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DEAN KOONTZ



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Ashley Bell



A Novel

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Contents

Cover

Title Page

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Epigraph

Part 1: The Woman Who Intended to Marry a Hero

Chapter 1: The Girl Whose Mind Was Always Spinning

Chapter 2: Another Perfect Day in Paradise

Chapter 3: The Salon

Chapter 4: Searching for the Silver Lining

Chapter 5: Pet the Cat

Chapter 6: The Frightening Pace of Examination

Chapter 7: The Power of Cookies

Chapter 8: Hammered and Fully Prosecuted

Chapter 9: Into the Tunnel of Fate

Chapter 10: The Kind of Girl She Is

Chapter 11: A Time When She Believed in Magic

Chapter 12: Footsteps of a Man Unseen

Chapter 13: Young Again in Grief

Chapter 14: She Sat Up, Sat Up, Sat Up in Bed

Chapter 15: One Moment of Truth Among Many

Chapter 16: A Memory Inexplicable in These Circumstances

Chapter 17: In the Hours Before the Crisis

Chapter 18: Something Bad and Something Worse

Chapter 19: If Only It Were Just a Ghost

Chapter 20: A Condition of Complete Simplicity
Chapter 21: Half a World Away from Home
Chapter 22: What the Hell Just Happened?
Chapter 23: She Just Can't Leave It Alone
Chapter 24: How Sweet It Would Be If It Could Be True
Chapter 25: Captain? Are You Up There, Captain?
Chapter 26: People of Sinister Intentions
Chapter 27: What She Did When She Didn't Go Insane
Chapter 28: A Visit from the Doctor
Chapter 29: The Poison-Ivy Itch of Intuition
Chapter 30: Proud Collector of 10,000 Heads
Chapter 31: Crazy When You Least Expect It

Part 2: Girl With a Mission, Girl on the Run

Chapter 32: Solange St. Croix and the Butterfly Effect
Chapter 33: Waiting for the Wrong People to Show Up
Chapter 34: The I of the Needle
Chapter 35: A World and a Half Away
Chapter 36: Scrabblemancy
Chapter 37: Every Mama's Babies Got to Pee
Chapter 38: Give Death a Kiss
Chapter 39: Love Call and War Cry
Chapter 40: Downhill, Over the Edge, Into Chaos
Chapter 41: The Warrior Olaf and His Valkyrie
Chapter 42: The Book of Leaping Panther and Gazelle
Chapter 43: Three Days in a Locked Room
Chapter 44: Adjusting to Paranoia
Chapter 45: No Haven from Her Enemies

Part 3: From Time to Time the World Goes Mad

Chapter 46: Where She Went When She Couldn't Go Home Again

Chapter 47: Night Visitors

Chapter 48: Extraction

Chapter 49: The Man Who Borrowed the Names of Death

Chapter 50: Fog and the Fog of Time

Chapter 51: Thunder Crusher

Chapter 52: Going Home with the Dead

Chapter 53: Walk the Board, Dudette

Chapter 54: A Taste of the Caterpillar's Mushroom?

Chapter 55: The Photograph

Chapter 56: Out of Chaos, Conviction

Part 4: Putting the Pieces Together at the Risk of Falling Apart

Chapter 57: Breakfast with a Side of Surprise

Chapter 58: Off the Grid

Chapter 59: The First to Recognize Her Talent

Chapter 60: The Panther of Lost Time

Chapter 61: As I Lay Dying

Chapter 62: A Smile from the Past

Chapter 63: Sleeping on a Sea of Troubles

Chapter 64: A Literary Lion's Den

Chapter 65: Silence Like a Cancer Grows

Chapter 66: He Who Would Rather Die than Share

Chapter 67: A Little Time to Chill

Chapter 68: A Man, a Dog, a Moment

Chapter 69: Cash, Key, and Contact

Chapter 70: Cookies, Tea, and Dark History

Chapter 71: An Old Woman with a Junk-Shop Memory

Chapter 72: Questions Not Asked

Chapter 73: Just Before the Swarm

Chapter 74: Hermione, Hermione, and the Men in Black

Chapter 75: Girls, Thugs, and the Remade Woman

Chapter 76: Two Dead Girls

Chapter 77: The Collar That Restrains Her

Chapter 78: In Hiding from a Nonexistent Husband

Chapter 79: Paxton Reflecting

Chapter 80: The Truth She Dares Not Face

Chapter 81: The Ultimate Traitor

Part 5: Out of the Ashes of Memory

Chapter 82: Returning to the Place That She Called Evil

Chapter 83: What Do You Need Most?

Chapter 84: While Waiting for an Eskimo Pie

Chapter 85: The Library of Babel

Chapter 86: To Break Her Spirit

Chapter 87: No Dragons, No Skulls, No Hearts

Part 6: The Girl Who Was and Wasn't There

Chapter 88: The Best Western That Wasn't

Chapter 89: Master of Her Fate, Captain of Her Soul

Chapter 90: The First Shock of Three

Chapter 91: The Second Shock of Three

Chapter 92: The Third Shock of Three

Chapter 93: Heart to Heart in a Desperate Hour

Part 7: Two Girls Needing to Be Found

Chapter 94: The Girl We Only Think We Know

Chapter 95: A Familiar House Never Seen Before

Chapter 96: The Box of Ordinary Things

Chapter 97: Where Shadows Live Their Shadow Lives

Chapter 98: A Little Trove of Traumas
Chapter 99: The Girl Who Loved Horses
Chapter 100: The Clock, the Watch, and the Ovens
Chapter 101: Devious and Numerous
Chapter 102: The Wicked Witch Lets Her Hair Down
Chapter 103: Valiant Girls Do Not Go Mad
Chapter 104: Boozer, Baker, Starmaker
Chapter 105: The Passenger
Chapter 106: A Father's Intuition
Chapter 107: By the Skin of Their Teeth
Chapter 108: The Enduring Chill

Part 8: Bibi to Bell

Chapter 109: The Eight-Fingered Waitress and the Possibility of Death
Chapter 110: The Girl in Need of Discipline
Chapter 111: Like a Message in a Bottle
Chapter 112: Teacher of the Year Award
Chapter 113: What Words Cannot Describe
Chapter 114: The Awful Woman and the Terrible Blow
Chapter 115: Toba's Life of Fact and Fiction
Chapter 116: Reality and the Realtor
Chapter 117: The Tides of Night
Chapter 118: He Can Fix Anything. Almost.
Chapter 119: The Man Who Didn't Belong There
Chapter 120: The Hard Way
Chapter 121: The Captain Regrets
Chapter 122: Bibi on the Brink
Chapter 123: A Moment in Her Life with Books
Chapter 124: The Captain and His Albatross
Chapter 125: In a World of Her Own Making

Chapter 126: The Dangerous Art

Chapter 127: Bibi to Bell

Chapter 128: God Bless You, Erich Segal

Chapter 129: Where She Goes from Here

Chapter 130: She Hears the Song in the Egg of the Bird

Dedication

By Dean Koontz

About the Author

Excerpt from The Silent Corner

She...

Hears the song in the egg of a bird.

—James Dickey, *Sleeping Out at Easter*

1

*The Woman Who
Intended to Marry a Hero*

1

The Girl Whose Mind Was Always Spinning

The year that Bibi Blair turned ten, which was twelve years before Death came calling on her, the sky was a grim vault of sorrow nearly every day from January through mid-March, and the angels cried down flood after flood upon Southern California. That was how she described it in her diary: a sorrowing sky, the days and nights washed by the grief of angels, though she didn't speculate on the cause of their celestial distress.

Even then, she was writing short stories in addition to keeping a diary. That rainy winter, her simple narratives were all about a dog named Jasper whose cruel master had abandoned him on a storm-swept beach south of San Francisco. In each of those little fictions, Jasper, a gray-and-black mongrel, found a new home. But at the end of every tale, his haven proved impermanent for one reason or another. Determined to keep his spirits high, good Jasper traveled southward, hundreds of miles, in search of his forever home.

Bibi was a happy child, a stranger to melancholy; therefore, it seemed odd to her then—and for years after—that she should write multiple woeful episodes about a lonely, beleaguered mutt whose search for love was never

more than briefly fulfilled. Understanding didn't come to her until after her twenty-second birthday.

In one sense, everyone is a magpie. Bibi was one, but she didn't know it then. Much time would pass before she recognized some truths that she had hidden away in her magpie heart.

The magpie, a bird with striking pied plumage and a long tail, often hoards objects that strike it as significant: buttons, bits of string, twists of ribbon, colorful beads, fragments of broken glass. Having concealed these treasures from the world, the magpie builds a new nest the following year and forgets where its trove is located; therefore, having hidden its collection even from itself, the bird starts a new one.

People hide truths about themselves from themselves. Such self-deception is a coping mechanism, and to one extent or another, most people begin deceiving themselves when they're children.

That sodden winter when she was ten, Bibi lived with her parents in a small bungalow in Corona del Mar, a picturesque neighborhood of Newport Beach. Although they were just three blocks from the Pacific, they had no ocean view. The first Saturday in April, she was home alone, sitting in a rocking chair on the front porch of the quaint shingled house as warm rain streamed straight down through the palm trees and the ficuses, as it sizzled on the blacktop like hot oil on a griddle.

She was not a child who lazed around. Her mind remained always busy, spinning. She had a yellow lined tablet and a collection of pencils with which she was composing yet another installment in the saga of lonesome Jasper. Movement at the periphery of her vision caused her to look up, whereupon she discovered a soaked and weary dog ascending the sidewalk from the distant sea.

At ten, her sense of wonder had not been worn thin; and she sensed that a surprising turn of events was about to occur. In the grip of an agreeable expectation, she put down the tablet and the pencil, rose from the chair, and went to the head of the porch steps.

The dog looked nothing like the lonely mongrel in her stories. The bedraggled golden retriever halted where the bungalow walkway met the public sidewalk. Girl and beast regarded each other. She called to him,

“Here, boy, here.” He needed to be coaxed, but eventually he approached the porch and climbed the steps. Bibi stooped to his level to peer into his eyes, which were as golden as his coat. “You stink.” The retriever yawned, as if his stinkiness was old news to him.

He wore a cracked and filthy leather collar. No license tag dangled from it. There wasn’t one of those name-and-phone-number plates riveted to it, which a responsible owner should have provided.

Bibi led the dog off the porch, through the rain, around the side of the house, into a brick-paved thirty-foot-square courtyard flanked by stuccoed privacy walls along the property lines to the east and west. To the south stood a two-car garage that opened onto an alleyway. Exterior steps rose to a small balcony and an apartment above the garage. Bibi avoided glancing up at those windows.

She told the retriever to wait on the back porch while she went into the house. He surprised her by being there when she returned with two beach towels, shampoo, a hair dryer, and a hairbrush. He ran with her across the courtyard, out of the rain and into the garage.

After she turned on the lights, after she took the stained and mud-crusting collar from around his neck, she saw something that she had not previously noticed. She considered dropping the collar in the garbage can, burying it under other trash, but she knew that would be wrong. Instead, she opened a drawer in the cabinet beside her father’s workbench, took one of several chamois cloths from his supply, and wrapped the collar in it.

A sound issued from the apartment overhead, a brief hard clatter. Startled, Bibi looked at the garage ceiling, where the open four-by-six joists were festooned with spider architecture.

She thought she heard a low and anguished voice, too. After listening intently for half a minute, she told herself that she must have imagined it.

Between two of the joists, backlit by a bare dust-coated bulb in a white ceramic socket, a fat spider danced from string to string, plucking from its silken harp a music beyond human hearing.

Bibi thought of Charlotte the spider, who saved Wilbur the pig, her friend, in E. B. White’s book *Charlotte’s Web*. For a moment, Bibi was all

but unaware of the garage as an image rose in her mind and became more real to her than reality:

Hundreds of tiny young spiders, Charlotte's offspring fresh from her egg sac many weeks after her sad death, standing on their heads and pointing their spinnerets at the sky, letting loose small clouds of fine silk. The clouds form into miniature balloons, and the baby spiders become airborne. Wilbur the pig is overcome with wonder and delight, but also with sadness, while he watches the aerial armada sail away to far places, wishing them well but sorry to be deprived of this last connection to his lost friend Charlotte....

With a thin whine and soft bark, the dog brought Bibi back to the reality of the garage.

Later, after the retriever had been washed and dried and brushed, during a break in the rain, Bibi took him into the house. When she showed him the small bedroom that was hers, she said, "If Mom and Dad don't blow their tops when they see you, then you'll sleep here with me."

The dog watched with interest as Bibi dragged a cardboard box out of the closet. It contained books that wouldn't fit on the already heavily laden shelves flanking her bed. She rearranged the volumes to create a hollow into which she inserted the chamois-wrapped collar before returning the box to the closet.

"Your name is Olaf," she informed the retriever, and he reacted to this christening by wagging his tail. "Olaf. Someday, I'll tell you why."

In time, Bibi forgot about the collar because she wanted to forget. Nine years would pass before she discovered it at the bottom of that box of books. And when she found it, she folded the chamois around it once more and sought a new place in which to conceal it.