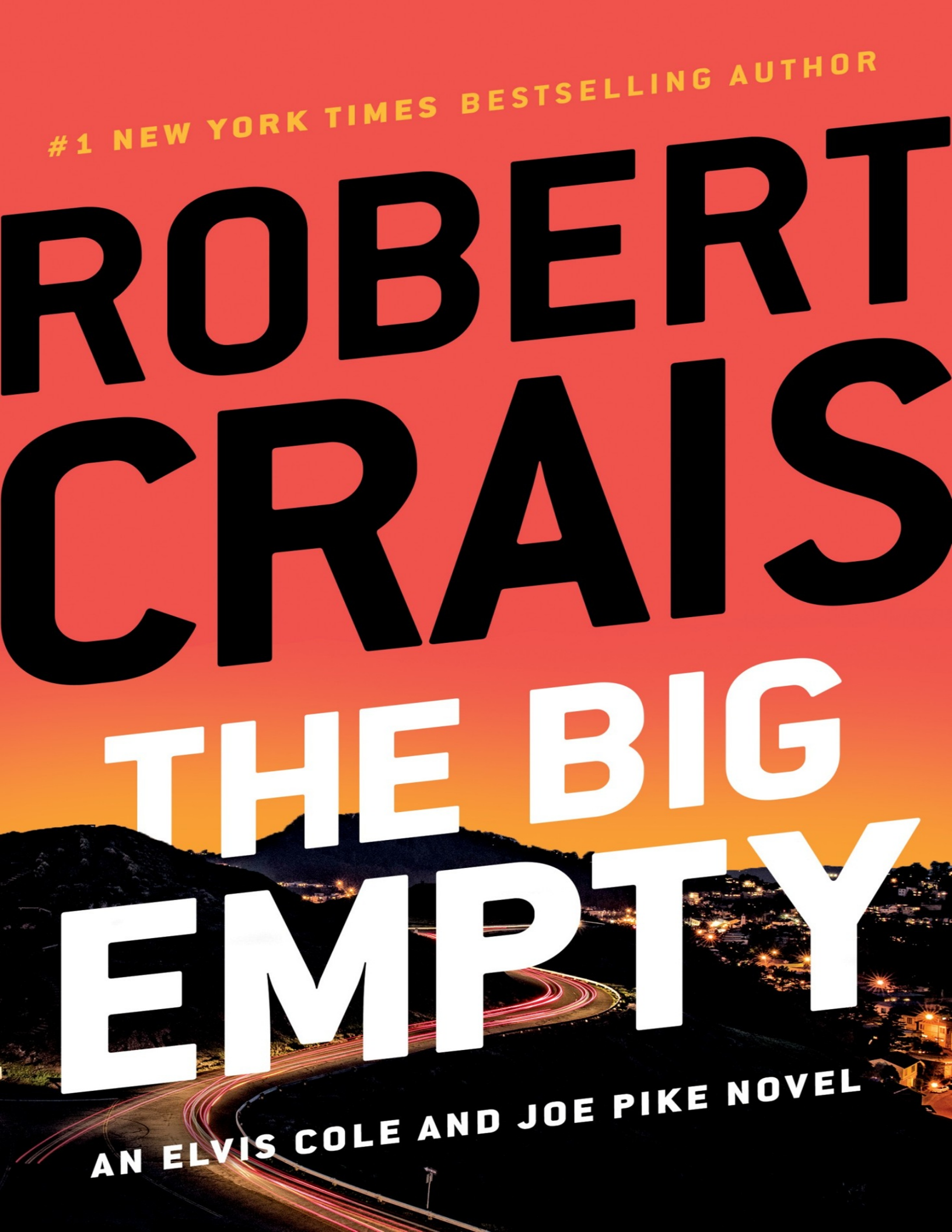


#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

# ROBERT CRAIS

# THE BIG EMPTY

AN ELVIS COLE AND JOE PIKE NOVEL



## TITLES BY ROBERT CRAIS

*The Big Empty*

*Racing the Light*

*A Dangerous Man*

*The Wanted*

*The Promise*

*Suspect*

*Taken*

*The Sentry*

*The First Rule*

*Chasing Darkness*

*The Watchman*

*The Two Minute Rule*

*The Forgotten Man*

*The Last Detective*

*Hostage*

*Demolition Angel*

*L.A. Requiem*

*Indigo Slam*

*Sunset Express*

*Voodoo River*

*Free Fall*

*Lullaby Town*

*Stalking the Angel*

*The Monkey's Raincoat*



# THE BIG EMPTY

---

ROBERT CRAIS

G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS

New York

**PUTNAM**

— EST. 1838 —

G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS

*Publishers Since 1838*

An imprint of Penguin Random House LLC

1745 Broadway, New York, NY 10019

[penguinrandomhouse.com](http://penguinrandomhouse.com)



Copyright © 2024 by Robert Crais

Penguin Random House values and supports copyright. Copyright fuels creativity, encourages diverse voices, promotes free speech, and creates a vibrant culture. Thank you for buying an authorized edition of this book and for complying with copyright laws by not reproducing, scanning, or distributing any part of it in any form without permission. You are supporting writers and allowing Penguin Random House to continue to publish books for every reader. Please note that no part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner for the purpose of training artificial intelligence technologies or systems.

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

Names: Crais, Robert, author.

Title: The big empty / Robert Crais.

Description: New York : G. P. Putnam's Sons, 2024.

Identifiers: LCCN 2024027689 | ISBN 9780525535768 (hardcover) | ISBN 9780525535799 (ebook)

Subjects: LCGFT: Thrillers (Fiction) | Novels.

Classification: LCC PS3553.R264 B54 2024 | DDC 813/.54—dc23/eng/20240628

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2024027689>

Ebook ISBN 9780525535799

Cover design: Kaitlin Kall

Cover image: Thomas Winz / The Image Bank / Getty Images

Title page photograph by DmytroPerov/Shutterstock

The authorized representative in the EU for product safety and compliance is Penguin Random House Ireland, Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street, Dublin D02 YH68, Ireland, <https://eu-contact.penguin.ie>.

ep\_prh\_7.1a\_149834205\_co\_ro

# Contents

*Dedication*

*Acknowledgments*

Bad Mother

Part One

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)



Chapter 26

Chapter 27

Chapter 28

Chapter 29

Chapter 30

Part Two

Chapter 31

Chapter 32

Chapter 33

Chapter 34

Chapter 35

Chapter 36

Chapter 37

Chapter 38

Chapter 39

Chapter 40

Chapter 41

Chapter 42

## Part Three

Chapter 43

Chapter 44

Chapter 45

Chapter 46

Chapter 47

Chapter 48

Chapter 49

Chapter 50

Chapter 51

Chapter 52

Chapter 53

Chapter 54

## Part Four

[Chapter 55](#)

[Chapter 56](#)

[Chapter 57](#)

[Chapter 58](#)

[Chapter 59](#)

[Chapter 60](#)

[Chapter 61](#)

[Chapter 62](#)

[Chapter 63](#)

[Chapter 64](#)

[Chapter 65](#)

[Chapter 66](#)

[Chapter 67](#)

[Chapter 68](#)

[Chapter 69](#)

[Chapter 70](#)

[Chapter 71](#)

[Chapter 72](#)

[Chapter 73](#)

[Chapter 74](#)

[Chapter 75](#)

[\*About the Author\*](#)

for Martin Rast

and

Christiane, Monika, and TC.

Welcome to the pack.

## Acknowledgments

For her support and herculean assistance, then and now: Carol Topping.

This novel began with my former editor, Mark Tavani. Thank you, my friend.

Daphne Durham assumed the editorial reigns with grace, insight, and love for Elvis Cole and Joe Pike. Her encouragement, suggestions, and unrelenting enthusiasm kept me on the rails and running true. Thank you.

Boss production editor Claire Sullivan and copy editor Rob Sternitzky had my six, and saved me from myself innumerable times. They had large shoes to fill, and did. Pat Crais, C/E Emeritus, approves. No higher compliment could be paid.

Thanks to my publicists, Kim Dower and Katie Grinch, for getting out the word, and Aranya Jain for helping everyone do everything, especially this author.

Aaron Priest and Lucy Childs, Lauren Crais, Wayne and Trey Topping, Shelby Rotolo, Diane Friedman, Max Sherman, and Steve Volpe all helped in ways large and small. And, always, Randy.

## Bad Mother

**S**adie Given woke from a troubled sleep, the stupid phone babbling like an angry turkey, gobble-gobble, gobble-gobble. Sadie had fallen asleep on the couch in their tiny single-wide, and the instant she woke, Sadie knew she was late. She snatched up the phone as she stood.

“I’m sorry. I’m leaving now.”

Anya said, “You’re late.”

Anya gave her an icy fifteen-year-old’s tone with just enough hurt to make the tone sting.

Sadie hopped toward the door, slipping on her sandals.

“I know, I know, I’m sorry, baby. I’m coming.”

“It’s getting dark. I’m the last one here.”

Sadie glanced to the windows and saw purple shadows.

“Where are you?”

“The skate park, Mom, where I said. I texted you like five times. Why didn’t you answer?”

Found her keys and purse by the door, let herself out, and fumbled the keys locking their mobile home. She always seemed to be rushing. Rushing to get Anya to school, rushing to work, rushing to pick up Anya, rushing to make dinner, rushing to eat, rushing to her second job, rushing to give Anya the life and opportunities Sadie never had.

“Anya, stop. I’ll be there in, what, ten minutes? I’m sorry.”

“More like twenty. This is stupid. I’ll walk.”

Anya could be a pain, but Sadie felt terrible. She had made Anya promise to wait. She had made her promise not to leave with her friends. And now she was rushing again because she’d fallen asleep.

“I messed up, okay? I’m coming.”

Sadie turned from the door, stumbled, and fell down the three wooden steps her ex-boyfriend built after he got out of prison back when she was still stupid. Her phone and keys went flying and Sadie landed hard in the gravel, scraping her palms and shredding her knees.

Anya's tiny voice saying, "What was that? Mom?"

"Shit."

Darker now, the deep purple sky turning to a midnight blue specked with stars.

Sadie found her phone and keys, and climbed into a dreary fourteen-year-old Honda the color of twilight. Her right knee hurt. Blood spotted the knee of her jeans like tiny black flowers.

Ruined.

Anya, still talking.

"Hello? Mom? Are you there?"

Sadie started the car and powered toward the road, kicking up trailer park gravel and dust.

Anya's voice saying, "Hell-lowww?"

Sadie took a deep breath, held it like the girl on TV said, and visualized her throbbing headache being carried away as she exhaled. It didn't work. It never worked.

"Hell-lowwww? Anyone therrre?"

Sadie steered onto the old highway and sped toward town.

The skate park was five miles from their home, but only a quarter mile from school. Anya could've ridden the school bus home, but, no, of course not, she went to the skate park with friends. To work on homework and study together, Anya said, which was bullshit. Sadie had given her mother exactly the same crapola when she was fifteen and went to the skate park, and all she'd done was smoke weed, make out with boys, and ruin her life. She wanted more for Anya.

"Mom?"

Sadie said, "I fell. It's nothing. I'm coming."



She veered left when the road forked and passed the old drive-in theater, picking up speed.

Anya said, "Fell? Fell how?"

"I tripped on the steps. It was stupid."

"Were you drinking?"

Sadie's grip on the wheel tightened.

"Stop."

"Did you get high? Is that why you forgot me?"

Sadie took another deep breath. She held it.

Please work.

"I didn't forget you."

"Then where were you?"

Now the tone was a whine.

It was hard, just the two of them. And the guilt, oh Lord, the guilt was enormous.

Sadie was seventeen when she had Anya. She had been arrested eight times after Anya's birth and had served eleven months at the Century Regional Detention Facility. Sadie had lost custody of her child to the state, gotten her back, and currently worked sixty-five hours a week split between two jobs, one paying minimum wage, the other paying minimum plus tips. Sadie had been straight-edge sober for three years, two months, and sixteen days, and attended meetings three times a week, despite working two jobs and raising Anya. Sadie Given had turned her life around, made a home with her daughter, and didn't owe anyone anything. She didn't date, saved what money she could, and had a plan for community college. Maybe next year. Maybe.

Anya gave her the tone again.

"I'm waiting. Where were you?"

"Home."

"Our home?"

"Stop!"

Anya stopped, but Sadie kept going.

“I fell asleep. I was sleeping. Maybe if you didn’t watch TV all night, I could rest.”

Sadie cringed even as the words tumbled out and knew she had blown it again.

Anya said, “This is bullshit. I’m not waiting any longer.”

“I’m almost there.”

“I don’t care. Good-bye.”

Sadie pressed the gas and glanced at the mirror. Checking for sheriffs. Habit.

“Anya. I can see the school. I’m two minutes away, not even.”

“Go home. I’ll walk.”

“Don’t you dare.”

“Maybe you won’t forget me next time.”

“Anya!”

Anya hung up.

Sadie tossed her phone onto the passenger seat, so angry she wanted to slap the attitude off Anya’s ungrateful face, but her rage instantly vanished and she felt only shame. And guilt.

Anya was everything. Her baby. Her love.

The school flashed past. Sadie made a last turn and saw the skate park ahead, a dim, shrouded concrete playground wrapped by trees and chain-link fences.

Closer.

Closer.

There.

Sadie pulled into the gravel parking area. Anya should’ve been waiting in front, but wasn’t.

Brat.

Sadie beeped the horn twice, and held it the second time. She opened her door, stood from the car, and shouted.

“Anya! I’m here.”

The skate park was deserted.

Sadie studied the hamburger stand and buildings across the street, didn't see Anya, and peered up the road into deepening darkness. If Anya was walking home, Sadie would've passed her. She hadn't, which meant Anya wasn't going home. She was probably going to one of her stupid friends or hiding nearby to torture her mother.

"Damn it, girl."

Sadie beeped the horn three fast times, beep, beep, beep. She called again.

"Anya, you stop it and come here!"

Nothing.

She beeped the horn and called louder.

"Anya!"

Nothing.

Sadie slid behind the wheel and slowly pulled away. She was furious, but her anger was tempered by fear. She didn't want her daughter walking along the dark, unlit roads.

Sadie followed the old road past small homes set on an acre or more, deep yards dotted with horse trailers, and empty land. She grew angrier and more afraid, but finally more afraid than angry.

Night fell hard in a rural area. The sky turned bright with stars, but the land grew black.

Sadie peered into passing shadows and fields, but didn't see Anya.

Then her eye caught a glint of light.

Sadie tapped the brakes.

The glint came again, a flash of dim light behind shadows on the far side of a field.

Sadie stopped and got out of her car. She wanted to call Anya's name, but didn't.

Sadie ran to the darkness as fast as she could.

# **PART ONE**