

AMAZON ORIGINAL STORIES

DEAN KOONTZ



IN
FI

NAMELESS

IN THE HEART OF THE FIRE

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1

The sky is the blue of a birthing blanket, the day newborn and filled with the light of innocence, when the air brakes of the bus whistle softly, waking him. He has arrived in Worstead, Texas, looking for trouble, on this Friday in June.

The bus is bound for Houston, and this is merely a quick hop-on, hop-off stop en route.

He steps into the aisle. Rather than consign it to the luggage compartment, he has kept his small white suitcase with him.

Carrying the bag, he exits the bus. He is the only passenger disembarking in Worstead, population 11,546.

A young Hispanic couple wait to board. The man is thin and intense. She's pregnant, radiant. Maybe they are victims of the world, or maybe they are the parents of its savior. Life is a weave of infinite possibilities, though some are more likely than others.

The treeless, dusty street is lined with two-and three-story buildings with flat, parapeted roofs. Constructed of local limestone or rust-colored sand-struck

bricks, many date back to the days of gunslingers and stagecoaches that were ripe for robbery.

The morning is warm. Later it will be stifling.

He checks his iPhone and discovers one text message. As always, it is from Ace of Diamonds, who manages his nomadic life. He doesn't know who Ace might be, whether male or female.

This message is just a reminder: ALEX HURKOS, BLUE RIBBON MOTOR INN.

The Blue Ribbon Inn is visible from the bus station, and he sets out for it on foot.

His name isn't Hurkos. He doesn't remember his name.

Indeed, he doesn't remember anything of his past prior to this itinerant life he's been leading for two years. He knows—a better word is *believes*—that his amnesia is a medical matter beyond his control, but he senses that it's also somehow a choice he has made.

He currently calls himself Ben Shepherd. A magazine left on the bus by a previous passenger featured an article about a police dog—a German shepherd—that lost one leg in a violent encounter but persevered through rehab and didn't retire. The dog's name is Ben.

At the Blue Ribbon Inn, no ID is required because Ace of Diamonds prepaid and made certain other arrangements with the management. Nameless has no credit cards. He rarely carries identification of any kind, not even in false names.

The front desk clerk, one Roxanne Cortez, wishes him a pleasant stay and winks at him. He returns the wink.

The room is large, clean, and comfortable. He doesn't wear gloves and won't bother to wipe down any surfaces prior to leaving, for he has no fingerprints. They were removed with the application of a series of lightly applied acids and CO₂ laser treatments. This he remembers, for the memory affords him peace of mind.

In the closet hang two pairs of jeans, two shirts. They are not his size, of course, much too small, but that doesn't matter.

During his time in Worstead, he will wear the same sport coat, shirt, and jeans that he's wearing now. If all goes well, he will be done with the job before the day ends, and then be on his way.

Except for the toothpaste and toothbrush, the toiletries in the bathroom are not suitable for him and are merely stage dressing.

In a nightstand drawer are a car key labeled with a license plate number, a smartphone with functions specific to this mission, and a radio-wave jammer.

He doesn't know who pays for what he needs. Now and then he is overcome

by curiosity and considers seeking answers. However, he understands as if in blood and bone that he is better off not knowing, and the desire for enlightenment always passes.

Because he slept little on the bus, he prepares himself for what lies ahead by taking a three-hour nap. He always falls asleep instantly and always wakes at the time he has predetermined.

After a long shower, freshly dressed in his only clothes, he opens his small white suitcase. Among other things, it contains a zippered pouch holding forty thousand dollars in hundreds and twenties.

The bag also contains a Galco shoulder system for a pistol. The fit is tight but comfortable.

The pistol is a Springfield Armory TRP-Pro .45ACP. Five-inch barrel. Seven-round magazine. A sound suppressor.

With the pistol holstered, he pulls on his sport coat and drops a spare magazine in one pocket, the radio-wave jammer in another.

He closes the suitcase and stows it in the closet.

Leaving the room, he hangs the DO NOT DISTURB sign on the door.

Parked in front of the room, a rental Ford sedan bears the same license plate number as does the key. He puts the pouch with forty thousand dollars in the trunk, in the spare-tire well, and locks the car.

He walks to the coffee shop associated with the motel, asks for a window booth, and orders a late lunch.

He has a view of the street. A few clouds have hatched in the sky; though at ground level the day is still, a high-altitude wind harries the clouds. Flying across the faces of the buildings, the shadows resemble dragons, as if Texas has gone Tolkien.

This is a world of wondrous beauty and deep mystery, of which he has considerable appreciation, and this awareness shapes him no less than life experiences shape others. Some psychologists would argue that a man stripped of his past must be an emotional cripple, because we are made of memories. However, this long-enduring world, wrapped in more mysteries than Nameless, functions superbly, and he also thrives, an enigma even to himself but with a solemn purpose.

Another text message arrived while he was showering. Now he reads it. Two names that he already knows. Three addresses.

2

Jennifer Demeter lives in a modest stucco house on two acres south of the town limits. A pair of large oaks frame the isolated residence. An old Honda is parked in a carport from which paint is peeling like sunburned skin. The wood of the porch is the weathered gray that high-end designers strive to achieve for wealthy clients and that the poor endure because they lack money for paint.

Worstead exists to serve a county of ranches and farms. Jenny works from home, the accountant for Worstead Farm Supply.

He parks the Ford in the gravel driveway. Before he gets out, he lowers the windows to ventilate the vehicle in the summer heat.

The porch steps are made of cinder blocks. The floorboards creak. The front door stands open behind a screen door.

Flitting between the yard and trees, brown-headed cowbirds issue slurred whistles, but no sound comes from the house.

He knocks loudly, waits, and knocks again.

The hall lies in gloom, with a doorway to a sun-filled room at the far end. Backlit, she appears and slowly approaches, seeming to drift like a spirit reluctantly returning to this world.

As she draws near, he sees that she carries a can of hornet killer. Set on STREAM, with a twenty-foot reach, such a potent pesticide might provide a better defense than pepper spray.

“Mrs. Dwayne Demeter?” he asks.

“Ever since high school,” she says. “Who might you be?”

“Ben Shepherd. I was with Dwayne in Afghanistan.”

Whether this claim is true or not, he doesn’t know. He might—or might never—have been in Afghanistan.

“I don’t think Dwayne mentioned any Ben Shepherd.”

“There’s special ops and black ops. When we’re on black ops, we don’t talk about teammates by name while they’re alive, in service. Anyway, I knew Dwayne only on his last tour of duty.”

“Were you with him when?”

“When it happened? Yes. It was quick. Gone in a second.”

Her lips are pressed tight as she considers his words. It’s what she wants to believe. She isn’t the kind of woman who wants it prettified, to be told Dwayne lingered long enough to say, *Tell Jenny, I love her*, but she also doesn’t want to

be told he suffered.

“You still on the team?” she asks.

“No, ma’am. I’m civilian now. As much as I can ever be.”

She studies him through the screen. “Why’re you here?”

“Russell Soakes.”

Having lowered the can of hornet killer, Jennifer Demeter raises it again.

“You tell him to go to hell.”

“If it comes to that, ma’am, I’ll send him there.”

He speaks without bravado, matter-of-factly, and she seems attuned to this nuance of tone. “You’re what—the Lone Ranger?”

“No, ma’am. I don’t have a horse named Silver.”

“Russell Soakes is a snake.”

“No argument.”

“Are you some kind of law?”

“No, ma’am.”

“The law’s useless to me.”

“Then it’s time for a new approach to the problem.”

Dubious, she studies him through the screen, which renders his face in pixels as it renders hers. “So what’s in it for you?”

“It’s something to do.”

She regards him in silence. Her stare is clear and blue. In spite of her losses, there is nothing drowned in those eyes. Her spirit is buoyant and breathing.

Nameless is patient, with nowhere to be but here.

“Is it something Dwayne did for you, so you want to give back?”

“Exactly,” he lies, for it is an explanation that will put her mind at ease. He has allowed her to conceive it herself.

She lowers the can of insecticide. “Maybe I’m losing it.”

He doesn’t press her to let him in. At this point, she will distrust even the slightest encouragement.

The sturdy aluminum screen door has neither a hook-and-eye latch nor a sliding bolt. She uses a key to unlock the blind deadbolt, which doesn’t provide a keyway on his side of the door.

She lets him in and relocks the door. “I’m working in the kitchen. End of the hall.”

She doesn’t want to turn her back on him. He leads the way to the kitchen.

Lacking air-conditioning, the house is a steeping pot.

Seraphina, ten years old, sits at the kitchen table, reading a book. She is a beautiful child with a halo of lustrous golden hair. She looks up from the novel, smiles shyly, and returns to her story.

The door is open to a screened—no doubt locked—back porch, where twelve-year-old Max is ensconced in a wicker chair, also reading a book. He looks up furtively, and then at the page again. “It’s wrong to pen up a boy his age,” says his mother, “but I can’t let either of them out of my sight with Soakes in the world.” She puts down the hornet killer. “Iced tea, Mr. Shepherd?”

“Thank you, yes.”

She has been peeling apples and slicing them into a large bowl of cold water. She puts the bowl in the refrigerator. She produces a pitcher of tea and pours two glasses and sets them on the table.

He settles in a chair across from Jennifer Demeter. Seraphina is to his left, seemingly lost in her book.

Sweetened with peach nectar, the tea is delicious.

“How did you hear about Soakes and me?” Jenny wonders.

“Better you don’t know. After whatever’s going to happen to Soakes happens, it’s better you know less than more.”

She watches him drink the tea. The knuckles of her hand are sharp and white as she grips but doesn’t sample her glass of tea.

“This feels like dreaming,” she says.

“It isn’t.” He indicates the girl. “Should we talk privately?”

“They’re young, but I don’t keep anything from them.”

“That’s not a bad way to be.”

“It’s the only way to be in this situation. Soakes pretends to be obsessed with me, but it’s not me he really wants.”

She is a fine-looking woman, thirty-two, fair of face and form, with an engaging quickness of mind and fullness of heart.

Nameless glances at Seraphina. Jenny nods grimly.

With that revelation, a vision sweeps upon him. He puts his tea down without spilling it as the future washes into the room.

Pajama-clad young Max is crumpled in a corner of the kitchen, his face broken into a jigsaw puzzle by hammer blows. Jenny lies facedown, the back of her skull cracked and concave, the pieces held together by a mortar of extruded brains. Seraphina is not present. Russell Soakes and a curly-haired man with a port-wine birthmark on his forehead enter the room with canvas tarps and duct tape. They begin to bundle the dead mother and son in sheets of black plastic.

Nameless is bent forward in his chair, his head clamped in his hands, as if to press out the vision that has overwhelmed him.

Jenny says, “What is it? What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. Just . . . it’s hideous, to think of him with her.”

If he tells Jenny the truth—*I have this strange ability*—she will want to

know what he has foreseen.

He won't share the vision with her, though not just because it is so terrifying. He will not share it because then she will ask if he can prevent this horror from occurring.

Sometimes he can. Sometimes he can't. Certain events are lightly sketched on the future and can be erased. Others are woven into the fabric of all that is to come and resist being unraveled.

He never knows whether he will be successful.

His memory extends backward only two years, but there is much in it that he wishes he could forget.

3

A sea of emerald grass shimmers on both sides of the highway, and the sky is bigger than the land below, the few early clouds having been burned off by the sun. The emptiness appeals to Sheriff Russell Soakes, as it has since he was a child; from the vast lonely vistas, he infers that there are no boundaries, no rules, that each man and woman is a hunter with hungers to satisfy, and that the satisfaction of them is the only good for which to strive.

Cruising his county in a black-and-white Suburban, Russell is in a foul mood. He has needs that are currently not being fulfilled.

He lost his temper with Wendy, his most recent plaything, and by the time he worked off his anger on her, he needed to put her deep in a hole. There's not been a girl in the playpen for a month.

Having grown tired of Wendy even before he killed her, he worked out a plan to get Seraphina, but Jenny Demeter somehow tumbled to his true intentions.

If he could have drugged the family, put Jenny and Max in their beds, replaced Seraphina with an unconscious Wendy, and engineered a leak in their gas furnace—leading to an explosion and fierce fire—little but charred bones and teeth would have remained. The county operates a coroner system rather than a medical-examiner system, so there is no forensic pathologist to worry about. The coroner, Cecil Blocker, owns one of the town's two funeral homes and is beholden to the sheriff for a number of reasons; he would identify Wendy's remains as Seraphina's on Russell's say-so and think nothing of it.

But now Russell isn't welcome at the Demeter house, Wendy is in a hole too deep for coyotes to dig her out, and the sheriff has yet to devise another low-risk plan to get the exquisite Seraphina.

He should give up on the Demeter girl, but he is obsessed with her. Besides, he can patrol the main highways, pull over a hundred cars—two hundred—on one pretense or another, without finding a tender creature to his liking. High standards complicate his life.

His yearning for Seraphina brings him past the Demeter property a few times a day. But on this occasion, he is drawn to the place by a text message received on his personal smartphone. It is sent by Deputy Harry Carlisle and says cryptically, SOMETHING'S GOING DOWN AT 600 SMOKETREE ROAD, which is the Demeter address.

When Russell arrives, he discovers an unfamiliar vehicle in the driveway. He