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THE JAMES BECK NOVELS

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New Lots

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DEATH
COMES DUE

JOHN CLARKSON

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Brooklyn, NY

DEATH COMES DUE
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For the victims of mass incarceration

Demarco Jones asked, “Where’s Manny?”

James Beck looked up from his book and said, “On the pier. Fishing.”

They were in Beck’s bar on the first floor of his renovated building in Red Hook, Brooklyn. Demarco stood behind the hundred-year-old oak bar that dominated the first floor, reading the manual for a new coffee maker. Beck sat on a barstool at his usual spot, reading a new history of the United States he’d been absorbing in chunks.

Neither of the men looked like devotees of the written word.

Demarco Jones stood six feet four, head shaved, linebacker physique. He was a hardened criminal, ex-con, and an exceptionally efficient killer.

Beck was less imposing, but he was sturdy, fearless, and had survived more life-and-death situations than he cared to remember.

Beck asked, “What was wrong with the old coffee maker?”

Demarco kept reading the manual and muttered, “Lots.”

“That one looks like it should be in a chemistry lab.”

Jones didn’t bother to respond.

Beck persisted.

“I’m not sure it fits in with the décor.”

Demarco looked up from the manual.

“You mean this Iceman Cometh turn-of-the-century dive bar look?”

“Painstakingly executed.”

“You think it should be in the new kitchen upstairs.”

“I do.”

“But this is where we take our morning coffee.”

Beck made a small sound of concession and looked back at his history book.

Demarco dropped the manual on the back bar and began filling the coffee maker with freshly ground coffee. He said, “I’m glad Manny went out.”

Beck closed the eight-hundred-page book and said, “You’re noticing it, too?”

“About the only time he goes out is to shop for food.”

“You think it’s because he’s getting older?”

“Partly. Mostly it’s all the time he spent inside. It’s wearing on him. And that mess with his niece didn’t help.”

Beck said, “The shooting or the betrayal?”

Demarco’s answer came without hesitation. “Both. She was the last of his family far as I know.”

“There’s still us.”

“Hmm.”

Beck took another sip of his coffee. The last cup made with the old coffee maker. He said, “Doesn’t change the past, I guess.”

“What?”

“Having us. And this place.”

“You can’t change the past, James. Maybe tone down the effects. But Manny is Manny. The original OG. The tats, work clothes. He’s not gonna change. Still got one attitude – stay the fuck away from me.”

“Yes,” said Beck. “No illusions.” He tapped his knuckle against his book. “History of this country is pretty clear.”

“America loves locking people up.”

“Or just killing whoever is in the way.”

Demarco turned on the coffee maker, shaking his head.

Beck said, “What?”

“Even you.”

“Even me what?”

“Even you got nailed. White, no priors, no history – and they still locked you up.”

“I killed a cop, D. Powers that be couldn’t let that go.”

“Well, you beat it. And you got paid.”

“After eight years of hell and Phineas moving mountains. Any particular reason you decided to bring all that up this morning?”

“I don’t know. Talking about Manny, I suppose. He was locked up longer than any of us. What is he? Sixty-two, sixty-three? Forty-five years in the system. What that does to you is permanent, James.”

“It’s all permanent, brother. I remember the feel of the handcuffs that first time. And every time after that.”

Demarco leaned against the back bar and watch the steam rising from the new coffee maker.

“When I was a kid, I had an operation on my eyes. I think it was pretty standard. To tighten the muscles or something, but I had bandages over my eyes for maybe two weeks. My Aunt Ethel was with me when they finally took the bandages off. I remember opening my eyes.”

“And?”

“First thing I did was close them.”

“Really.”

“Everything was too bright, too disorienting. Aunt Ethel kept tellin’ me to open my eyes, but I just wanted to sit in that chair. Go back to the way it was until I could get a hold of myself.”

“Like the guy who gets out of prison and wants to sleep in a closet.”

“On the floor.”

“Yeah.”

Demarco said, “It’s good Manny has this place.”

“And us.”

“And his fishing buddies, I guess.”

Beck said, “Ramon and Eduardo. I think it’s Eduardo.”

“They ex-cons?”

“Maybe some small-time stuff. I think Manny would’ve told me if either of them had done hard time. They’re just neighborhood guys.”

“But Hispanic.”

“Yes. Not Dominican like Manny. Puerto Rican, I think. I’m not sure. I suspect the common denominator is they all like rum.”

Demarco smiled his killer smile. “Come to think of it, I don’t remember Manny ever bringing home any fish.”

“Nah. Manny Guzman is not going to eat anything out of New York Bay.”

Beck looked at the bottle of dark Dominican rum on the back-bar shelf that Manny sometimes sipped with his morning coffee – Matusalem Gran Reserva 18. He thought of pouring a bit for himself but decided against it. Maybe when Manny got back.

Demarco warmed a small pitcher of milk in the microwave on the back bar and placed the pitcher next to Beck. He replaced Beck’s half-full coffee cup with a clean cup, then poured in steaming coffee from his new machine. Beck added just the right amount of warm milk. Despite the chilly March morning outside, the rich aroma from the fresh hot coffee made the old barroom feel like home.

2

A little over a mile from where Beck sat, NYPD Deputy Inspector Dianne Brennan stood in the bowels of the massive Red Hook Grain Terminal – a dangerous, derelict structure, abandoned for nearly fifty years. She stared at a burned and twisted corpse made lurid by the unforgiving glare of police emergency lights.

Brennan, a tall redhead with an athletic figure, wore a tailored gray pantsuit, white shirt, and black round-toe pumps, her Sig-Sauer riding high on one hip, her police radio on the other, and her Deputy Inspector insignia on her lapel. Brennan looked like a confident commanding officer, but she felt like a disoriented bystander dropped into a surreal hellhole and immobilized by a gruesome specter of death.

The abandoned grain terminal was a vast labyrinth of massive crumbling concrete pillars and walls, corroding metal staircases, giant rusting metalworks, and creeping black mold marred by patches of garish, ugly graffiti. The corpse lay in a blackened alcove at the end of a hundred-foot-long corridor, its ceiling supported by gigantic circular pillars with massive concrete conical tops. Most of the clothing had burned away, all the skin had turned black. The body looked like a filthy, misshapen statue that had fallen into a pile of ashes – the remains of several wooden pallets that had fed the fire. Brennan knew that for the rest of her life, two things would haunt her: the expression of pain and absolute terror fixed forever on the face of the victim, and the sickening smell – a combination of burned gasoline, scrap wood, and human flesh.

The two patrolmen from the 76th precinct who had found the body knew enough to sidestep the usual procedure and call in the discovery by cell phone. That kept the information off the radio frequency monitored by news organizations and other trawlers looking for excitement. The desk sergeant on duty had the presence of mind to report the finding directly to the precinct commander, Captain Nicholas Fernandez, who made sure to keep the investigation off the grid. All the necessary NYPD personnel – crime scene unit, medical examiner’s office, precinct homicide detectives from the Seven-Six, and FDNY investigators – had filtered into the location in unmarked cars or vans discreetly parked on side streets surrounding the abandoned grain terminal.

Brennan stood with Fernandez facing the murder scene, forcing herself to look at the burnt and twisted remains despite how queasy the sight made her feel. It was important to her that she did not show any weakness to Fernandez. Brennan was aware of her standing among her fellow officers. Particularly male officers. Brennan worked directly with the commissioner of the New York Police Department. She was his eyes and ears. She investigated crimes that could become P.R. problems, attract media attention, foment protests. Usually, higher-ranking cops would defer to someone with her rank, but they knew that Brennan had no power of her own. No real command authority. She had a measly squad of four detectives, nothing more. She did, however, have the ear of the commissioner, so NYPD command staff were careful around Dianne Brennan. That didn’t mean they respected her. In fact, far too many resented her, particularly those assumed that a woman as young and attractive as Brennan had earned her rank by sleeping her way to the top.

Brennan’s response was to ignore the bullshit, keep her cool, and do her job. A job Commissioner Warren Roth had made clear to her: “Make sure I’m never the second person to know something that will affect the department.”

Brennan's job was to gather information. Which, at this moment, meant following protocol – check in with the highest-ranking cop on the scene, Captain Nicholas Fernandez.

After greeting Fernandez and shaking his hand, Brennan skipped the small talk and asked, “How did your guys find this?”

Fernandez pointed up to the blackened ceiling. “The fire in here ran along the ceiling and out that opening facing the bay, scorching the wall outside. My guys were rolling on Bay Street. Regular patrol. They saw the scorch marks. Normally, we don't come in here. It's too dangerous. This place is twelve stories high, seventy-feet wide, five-hundred-feet long. No lighting. Open holes everywhere. Everything falling apart.”

Brennan said, “But they came in to investigate the fire.”

“There wasn't any fire by the time they were within sight. Just the signs of a fire.”

“Enough to come in.”

“Yes. They found the body. Called it in. Kept it off the radio. Here we are.”

“Well, Captain, you and your people did a good job keeping this off the grid. This is one of those cases we'd like to get a handle on before the press swarms all over it.”

Fernandez turned to Brennan, literally sick of looking at the corpse. “Just so I know, Inspector, are you going to be taking command of this investigation?”

“No. I report what I find to the commissioner.” Brennan made sure to add, “He might ask my opinion, but it's his call who does what.”

Fernandez nodded. “I'm assuming this will get bumped up at least to the borough level.”

“Probably. But you should keep doing what you're doing until you hear otherwise.”

Fernandez nodded but didn't say anything. Brennan could tell he didn't like getting any kind of direction from her. Tough

shit, she thought. You don't want to hear what I have to say, don't ask me. Brennan dropped her collegial act.

"Tell your guys to stick around until I can talk to them."

Fernandez gave Brennan a half salute and moved off to talk to his precinct detectives.

Brennan did a quick circuit of the area gathering people she wanted to talk to: the detective in charge of the crime scene unit, the head technician from the medical examiner's office, and a fire marshal from the FDNY Bureau of Fire Investigations. They walked to an open area facing the bay to get away from the smells and sights of the brutal murder. Brennan had received the first report shortly after she had arrived at her office in One Police Plaza at 8:32 a.m. Overnight, warm air moving across the cold water in the bay had created a layer of fog, now mostly dissipated in the morning sun.

Brennan knew the CSU detective, a large man with an easy-going, confident manner named Gerry Austen. He'd been on the job eighteen years but had never seen a murder as grim as this one.

"Gerry, nice to see you again. Despite the horrible circumstances."

"Likewise, Inspector."

"What's your take?"

Austen stared out at the bay for a moment, considering what to say. "Ah, I'd say this is about as bad as it gets." Austen nodded back toward the body. "Obviously, the body was doused with a flammable liquid. My nose tells me it was gasoline."

Austen looked at the fire marshal, who nodded but didn't say anything.

Brennan asked, "How much gas would it take to do that?"

"I don't know. Four or five gallons. But it was those wooden pallets that kept it going. I assume the pallets were already here. The gasoline burned long enough so that the skin split open and the body fat fed the wood. The fat and wood kept everything burning.

“The only other significant thing, it looks like there was a trauma to the left side of the skull. Blunt force. Hopefully, the blow either killed the victim or knocked him out before the fire.”

The fire marshal chimed in, “The autopsy will confirm that.”

Brennan asked, “How?”

“If the victim was breathing, there’ll be residue in the lungs. Irritants, carbon monoxide, and particulate matter from the accelerant. And damage from the super-heated air.”

Austen said, “Even if he was conscious after the first few lungs-full, there’d be massive edema to his airways. That would cut off the oxygen, and he’d pass out.”

The medical examiner investigator said, “I concur. At the most, ten or twenty seconds of pain and panic, and that would be it.”

Thirty seconds thought Brennan. She knew what a drop of cooking oil splashed out of a frying pan onto her hand for a split second felt like. She couldn’t imagine the eternity of pain and agony of a body covered in burning gasoline for twenty seconds.

Austen continued, “Obviously, this one is going to be tough. No weapons on the scene, no blood, no prints. The one thing we have going for us is the teeth are intact. First line of investigation would be dental records. We could use them to confirm the identity. Of course, after we get a name. Maybe we get lucky with Missing Persons, and that gives us some direction. Honestly, Inspector, we have an awful long way to go.”

Brennan nodded. She asked the ME investigator, “You think there might be any blood in the internal organs?”

“Doubtful. We can get DNA from the teeth, but again that’s only good if we get a name to start with like Detective Austen says. Otherwise, we have nothing to compare it to. Same thing with dental records. I took a quick look at the teeth.” The technician grimaced and shrugged. “He’s had cavities filled. No bridges. I don’t think there are any implants. We may get some fractures once we x-ray the skeleton. But again...”

Brennan interrupted. “We need a name, something to start with.” She turned to the fire marshal, “Any estimate on when this fire was set?”

“Body is still warm. The wood ash is somewhat intact. The concrete underneath is still warm. I’d estimate six, seven o’clock this morning.”

Brennan asked the men around her. “Anything else you want to tell me?”

There wasn’t.

Brennan looked past the group and saw two of her detectives approaching. Good, she thought. These guys aren’t going to be much help any time soon.

3

Beck came down into the first-floor barroom, his hair still wet from his after-workout shower. He had a daylong to-do list in his head, and it was already past noon. Before he made it halfway to his front door, he heard a familiar knock – a heavy one-two pounding that Beck knew meant Willie Reese was outside his door.

Reese had become a peripheral member of Beck's crew after he had come to Beck's building looking to extort money from Beck for the privilege of living in his neighborhood. Willie had just been released from a two-year stint in Sing Sing and needed to start earning.

Willie was big enough and strong enough to put down a man much larger than James Beck. He'd also brought along four of his gang, just in case. But Willie Reese had made a mistake. Beck had outsmarted and outfought Willie, rendering a brutal beating. Manny Guzman and Demarco Jones ran off the others with shotguns pointed at their heads.

After the fight, Beck called on his friend and personal physician, Brandon Wright, to put Willie Reese back together, and then further tested Willie by making him an offer to see if Willie could learn from the experience. Willie Reese had been smart enough to accept Beck's proposition. When Willie ended up making much more money than he would have made extorting Beck, he became Beck's neighborhood protector, a job he was well-suited for since he ruled over just about every gangbanger and bad boy in Red Hook. Beck took Willie into his tight-knit

crew, and their mutual loyalties had grown stronger over the years.

Beck unlocked his front door and stepped aside for Willie to enter.

“What’s up, big guy?”

“Cops is what’s up.”

Beck took a quick look outside, scanning Conover Street.

“Where? Why?”

“Unmarks been sneakin’ into the neighborhood last couple hours or so. They parkin’ over in the lots off Columbia and walkin’ past the park and gravel pits into that abandoned grain terminal.”

“Why?”

“Not sure. But from outside, it looks like there was a fire in there. I drove around and spotted a fire department SUV stuck in there between some empty truck trailers.”

“No other equipment?”

“Nah. Nothing’s burning now.”

Beck thought about it for a moment. “If the cops are investigating, might be somebody burned up in there.”

Willie said, “That shithole would be a good place for it.”

Beck walked toward the end of the bar and called out for Manny Guzman, thinking he would be in his small kitchen behind the bar. No answer. Manny’s absence frustrated Beck, but he had other concerns. He walked behind the bar, pulled out a gun lockbox holding his Hi-Power Browning, and placed it on the bar.

“Willie, you strapped?”

Willie reached under his 4XL Brooklyn Nets pullover hoodie and extracted a Desert Eagle .50 caliber pistol he’d been carrying in the waistband of his heavy denim jeans.

“Jeezus, how can you carry that cannon around with you?”

“Easy.”

“Easy for you. If we have cops crawling around the neighborhood, you don’t want to be on the streets with that.”

Willie put the gun on the bar as Beck pulled out a Benelli M3 shotgun from under the bar top and laid it down next to his gun box and Willie's Desert Eagle.

"Hang on, let me get Manny's Winchester out of the kitchen."

"Where's Demarco?"

"Out for a run. When he gets back, tell him to add his Glock to the pile and lock up whatever else we don't want the cops finding if they come barging in."

Beck went into the kitchen behind the bar. He came back with a beautifully maintained double-barrel Winchester shotgun and a large blue Ikea shopping bag. He placed the lockbox, Willie's Desert Eagle, and the shotguns into the bag.

"Demarco's gun will fit into this bag, too. After he stores everything in the safe, tell him to lock up and make himself scarce. You, too."

"Where you goin'?"

"To find Manny."

"Where is he?"

"Probably shopping at Fairview."

"Or maybe down by the pier fishin'."

Beck muttered "maybe" as he headed out the door. He didn't want to tell Willie that Manny had already left at dawn to catch the high tide. Or that he should have been back by now. Nor did Beck want to tell Willie that Manny's fishing gear wasn't in the storage closet near the kitchen. And he sure as hell didn't want to tell him that there was no way Manny would go food shopping with the goddamn stinking five-gallon bucket he uses to carry his bait.

Beck headed toward the supermarket anyway, trying to convince himself that Manny might have left his gear with his buddies while he made a run to the grocery store. And then he saw the flashing red and blue police lights parked near the foot of Pier 44 where Manny and his buddies fished. He broke into a run.

4

Dianne Brennan waved a hand to get the attention of Alphonse Grimaldi and Dave Metuchen, both First Grade NYPD detectives. She walked back toward the crime scene and met them near the body, giving them a few moments to see what they were dealing with. They exchanged looks, but nobody said anything. Brennan led them away from the scrum of activity so that their conversation would remain private.

Alphonse Grimaldi was a big man with a large nose who grudgingly wore his baggy suits and outdated ties. He only buttoned his suit jacket and the top button of his white shirts for weddings, funerals, and court appearances. He had a perpetual five o'clock shadow and would never lose the bags under his eyes. Grimaldi had spent years on the Major Case Squad investigating kidnappings, high-end robberies, and burglaries. He believed he was the best investigator in the room, had plenty of New York attitude, and fit in well with NYPD cops and detectives who naturally accepted him as one of their own and treated him like the veteran detective he was – something Brennan found useful because the rank and file kept their distance from her. She was management.

Dave Metuchen was Grimaldi's opposite. Metuchen's 38 regular suits fit him well and looked like they had just come from the dry cleaners because they had. Metuchen had other skills that Brennan needed. He had a nonthreatening manner that put civilians at ease. He'd spent years in the NYPD Robbery Division working on task forces that regularly involved the ATF

and FBI, so he was good at dealing with outside law enforcement agencies, navigating feuds, and overcoming distrust, even though he personally trusted no one. Metuchen always figured the angles and calculated the politics in any situation.

Brennan quickly filled them in on what had happened. Grimaldi didn't hide his disgust. Metuchen showed no reaction.

Grimaldi got to the point.

"So, what's the plan, boss?"

"Find the monster who did this and lock him up. Fast."

Both detectives understood what "fast" meant. Before the local precinct homicide detectives cracked it, and before the higher-ups took over.

Dianne Brennan was the most ambitious person either of them had ever dealt with. She'd been plotting her moves to the top in the NYPD from the day she entered the police academy. She'd used her looks, her brains, her work ethic, and her blue-collar Irish-kid-from-Queens background to get assignments in precincts where she could earn her gold shield and get to where she wanted to be. Without even knowing the details, Grimaldi and Metuchen both knew that a homicide case drawing this much attention was exactly the kind of case that could keep her on the rise.

Metuchen spoke first.

"What do you figure, twenty-four, forty-eight hours?"

"Tops. Roth will move on this quickly, but it will time for the chiefs to gear up and get moving. Forty-eight hours max, we'll be shunted aside."

Grimaldi said, "And so far, we got no ID on the vic, no motive, no weapons, no suspects, no witnesses."

Brennan said, "So what's that leave us with?"

Grimaldi said, "Well, by the looks of it, we have a fucked-up, horrifying MO. Phil is good at running through all the databases. Let's see if we can find anything like it. What's he doing?"

Phil Harris was the third detective on Brennan's four-man squad.

Metuchen said, “He’s on that bullshit thing about the mayor’s campaign contributor.”

Brennan said, “That bozo who owns a bunch of pharmacies. The media is making a big deal out of it. The commissioner wants to know how dirty he is.”

Metuchen said, “I would assume very.”

Brennan said, “Obviously. We’re trying to figure out if he’s going to get indicted.”

Grimaldi asked, “For what?”

“Take your pick. Illegal campaign contributions, tax fraud, conspiracy. I’ll pull Phil off that and put him on this for now. It’s a base we have to cover, but if anything like this has been done before in our area, I think we’d already know about it.”

Metuchen said, “Agreed. First job is to identify the victim. Start with the basics. There’s no magic to it. Canvas the area for witnesses. What’s Jerome doing? Is he still undercover on that extortion thing?”

Brennan said, “Yes. He’s in Fort Greene on a construction site. We have to find out whatever there is to find out long before I can free him up.”

Grimaldi said, “So, it’s basically us.”

“And whatever the Seven-Six homicide guys do.”

The two detectives knew horning in on the investigations would piss off the local precinct guys, but they’d stopped caring about that sort of thing.

Grimaldi said, “The other angle is Missing Persons. Couldn’t tell much by looking at that mess, but I assume the victim is an adult male?”

“According to the CSU and ME guys.”

Metuchen said, “Going through the missing persons squad will take too long, and anybody missing long enough to be on their list probably isn’t our vic.”

Grimaldi said, “I agree. Someone missing recently, family or somebody will go to the local precincts. We could give it a shot there and hope we get lucky.”

Brennan said, "What's the best way to do that?"

Grimaldi said, "Go straight into the precincts. Find the detectives who have missing persons on their to-do list and talk to 'em. Any other way, they'll avoid us."

Metuchen shook his head slightly. "Lotta footwork for a long shot. We don't have any kind of description of this guy. Is he white? Hispanic? Black? Height, weight, features. Whoever did this took all that out of the picture."

Brennan said, "I know it's a longshot, but if the ME comes up with dental work, fractures, anything that might identify the victim, we'll need a name to match it to."

Grimaldi said, "We can't wait for the ME."

Brennan said, "No, we can't wait."

There was a pause as everyone thought about options. There weren't any good ones. Brennan made the decision.

"All right, forget missing persons for now. Start canvassing the area. Maybe somebody saw something."

Grimaldi said, "Not much around here."

Brennan said, "Then it won't take long. Start close and keep expanding the radius until you hear from me or tap out. Try not to bump into the local homicide guys. They'll be doing the same thing. I'll get Phil going on the MO."

Metuchen gave Grimaldi a look that said this is awfully thin.

Grimaldi shrugged.

Brennan had pulled out her cell phone to call Phil Harris when the voice of her driver, William Jablonsky, crackled over the police radio on her hip. She had recruited Jablonsky fresh out of the police academy. He had finished a B.A. in Criminal Justice at John Jay while in the police academy and was about to start Fordham law school at night.

"What's up, William?"

"Report just came in of a dead body in the water near a pier about a mile from where you are. Cops from the Seven-Six and harbor patrol are on the scene."

“Shit. You still parked on Columbia?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“I’ll be there in a minute. Anything else?”

“That’s it.”

Brennan speed-dialed Phil Harris’s number on her cell phone. Grimaldi and Metuchen stepped away so that they didn’t have to listen. They had heard Jablonsky’s report over Brennan’s radio.

Grimaldi said, “Another body.”

“I don’t believe in coincidences.” Metuchen nodded discreetly toward Brennan and said, “She’s gonna run hot now.”

Grimaldi said, “No shit.”

Brennan finished her call and joined her two detectives.

“Dave, start canvassing this area. Call me if anything pops. Alphonse, come with me.”

Metuchen watched Brennan and Grimaldi rush off. Grimaldi turned, mimicked phoning. Metuchen nodded and made the same motion. They both wanted to know whatever the other one found out.