

**Dean Koontz**

**The Taking**  
*(passages from the novel)*

*"When you're alone in the middle of the night and you wake in a sweat and a hell of a fright"*

– T. S. Eliot, *Fragment of an Agon*

This book is dedicated to Joe Stefko:

great drummer, publisher of exquisite special editions,  
dog-lover three virtues that guarantee Heaven.

The bad feet can be overlooked.

**PART ONE**

*"In my beginning is my end."*

– T. S. Eliot, *East Coker*

I

A FEW MINUTES PAST ONE O'CLOCK IN THE MORNING, a hard rain fell without warning. No thunder preceded the deluge, no wind.

The abruptness and the ferocity of the downpour had the urgent quality of a perilous storm in a dream.

Lying in bed beside her husband, Molly Sloan had been restless before the sudden cloudburst. She grew increasingly fidgety as she listened to the rush of rain.

The voices of the tempest were legion, like an angry crowd chanting in a lost language. Torrents pounded and pried at the cedar siding, at the shingles, as if seeking entrance.

September in southern California had always before been a dry month in a long season of predictable drought. Rain rarely fell after March, seldom before December.

In wet months, the rataplan of raindrops on the roof had sometimes served as a reliable remedy for insomnia. This night, however, the liquid rhythms failed to lull her into slumber, and not just because they were out of season.

For Molly, sleeplessness had too often in recent years been the price of thwarted ambition. Scorned by the sandman, she stared at the dark bedroom ceiling, brooding about what might have been, yearning for what might never be.

By the age of twenty-eight, she had published four novels. All were well received by reviewers, but none sold in sufficient numbers to make her famous or even to guarantee that she would find an eager publisher for the next.

Her mother, Thalia, a writer of luminous prose, had been in the early years of an acclaimed career when she died of cancer at thirty. Now, sixteen years later, Thalia's books were out of print, her mark upon the world all but erased.

Molly lived with a quiet dread of following her mother into obscurity. She didn't suffer from an inordinate fear of death; rather, she was troubled by the thought of dying before achieving any lasting accomplishment.

Beside her, Neil snored softly, oblivious of the storm.

Sleep always found him within a minute of the moment when he put his head on the pillow and closed his eyes. He seldom stirred during the night; after eight hours, he woke in the same position in which he had gone to sleep—rested, invigorated.

Neil claimed that only the innocent enjoyed such perfect sleep.

Molly called it the sleep of the slacker.

Throughout their seven years of marriage, they had conducted their lives by different clocks.

She dwelled as much in the future as in the present, envisioning where she wished to go, relentlessly mapping the path that ought to lead to her high goals. Her strong mainspring was wound tight.

Neil lived in the moment. To him, the far future was next week, and he trusted time to take him there whether or not he planned the journey.

They were as different as mice and moonbeams.

Considering their contrasting natures, they shared a love that seemed unlikely. Yet love was the cord that bound them together, the sinewy fiber that gave them strength to weather disappointment, even tragedy.

During Molly's spells of insomnia, Neil's rhythmic snoring, although not loud, sometimes tested love almost as much as infidelity might have done. Now the sudden crash of pummeling rain masked the noise that he made, giving Molly a new target upon which to focus her frustration.

The roar of the storm escalated until they seemed to be inside the rumbling machinery that powered the universe.

Shortly after two o'clock, without switching on a light, Molly got out of bed. At a window that was protected from the rain by the overhanging roof, she looked through her ghostly reflection, into a windless monsoon.

Their house stood high in the San Bernardino Mountains, embraced by sugar pines, knobcone pines, and towering ponderosas with dramatic fissured bark.

Most of their neighbors were in bed at this hour. Through the shrouding trees and the incessant downpour, only a single cluster of lights could be seen on these slopes above Black Lake.

The Corrigan place. Harry Corrigan had lost Calista, his wife of thirty-five years, back in June.

During a weekend visit to her sister, Nancy, in Redondo Beach, Calista parked her Honda near an ATM to withdraw two hundred dollars. She'd been robbed, then shot in the face.

Subsequently, Nancy had been pulled from the car and shot twice. She had also been run over when the two gunmen escaped in the Honda. Now, three months after Calista's funeral, Nancy remained in a coma.

While Molly yearned for sleep, Harry Corrigan strove every night to avoid it. He said his dreams were killing him.

In the tides of the storm, the luminous windows of Harry's house seemed like the running lights of a distant vessel on a rolling sea: one of those fabled ghost ships, abandoned by passengers and crew, yet with lifeboats still secured. Untouched dinners would be found on plates in the crew's mess. In the wheelhouse, the captain's favorite pipe, warm with smoldering tobacco, would await discovery on the chart table.

Molly's imagination had been engaged; she couldn't easily shift into neutral again. Sometimes, in the throes of insomnia, she tossed and turned into the arms of literary inspiration.

Downstairs, in her study, were five chapters of her new novel, which needed to be polished. A few hours of work on the manuscript might soothe her nerves enough to allow sleep.

Her robe draped the back of a nearby chair. She shrugged into it and knotted the belt.

Crossing to the door, she realized that she was navigating with surprising ease, considering the absence of lamplight. Her sureness in the gloom couldn't be explained entirely by the fact that she had been awake for hours, staring at the ceiling with dark-adapted eyes.

The faint light at the windows, sufficient to dilute the bedroom darkness, could not have traveled all the way from Harry Corrigan's house, three doors to the south. The true source at first eluded her.

Storm clouds hid the moon.

Outside, the landscape lights were off; the porch lights, too.

Returning to the window, she puzzled over the tinselled glimmer of the rain. A curious wet sheen made the bristling boughs of the nearest pines more visible than they should have been.

Ice? No. Stitching through the night, needles of sleet would have made a more brittle sound than the susurrant drumming of this autumn downpour.

She pressed fingertips to the windowpane. The glass was cool but not cold.

When reflecting ambient light, falling rain sometimes acquires a silvery cast. In this instance, however, no ambient light existed.

The rain itself appeared to be faintly luminescent, each drop a light-emitting crystal. The night was simultaneously veiled and revealed by skeins of vaguely fluorescent beads.

When Molly stepped out of the bedroom, into the upstairs hall, the soft glow from two domed skylights bleached the gloom from black to gray, revealing the way to the stairs. Overhead, the rainwater sheeting down the curved Plexiglas was enlivened by radiant whorls that resembled spiral nebulae wheeling across the vault of a planetarium.

She descended the stairs and proceeded to the kitchen by the guidance of the curiously storm-lit windows.

Some nights, embracing rather than resisting insomnia, she brewed a pot of coffee to take to her desk in the study. Thus stoked, she wrote jagged, caffeine-sharpened prose with the realistic tone of police-interrogation transcripts.

This night, however, she intended to return eventually to bed. After switching on the light in the vent hood above the cooktop, she flavored a mug of milk with vanilla extract and cinnamon, then heated it in the microwave.

In her study, volumes of her favorite poetry and prose—Louise Glück, Donald Justice, T. S. Eliot, Carson McCullers, Flannery O'Connor, Dickens-lined the walls. Occasionally, she took comfort and inspiration from a humble sense of kinship with these writers.

Most of the time, however, she felt like a pretender. Worse, a fraud.

Her mother had said that every good writer needed to be her own toughest critic. Molly edited her work with both a red pen and a metaphorical hatchet, leaving evidence of bloody suffering with the former, reducing scenes to kindling with the latter.

More than once, Neil suggested that Thalia had never said—and had not intended to imply—that worthwhile art could be carved from raw language only with self-doubt as sharp as a chisel. To Thalia, her work had also been her favorite form of play.

In a troubled culture where cream often settled on the bottom and the palest milk rose to the top, Molly knew that she was short on logic and long on superstition when she supposed that her hope for success rested upon the amount of passion, pain, and polish that she brought to her writing. Nevertheless, regarding her work, Molly remained a Puritan, finding virtue in self-flagellation.

Leaving the lamps untouched, she switched on the computer but didn't at once sit at her desk. Instead, as the screen brightened and the signature music of the operating system welcomed her to a late-night work session, she was once more drawn to a window by the insistent rhythm of the rain.

Beyond the window lay the deep front porch. The railing and the overhanging roof framed a dark panorama of serried pines, a strangely luminous ghost forest out of a disturbing dream.

She could not look away. For reasons that she wasn't able to articulate, the scene made her uneasy.

Nature has many lessons to teach a writer of fiction. One of these is that nothing captures the imagination as quickly or as completely as does spectacle.

Blizzards, floods, volcanos, hurricanes, earthquakes: They fascinate because they nakedly reveal that Mother Nature, afflicted with bipolar disorder, is as likely to snuff us as she is to succor us. An alternately nurturing and destructive parent is the stuff of gripping drama.

Silvery cascades leafed the bronze woods, burnishing bark and bough with sterling highlights.

An unusual mineral content in the rain might have lent it this slight phosphorescence.

Or... having come in from the west, through the soiled air above Los Angeles and surrounding cities, perhaps the storm had washed from the atmosphere a witch's brew of pollutants that in combination gave rise to this pale, eerie radiance.

Sensing that neither explanation would prove correct, seeking a third, Molly was startled by movement on the porch. She shifted focus from the trees to the sheltered shadows immediately beyond the glass.

Low, sinuous shapes moved under the window. They were so silent, fluid, and mysterious that for a moment they seemed to be imagined: formless expressions of primal fears.

Then one, three, five of them lifted their heads and turned their yellow eyes to the window, regarding her inquisitively. They were as real as Molly herself, though sharper of tooth.

The porch swarmed with wolves. Slinking out of the storm, up the steps, onto the pegged-pine floor, they gathered under the shelter of the roof, as though this were not a house but an ark that would soon be set safely afloat by the rising waters of a cataclysmic flood.

## 2

IN THESE MOUNTAINS, BETWEEN THE TRUE DESERT to the east and the plains to the west, wolves were long extinct. The visitation on the porch had the otherworldly quality of an apparition.

When, on closer examination, Molly realized that these beasts were coyotes-sometimes called prairie wolves-their behavior seemed no less remarkable than when she had mistaken them for the larger creatures of folklore and fairy tales.

As much as anything, their silence defined their strangeness. In the thrill of the chase, running down their prey, coyotes often cry with high excitement: a chilling ululation as eerie as the music of a theremin. Now they neither cried nor barked, nor even growled.

Unlike most wolves, coyotes will frequently hunt alone. When they join in packs to stalk game, they do not run as close together as do wolves.

Yet on the front porch, the individualism characteristic of their species was not in evidence. They gathered flank-to-flank, shoulder-to-shoulder, eeling among one another, no less communal than domesticated hounds, nervous and seeking reassurance from one another.

Noticing Molly at the study window, they neither shied from her nor reacted aggressively. Their shining eyes, which in the past had always impressed her as being cruel and bright with blood hunger, now appeared to be as devoid of threat as the trusting eyes of any household pet.

Indeed, each creature favored her with a compelling look as alien to coyotes as anything she could imagine. Their expressions seemed to be imploring.

This was so unlikely that she distrusted her perceptions. Yet she thought that she detected a beseeching attitude not only in their eyes but also in their posture and behavior.

She ought to have been frightened by this fanged congregation. Her heart did beat faster than usual; however, the novelty of the situation and a sense of the mysterious, rather than fear, quickened her pulse.

The coyotes were obviously seeking shelter, although never previously had Molly seen even one of them flee the tumult of a storm for the protection of a human habitation. People were a far greater danger to their kind than anything they might encounter in nature.

Besides, this comparatively dark and quiet tempest had neither the lightning nor the thunder to chase them from their dens. The formidable volume of the downpour marked this as unusual weather; but the rain had not been falling long enough to flood these stoic predators out of their homes.

Although the coyotes regarded Molly with entreating glances, they reserved the greater part of their attention for the storm. Tails tucked, ears pricked, the wary beasts watched the silvery torrents and the drenched forest with acute interest if not with outright anxiety.

As still more of their wolfish kind slouched out of the night and onto the porch, Molly searched the palisade of trees for the cause of their concern.

She saw nothing more than she had seen before: the faintly radiant cataracts wrung from a supersaturated sky, the trees and other vegetation bowed and trembled and silvered by the fiercely pummeling rain.

Nonetheless, as she scanned the night woods, the nape of her neck prickled as though a ghost lover had pressed his ectoplasmic lips against her skin. A shudder of inexplicable misgiving passed through her.

Rattled by the conviction that something in the forest returned her scrutiny from behind the wet veil of the storm, Molly backed away from the window.

The computer monitor suddenly seemed too bright-and revealing. She switched off the machine.

Black and argentine, the mercurial gloom streamed and glimmered past the windows. Even here in the house, the air felt thick and damp.

.....

With a gasp of surprise, Neil snatched his hand back as if the entity on the other side surely had the power to reach through the mirror as he himself could not.

In the same instant, Molly spun off the bench, exploded to her feet, crazily certain that something had crossed over, through the veil of glass and quicksilver. But no unwanted visitor had entered the bedroom.

She glanced at the clock just as the sideways scroll of numbers abruptly halted. The time was 2:44.

Checking her wristwatch, she discovered that the hour and the minute hands had stopped spinning. Her timepiece agreed with the digital clock-2:44.

The music boxes fell silent.

The miniature carousel horse went from gallop to full stop in a plink, and the dancing figurines froze in midwaltz.

Molly felt suddenly relieved of the real or imagined weight that had been suspended overhead like a giant sword of Damocles.

The half-heard, fully felt, deep pulsations of sound stopped throbbing through her.

"The mirror," Neil said.

The reflection that it now offered was of the room in which they stood. No ruins, no mold-textured walls, no crawling vine.

Neil shifted his attention from the mirror to the ceiling. Then he went to a window. He peered less at the surrounding forest than at the obscured night sky from which rain poured in great cascades.

"Gone," he said.

"I felt something," she admitted. "But... what was it?"

"Don't have a clue."

He was not being candid with her, nor she with him.

They had been formed by a culture drunk with the yearning for inter-galactic contact, the bedrock of a new faith in which God was but a supporting player. Everyone knew the doctrines of this quasi-religion better than most people remembered the words of the Lord's Prayer: We are not alone... watch the skies... the answer is out there... They had been Spielberged and Lucased and Shyamalaned. A thousand movies and TV shows, ten thousand books, had convinced the world that the new magi would be scientists riding not to Bethlehem on camels but to a UFO landing site in mobile labs with satellite dishes on the roofs, and that the salvation of humanity would come from another planet rather than from a higher realm.

Molly knew the signs as prophesied by Hollywood and by science fiction writers. Neil knew them, too.

This September night lay deep inside the Close Encounter Zone. In this territory, alien technology was the only font of miracles.

She didn't want to put this understanding into words, however, and apparently neither did Neil. A pretense of bewilderment felt safer than candor.

Perhaps their reticence had its roots in the fact that on this subject Hollywood offered two familiar scenarios-one in which the extraterrestrials were benign gods, one in which they were full of wrath and cruel judgment. Thus far, these recent events lacked the sweetness and the twinkle of G-rated family entertainment.

Turning away from the window and from his inspection of the rain-choked sky, Neil said, "Not that we'll need it... but I'll get the shotgun."

Recalling the half-glimpsed, sinuous figure that had flashed darkly across the moldering room in the mirror, Molly retrieved her handgun from the vanity and said, "I'll get some spare cartridges for this."

## 5

ON THE KITCHEN TABLE LAY THE SHOTGUN AND A box of shells. Beside it were the pistol, a spare magazine, and a box of 9-mm cartridges.

Pleated window shades in the kitchen and the adjacent family room held back the night and the sight-though not the omnipresent sound-of the luminous rain.

Molly couldn't shake the feeling that the surrounding forest, previously a friendly woods, now harbored unknown hostile observers. Neil apparently shared her paranoia; he had helped her lower the shades.

They both intuited that the mysterious forces at work in this drenched night were not restricted to these mountains. Simultaneously they reached for the TV remote, and Neil got it first.

They stood in front of the big screen, watching, too agitated to settle into chairs.

Television reception was not what it should be. Some channels were so afflicted with electronic snow that only ghostly images could be seen through the blizzard. Broken voices spoke distorted words.

One of the twenty-four-hour cable-news networks offered better sound and a relatively clear picture that rolled and flickered only occasionally.

The young woman-Veronica something-anchoring the news desk was as lovely as any movie starlet. Her eyes were avaricious, her smile as genuine as that of a mannequin.

She traded unscripted commentary with a young man, Jack, who might have been a successful underwear model for Calvin Klein if he had not gone to journalism school and majored in broadcasting. His smile, quick to come and quick to falter, revealed bleached-white teeth as square as those of a cow.

War, politics, crime, and even the doings of Hollywood royalty had been washed entirely off the news wires by freakish weather of an unprecedented nature and ferocity.

During the night, unpredicted, the largest continuous storm front ever recorded had formed at sea with impossible speed. It had moved ashore along the entire west coast of the Americas-South, Central, and North.

Reports of a curiously scented rain falling at the rate of four, five, and even six inches an hour had been received, corroborated. Within a few hours, lowlying cities all the way from Argentina to Alaska had begun suffering various degrees of flooding.

Live satellite feeds from both exotic and familiar metropolitan areas, sometimes distorted or grainy, showed cars and trucks afloat in city streets that resembled canals. Families on the roofs of their half-submerged houses. Soggy hillsides sliding away in rivers of mud.

Through every image, like pure-silver threads subtly woven in a tapestry, the luminous rain glimmered, so that Argentina and Alaska, and every point between, seemed unreal, revealed by dream light.

Molly had never been a fan of catastrophic news. She found neither enlightenment nor entertainment value in watching disaster befall others. Usually she would have turned away from the TV, half sick with pity. In this case she sensed that her future was tied to the fate of the strangers on the screen.

More recently, torrential rains had begun falling across Europe. Asia. Africa. From the arid Middle East, even from the parched sands of Saudi Arabia, came reports of rain in unprecedented volume. Video was expected shortly.

Nothing in the breaking news warranted a smile. Manning their anchor desk, Veronica and Jack were nevertheless guided by the first rule of electronic journalism: Establish rapport with the audience; ingratiate yourself and make yourself welcome in their homes; be authoritative but nice, dignified but fun.

Neither of them could entirely conceal the excitement of being junior talent, consigned to the graveyard shift, yet suddenly on-air as a huge story began breaking. Minute by minute, their audience was growing from maybe a hundred thousand insomniacs to perhaps millions of riveted viewers. You could almost hear them calculating the boost their careers would receive from this lucky timing.

Although the precise nature and the seriousness of the current crisis remained unclear, field reports compensated with dramatic content for what they lacked in coherency.

Six hours earlier, prior to the arrival of the rain along the coastline of the Americas, the crew of a French marine-research ship had witnessed the sudden birth of a spectacular waterspout three hundred miles southwest of Tahiti.