shoulders against the chilly air.

Judging by the liquid sounds of the night, the coast and all the works of civilization that stood upon it might have been merely ramparts of ice melting into the black Pacific maw. Rain drizzled off the awning, gurgled in gutters, and splashed beneath the tires of passing cars. At the threshold of audibility, more sensed than heard, the ceaseless rumble of surf announced the steady erosion of beaches and bluffs.

As Spencer was passing the boarded-up art gallery, someone spoke from the shadows in the deeply recessed entrance. The voice was as dry as the night was damp, hoarse and grating: “I know what you are.”

Halting, Spencer squinted into the gloom. A man sat in the entryway, legs splayed,

back against the gallery door. Unwashed and unbarbered, he seemed less a man than a heap of black rags saturated with so much organic filth that malignant life had arisen in it by spontaneous generation.

“I know what you are,” the vagrant repeated softly but clearly.

A miasma of body odor and urine and the fumes of cheap wine rose out of the doorway.

The number of shambling, drug-addicted, psychotic denizens of the streets had increased steadily since the late seventies, when most of the mentally ill had been freed from sanitariums in the name of civil liberties and compassion. They roamed America’s cities, championed by politicians but untended, an army of the living dead.

The penetrating whisper was as desiccated and eerie as the voice of a reanimated mummy. “*I know what you are.*”

The prudent response was to keep moving.

The paleness of the vagrant’s face, above the beard and below the tangled hair, became dimly visible in the gloom. His sunken eyes were as bottomless as abandoned wells. “*I know what you are.*”

“Nobody knows,” Spencer said.

Sliding the fingertips of his right hand along his scar, he walked past the shuttered gallery and the ruined man.

“*Nobody knows,*” whispered the vagrant. Perhaps his commentary on passersby, which at first had seemed eerily perceptive, even portentous, was nothing more than mindless repetition of the last thing he had heard from the most recent scornful citizen to reply to him. “*Nobody knows.*”

Spencer stopped in front of the cocktail lounge. Was he making a dreadful mistake? He hesitated with his hand on the red door.

Once more the hobo spoke from the shadows. Through the sizzle of the rain, his admonition now had the haunting quality of a static-shredded voice on the radio, speaking from a distant station in some far corner of the world. “*Nobody knows...*”

Spencer opened the red door and went inside.

On a Wednesday night, no host was at the reservations podium in the vestibule. Maybe there wasn’t a front man on Fridays and Saturdays, either. The joint wasn’t exactly jumping.

The warm air was stale and filigreed with blue cigarette smoke. In the far left corner of the rectangular main room, a piano player under a spotlight worked through a

spiritless rendition of “Tangerine.”

Decorated in black and gray and polished steel, with mirrored walls, with Art Deco fixtures that cast overlapping rings of moody sapphire-blue light on the ceiling, the lounge once had recaptured a lost age with style. Now the upholstery was scuffed, the mirrors streaked. The steel was dull under a residue of old smoke.

Most tables were empty. A few older couples sat near the piano.

Spencer went to the bar, which was to the right, and settled on the stool at the end, as far from the musician as he could get.

The bartender had thinning hair, a sallow complexion, and watery gray eyes. His practiced politeness and pale smile couldn’t conceal his boredom. He functioned with robotic efficiency and detachment, discouraging conversation by never making eye contact.

Two fiftyish men in suits sat farther along the bar, each alone, each frowning at his drink. Their shirt collars were unbuttoned, ties askew. They looked dazed, glum, as if they were advertising-agency executives who had been pink-slipped ten years ago but still got up every morning and dressed for success because they didn’t know what else to do; maybe they came to The Red Door because it had been where they’d unwound after work, in the days when they’d still had hope.

The only waitress serving the tables was strikingly beautiful, half Vietnamese and half black. She wore the costume that she—and Valerie—had worn the previous evening: black heels, short black skirt, short-sleeved black sweater. Valerie had called her Rosie.

After fifteen minutes, Spencer stopped Rosie when she passed nearby with a tray of drinks. “Is Valerie working tonight?”

“Supposed to be,” she said.

He was relieved. Valerie hadn’t lied. He had thought perhaps she’d misled him, as a gentle way of brushing him off.

“I’m kinda worried about her,” Rosie said.

“Why’s that?”

“Well, the shift started an hour ago.” Her gaze kept straying to his scar. “She hasn’t called in.”

“She’s not often late?”

“Val? Not her. She’s *organized*.”

“How long has she worked here?”

“About two months. She...” The woman shifted her gaze from the scar to his eyes. “Are you a friend of hers or something?”

“I was here last night. This same stool. Things were slow, so Valerie and I talked awhile.”

“Yeah, I remember you,” Rosie said, and it was obvious that she couldn’t understand why Valerie had spent time with him.

He didn’t look like any woman’s dream man. He wore running shoes, jeans, a work shirt, and a denim jacket purchased at Kmart—essentially the same outfit that he’d worn on his first visit. No jewelry. His watch was a Timex. And the scar, of course. Always the scar.

“Called her place,” Rosie said. “No answer. I’m worried.”

“An hour late, that’s not so much. Could’ve had a flat tire.”

“In this city,” Rosie said, her face hardening with anger that aged her ten years in an instant, “she could’ve been gang-raped, stabbed by some twelve-year-old punk wrecked on crack, maybe even shot dead by a carjacker in her own driveway.”

“You’re a real optimist, huh?”

“I watch the news.”

She carried the drinks to a table at which sat two older couples whose expressions were more sour than celebratory. Having missed the new Puritanism that had captured many Californians, they were puffing furiously on cigarettes. They appeared to be afraid that the recent total ban on smoking in restaurants might be extended tonight to barrooms and homes, and that each cigarette might be their last.

While the piano player clinked through “The Last Time I Saw Paris,” Spencer took two small sips of beer.

Judging by the palpable melancholy of the patrons in the bar, it might actually have been June 1940, with German tanks rolling down the Champs-Élysées, and with omens of doom blazing in the night sky.

A few minutes later, the waitress approached Spencer again. “I guess I sounded a little paranoid,” she said.

“Not at all. I watch the news too.”

“It’s just that Valerie is so...”

“Special,” Spencer said, finishing her thought so accurately that she stared at him with a mixture of surprise and vague alarm, as if she suspected that he had actually read her mind.

“Yeah. Special. You can know her only a week, and...well, you want her to be happy. You want good things to happen to her.”

It doesn't take a week, Spencer thought. One evening.

Rosie said, “Maybe because there's this hurt in her. She's been hurt a lot.”

“How?” he asked. “Who?”

She shrugged. “It's nothing I know, nothing she ever said. You just feel it about her.”

He also had sensed a vulnerability in Valerie.

“But she's tough too,” Rosie said. “Gee, I don't know why I'm so jumpy about this. It's not like I'm her big sister. Anyway, everyone's got a right to be late now and then.”

The waitress turned away, and Spencer sipped his warm beer.

The piano player launched into “It Was a Very Good Year,” which Spencer disliked even when Sinatra sang it, though he was a Sinatra fan. He knew the song was intended to be reflective in tone, even mildly pensive; however, it seemed terribly sad to him, not the sweet wistfulness of an older man reminiscing about the women he had loved, but the grim ballad of someone at the bitter end of his days, looking back on a barren life devoid of deep relationships.

He supposed that his interpretation of the lyrics was an expression of his fear that decades hence, when his own life burned out, he would fade away in loneliness and remorse.

He checked his watch. Valerie was now an hour and a half late.

The waitress's uneasiness had infected him. An insistent image rose in his mind's eye: Valerie's face, half concealed by a spill of dark hair and a delicate scrollwork of blood, one cheek pressed against the floor, eyes wide and unblinking. He knew his concern was irrational. She was merely late for work. There was nothing ominous about that. Yet, minute by minute, his apprehension deepened.

He put his unfinished beer on the bar, got off the stool, and walked through the blue light to the red door and into the chilly night, where the sound of marching armies was only the rain beating on the canvas awnings.

As he passed the art gallery doorway, he heard the shadow-wrapped vagrant

weeping softly. He paused, affected.

Between strangled sounds of grief, the half-seen stranger whispered the last thing Spencer had said to him earlier: “*Nobody knows...nobody knows...*” That short declaration evidently had acquired a personal and profound meaning for him, because he spoke the two words not in the tone in which Spencer had spoken but with quiet, intense anguish. “*Nobody knows.*”

Though Spencer knew that he was a fool for funding the wretch’s further self-destruction, he fished a crisp ten-dollar bill from his wallet. He leaned into the gloomy entryway, into the fetid stink that the hobo exuded, and held out the money. “Here, take this.”

The hand that rose to the offering was either clad in a dark glove or exceedingly filthy; it was barely discernible in the shadows. As the bill was plucked out of Spencer’s fingers, the vagrant keened thinly: “*Nobody...nobody...*”

“You’ll be all right,” Spencer said sympathetically. “It’s only life. We all get through it.”

“*It’s only life, we all get through it,*” the vagrant whispered.

Plagued once more by the mental image of Valerie’s dead face, Spencer hurried to the corner, into the rain, to the Explorer.

Through the side window, Rocky watched him approaching. As Spencer opened the door, the dog retreated to the passenger seat.

Spencer got in the truck and pulled the door shut, bringing with him the smell of damp denim and the ozone odor of the storm. “You miss me, killer?”

Rocky shifted his weight from side to side a couple of times, and he tried to wag his tail even while sitting on it.

As he started the engine, Spencer said, “You’ll be pleased to hear that I didn’t make an ass of myself in there.”

The dog sneezed.

“But only because she didn’t show up.”

The dog cocked his head curiously.

Putting the car in gear, popping the hand brake, Spencer said, “So instead of quitting and going home while I’m ahead of the game, what do you think I’m going to do now? Hmmm?”

Apparently the dog didn’t have a clue.

“I’m going to poke in where it’s none of my business, give myself a second chance to screw up. Tell me straight, pal, do you think I’ve lost my mind?”

Rocky merely panted.

Pulling the truck away from the curb, Spencer said, “Yeah, you’re right. I’m a basket case.”

He headed directly for Valerie’s house. She lived ten minutes from the bar.

The previous night, he had waited with Rocky in the Explorer, outside The Red Door, until two o’clock in the morning, and had followed Valerie when she drove home shortly after closing time. Because of his surveillance training, he knew how to tail a subject discreetly. He was confident that she hadn’t spotted him.

He was not equally confident, however, about his ability to explain to her—or to himself—*why* he had followed her. After one evening of conversation with her, periodically interrupted by her attention to the few customers in the nearly deserted lounge, Spencer was overcome by the desire to know everything about her. Everything.

In fact, it was more than a desire. It was a need, and he was compelled to satisfy it.

Although his intentions were innocent, he was mildly ashamed of his budding obsession. The night before, he had sat in the Explorer, across the street from her house, staring at her lighted windows; all were covered with translucent drapes, and on one occasion her shadow played briefly across the folds of cloth, like a spirit glimpsed in candlelight at a séance. Shortly before three-thirty in the morning, the last light went out. While Rocky lay curled in sleep on the backseat, Spencer had remained on watch another hour, gazing at the dark house, wondering what books Valerie read, what she enjoyed doing on her days off, what her parents were like, where she had lived as a child, what she dreamed about when she was contented, and what shape her nightmares took when she was disturbed.

Now, less than twenty-four hours later, he headed to her place again, with a fine-grain anxiety abrading his nerves. She was late for work. Just late. His excessive concern told him more than he cared to know about the inappropriate intensity of his interest in this woman.

Traffic thinned as he drove farther from Ocean Avenue into residential neighborhoods. The languorous, liquid glimmer of wet blacktop fostered a false impression of movement, as if every street might be a lazy river easing toward its own far delta.



Valerie Keene lived in a quiet neighborhood of stucco and clapboard bungalows built in the late forties. Those two- and three-bedroom homes offered more charm than space: trellised front porches, from which hung great capes of bougainvillea; decorative shutters flanking windows; interestingly scalloped or molded or carved fascia boards under the eaves; fanciful rooflines; deeply recessed dormers.

Because Spencer didn't want to draw attention to himself, he drove past the woman's place without slowing. He glanced casually to the right, toward her dark bungalow on the south side of the block. Rocky mimicked him, but the dog seemed to find nothing more alarming about the house than did his master.

At the end of the block, Spencer turned right and drove south. The next few streets to the right were cul-de-sacs. He passed them by. He didn't want to park on a dead-end street. That was a trap. At the next main avenue, he hung a right again and parked at the curb in a neighborhood similar to the one in which Valerie lived. He turned off the thumping windshield wipers but not the engine.

He still hoped that he might regain his senses, put the truck in gear, and go home.

Rocky looked at him expectantly. One ear up. One ear down.

"I'm not in control," Spencer said, as much to himself as to the curious dog. "And I don't know why."

Rain sluiced down the windshield. Through the film of rippling water, the streetlights shimmered.

He sighed and switched off the engine.

When he'd left home, he'd forgotten an umbrella. The short dash to and from The Red Door had left him slightly damp, but the longer walk back to Valerie's house would leave him soaked.

He was not sure why he hadn't parked in front of her place. Training, perhaps. Instinct. Paranoia. Maybe all three.

Leaning past Rocky and enduring a warm, affectionate tongue in his ear, Spencer retrieved a flashlight from the glove compartment and tucked it in a pocket of his jacket.

"Anybody messes with the truck," he said to the dog, "you rip the bastard's guts out."

As Rocky yawned, Spencer got out of the Explorer. He locked it with the remote control as he walked away and turned north at the corner. He didn't bother running. Regardless of his pace, he would be soaked before he reached the bungalow.

The north-south street was lined with jacarandas. They would have provided little

cover even when fully dressed with leaves and cascades of purple blossoms. Now, in winter, the branches were bare.

Spencer was sodden by the time he reached Valerie's street, where the jacarandas gave way to huge Indian laurels. The aggressive roots of the trees had cracked and canted the sidewalk; however, the canopy of branches and generous foliage held back the cold rain.

The big trees also prevented most of the yellowish light of the sodium-vapor streetlamps from reaching even the front lawns of the properties along that cloistered avenue. The trees and shrubs around the houses also were mature; some were overgrown. If any residents were looking out windows, they would most likely be unable to see him through the screen of greenery, on the deeply shadowed sidewalk.

As he walked, he scanned the vehicles parked along the street. As far as he could tell, no one was sitting in any of them.

A Mayflower moving van was parked across the street from Valerie's bungalow. That was convenient for Spencer, because the large truck blocked those neighbors' view. No men were working at the van; the move-in or move-out must be scheduled for the morning.

Spencer followed the front walkway and climbed three steps to the porch. The trellises at both ends supported not bougainvillea but night-blooming jasmine. Though it wasn't at its seasonal peak, the jasmine sweetened the air with its singular fragrance.

The shadows on the porch were deep. He doubted that he could even be seen from the street.

In the gloom, he had to feel along the door frame to find the button. He could hear the doorbell ringing softly inside the house.

He waited. No lights came on.

The flesh creped on the back of his neck, and he sensed that he was being watched.

Two windows flanked the front door and looked onto the porch. As far as he could discern, the dimly visible folds of the draperies on the other side of the glass were without any gaps through which an observer could have been studying him.

He looked back at the street. Sodium-yellow light transformed the downpour into glittering skeins of molten gold. At the far curb, the moving van stood half in shadows, half in the glow of the streetlamps. A late-model Honda and an older Pontiac were parked at the nearer curb. No pedestrians. No passing traffic. The night was silent except for the incessant rataplan of the rain.

He rang the bell once more.

The crawling feeling on the nape of his neck didn't subside. He put a hand back there, half convinced that he would find a spider negotiating his rain-slick skin. No spider.

As he turned to the street again, he thought that he saw furtive movement from the corner of his eye, near the back of the Mayflower van. He stared for half a minute, but nothing moved in the windless night except torrents of golden rain falling to the pavement as straight as if they were, in fact, heavy droplets of precious metal.

He knew why he was jumpy. He didn't belong here. Guilt was twisting his nerves.

Facing the door again, he slipped his wallet out of his right hip pocket and removed his MasterCard.

Though he could not have admitted it to himself until now, he would have been disappointed if he had found lights on and Valerie at home. He was concerned about her, but he doubted that she was lying, either injured or dead, in her darkened house. He was not psychic: The image of her bloodstained face, which he'd conjured in his mind's eye, was only an excuse to make the trip here from The Red Door.

His need to know everything about Valerie was perilously close to an adolescent longing. At the moment, his judgment was not sound.

He frightened himself. But he couldn't turn back.

By inserting the MasterCard between the door and jamb, he could pop the spring latch. He assumed there would be a deadbolt as well, because Santa Monica was as crime-ridden as any town in or around Los Angeles, but maybe he would get lucky.

He was luckier than he hoped: The front door was unlocked. Even the spring latch wasn't fully engaged. When he twisted the knob, the door clicked open.

Surprised, stricken by another tremor of guilt, he glanced back at the street again. The Indian laurels. The moving van. The cars. The rain, rain, rain.

He went inside. He closed the door and stood with his back against it, dripping on the carpet, shivering.

At first the room in front of him was unrelievedly black. After a while, his vision adjusted enough for him to make out a drapery-covered window—and then a second and a third—illuminated only by the faint gray ambient light of the night beyond.

For all that he could see, the blackness before him might have harbored a crowd, but he knew that he was alone. The house felt not merely unoccupied but deserted, abandoned.

Spencer took the flashlight from his jacket pocket. He hooded the beam with his left hand to ensure, as much as possible, that it would not be noticed by anyone outside.