

Junior Burke

CHAPTER 1

He did his killing at night. One time he waited too long and had to strike in the harsh, gray light but he would not wait that long again. His hunger was too deep, his thirst too strong.

Moving along the river now, branches and leaves were brushing his face and sides; the damp ground beneath him, the rushing current just beyond. Nothing stirring. Nothing worth taking, anyway. The river swerved toward him and he bounded into it, feeling the wetness as he splashed, pushing off a flat rock, clearing the remaining water in one leap.

He cleared the rise, then was on smooth, hard ground, a sensation he did not like. In the open now, he did not sense he was being seen. Still he moved swiftly until he reached the place where the lights often came right at him, although there were none at the moment. Speeding up, he passed beyond where he felt exposed. He did not like being seen, not by anything – watching and waiting, striking when there was no chance for his victim, who would surrender the throat, the flank, all the rest. He would have his way, then cover his kill with branches and leaves so he could come back and finish. He would usually return more than once.

Now, like the river, the smooth, hard ground bent to the right. Ahead, were places he would go to only when there was little choice.

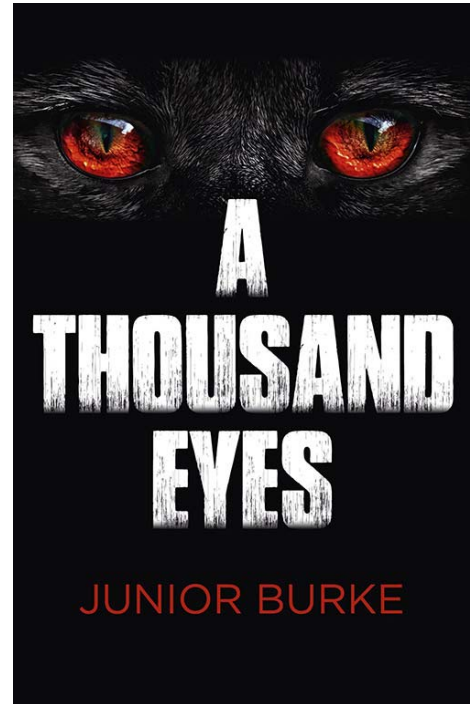
As he neared the spot where clouds often poured out thick and pale from above, he halted. The clouds had disturbed him, but never like this. There was a funnel, a tower of ash and blackness, pushing upwards to the dark blue sky, a blinding flame licking the center, crimson and orange shooting in all directions. His nose, eyes and tongue were under attack in a way he had never experienced. A cry rose within him, swirled in his throat, causing a whimper he could not recognize as his own. His instincts told him to go no further, to retreat back to the mountains. He was desperate and hungry but something had come to the valley more lethal than even he was, putting every living thing at risk.

Back on the hard ground now, lights were training on him from beyond. His eyes stung from what he had encountered. Bright and glaring, the lights got even brighter, came even closer. He moved faster, toward the tree line on the other side, dense brush beyond it. Tonight he would need to settle for a small kill, a coon or a rabbit, not the deer or elk he had been seeking.

Although a loner, with the smell and smoke and taste still harsh in his nostrils, eyes and throat, he needed to warn others, not just his own kind but all other non-humans.

Death was in the air.

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Lynton, Colorado was a town caught between two eras. One part of it, the older, classic, part consisted of those whose names and roots had been in town for a few generations or more. Others had moved there around the turn of the most current century, many of them from Boulder; those who no longer wanted or could afford to be in a housing market that was among the steepest in the nation. The rest of the more recent arrivals were from other parts of the country, who'd come to Colorado for the air and the mountains and decided to try small town life with access to Boulder's rarified sensibilities and Denver's international airport.

In Lynton, these were not geographical separations. The storied locals lived among the fresher, shinier newcomers and on the surface it all seemed to blend. So there was diversity but not in the way that word has come to be used. Lynton, like the majority of Colorado, was white and spoke English. Those who claimed Spanish as a first language might work at the Mentex cement plant, Lynton's only substantial industry, but when their shift was concluded they would head home to Valmont, seven miles out on the plains. With a population of two thousand, Lynton remained a small town, but around and above it, more and more newer and bigger houses were dotting the hills and pushing out the borders.

The mountains provided a huge natural wall to the west, like a massive mural, imposing and mysterious. You could drive or bike or walk up into them but they were an increasingly small part of the world that had not been disturbed and was not to be underestimated. They were also home to a range of species who, in any unforeseen encounter, might not surrender in the face of what most humans thought of as civilization.

There was only one church in Lynton, the First Methodist. The Catholics used it for Saturday evening Mass and a nondenominational meditation group rented it on Thursday nights. All others were forced to worship in neighboring towns. If you wanted a church wedding in Lynton, First Methodist was where you had it, and for a funeral service, it was also the site. For Frank Kincaid's funeral, the church was swelled to its two-hundred capacity.

Frank, who had worked at the Mentex plant for nearly ten years, was well-known in town and widely respected for his role with the volunteer fire department. His wife Ginger was bravely addressing those assembled, but barely holding up. She was pale, eyes stunned behind oval, silver-rimmed glasses, her light-shaded hair of no discernible color. In this grief-filled moment she projected a kind of noble beauty.

"Frank loved this community and loved this part of the world. He'd fish in the summer and hunt elk with his bow in the winter, so we would have fresh trout on the grill and fresh meat in the freezer ..." She looked down tearfully at her young daughters, April and Kara. "We all remember the Gold Canyon fire, three years back. That was a Labor Day weekend and Frank's brother was coming in from Nebraska." Ginger nodded at Kent in the second row, back straight, smiling through tears. "Once that fire started sweeping, Frank was out there day and night. I think Kent got to see him only once in seventy-two hours."

Kent, seated on the aisle, nodded in affirmation.

Ginger continued. "A number of homes were lost in the valley, but even when the winds shifted, Frank and the other fighters were able to keep the flames from spreading to town. That night, he was as tired as I'd ever seen him. As he was lying next to me, he said, "Maybe I haven't done much in my life that will be remembered, but you know what, Gin? This weekend, I helped put out a fire ..."

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During the post-service gathering in the church's community room, Ginger was receiving a line of mourners that stretched from the hall, putting what she had left into greeting and being greeted. Her girls were doing their parts, talking in low tones and listening solemnly, as their dad would have expected of them.

A trim, fortyish woman whose black hair was styled very short took hold of Ginger's hand. "My name's Angie Prez. You don't know me, Ginger, and Frank didn't know me either. But you and I need to talk."

CHAPTER 2

Lowell Felker, manager of Mentex Colorado, and Ned Haddock mayor of Lynton, were facing each other on opposite sides of Lowell's glass-top desk in his fourth floor office. The mayor had on a dark suit and tie, Lowell, a sports coat, slacks and cowboy boots. At fifty-three Lowell was five years older than Haddock and at six-three, a half-foot taller. He was broader too, big shouldered, his complexion ruddy and weathered, in contrast to the mayor's pallid skin. The mayor's hair was thinning, unlike Lowell's which was thick and yellowish-white, being between dye-jobs. Lowell's eyebrows were also thick, above eyes that were small in contrast to everything else about him and, at the moment, those eyes appeared agitated. There was an open fifth of Maker's Mark on the desk and Lowell was pouring a fresh glass for himself while Haddock's full glass stood all but untouched on the desk.

"I don't understand you, Ned. Why would you let something like this get in the way of your making a fortune?"

"Something like a man losing his life? Did you see his kids at the funeral?"

Lowell took a gulp of bourbon. "Frank left here and keeled over in his own house. Hell, for all anyone knows, his heart was a time bomb waiting to happen."

"You and your crew screwed up, Lowell. And Kincaid put himself in charge of the clean-up and got his lungs full of poison."

"He knew the risks, was just as greedy as the rest of us."

Haddock stood up. "I'm sure you'll find a way of going ahead with your project, but I'm pulling out."

Lowell pushed his chair back. "Why the hell would you do a dumb-ass thing like that?"

"I don't care how much money anybody stands to make. I don't want any part of this anymore." He looked around as though there might be something he'd brought along that he needed to take with him.

Now Lowell stood. "What about the rezoning?"

"Get somebody else to do it."

Lowell laughed but there was no mirth in it. "Who else is gonna get it done for us, Ned? You're the mayor for Goddsakes."

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Haddock looked at Lowell. "That's something you're going to have to figure out on your own, my friend."

"You're a damn fool, Haddock, turning up your nose at the opportunity of a lifetime. And you might think you're washing your hands of this but the kind of dirty your hands have gotten doesn't wash off so easily."

Ned didn't reply on his way out the door.

He crossed the hall to the elevator, took it down, then crossed the lobby and stepped out into the dusk. He pulled out a cigarette. He'd started smoking again when this whole business with Lowell Felker had started and now, as he lit up and inhaled deeply, he vowed that this would be his last smoke. It would be such a relief to get away from Felker and from this venture of his that seemed doomed the deeper Ned involved himself. Felker would have to find someone else to sell out the town.

As he stood there, Ned glanced toward the brush that bordered the parking lot. He felt he'd caught a glimpse of something, some subtle motion, but as his eyes probed the trees and branches he couldn't make out anything unusual. He took a last pull on the cigarette, then dropped it on the pavement and pressed it lifeless with the sole of his shoe. He unlocked his Audi wagon, pulled open the door and climbed behind the wheel.

It only took a minute to reach the stoplight at the entrance to town, and it was green for a change. It would take another full minute to come upon any concentrated real estate, Lynton's borders were larger than needed to accommodate such a small community.

Highway 64 turned into North Center Street, which ran one way through town and pointed toward the mountains. Once he'd cleared the two main blocks of Lynton, Ned was on Highway 38, winding steadily upward.

After two miles, he turned right on Sandyhill Road, which led to his place. He wondered if Kyle and Jessica would be there. No, Kyle said they were driving in to Boulder to meet some old high school friends for dinner. Kyle was home from his junior year at Northwestern and Jessica was his fiancée, wedding plans for as soon as they graduated next June. Ned's wife, Susan had left for Pennsylvania at the news that her father had been moved to a hospice, so she hadn't seen Kyle yet or met her prospective daughter-in-law. Before going, Susan informed Ned that Jessica's mother made a point of mentioning on the phone that Jessica and Kyle had not shared a bedroom when they'd visited Jessica's home in Indiana the week before.

"You think they're not sleeping together at college, Susan?" Ned had replied.

"Of course they are. But the woman feels strongly about it. I don't want to start any trouble. Just put her downstairs in the guest room, and she and Kyle can work it out."

Ned parked in the drive and made his way to the door. He loved his house. Some visitors, he assumed, found it cold, with its cement walls and floors. But there were vast windows that looked through the trees and out on the mountains to the west and north, the valley to the east and south. At night, the twinkling lights of Lynton, the town he and Susan had embraced ten years before, after moving from Palo Alto, would smile up at them.

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He'd enjoyed being mayor, had given it his best for seven years, until that damn Felker roped him into his scheme. Ned had been dazzled by the prospect of quick and lasting money, even though it went against most of what he'd come to believe. And, damn it, Felker was right, Ned would need to keep his mouth shut because, as Felker so impudently pointed out, Ned Haddock's hands had gotten dirty.

* * *

Ned was in his bed asleep when he was awakened by noise from downstairs. Kyle was making a racket, banging things around in the kitchen. What time was it? Ned turned and looked at the glowing numbers from the clock on the bedside table. Three-thirty-two. Rattle, rattle. Crash. What the hell was Kyle up to down there?

Ned rose and flung on his bathrobe. He thought about turning on the lamp, then instead crossed the room, pulled the half-open door toward him and stepped out into the hall. Something caught his eye and Ned turned to the left. There was light coming from Kyle's room across the hall and Kyle was standing in the doorway in underwear and t-shirt, a look of consternation on his face. "Somebody's in the kitchen," he whispered.

Fighting through his freshly awakened state, Ned's mind began to spin. Susan wouldn't have flown home early, she would have called. He remembered his cell phone was on the bedside table. "I'll call nine-one-one," he whispered.

"Jessica's down there," uttered Kyle.

"Are you sure that isn't her?"

Another crash assailed their ears.

"Of course that isn't her. I'm going down."

"No, wait here. I'll make the call."

Ned went back into his room and turned on the bedside lamp. The phone was on the small table, plugged into an outlet. He fervently hoped he had service. Sometimes the altitude affected it. As he lifted the phone, he heard a cry, clearly Jessica's voice. "Kyle, what going on?"

Ned pressed the digits. Static, then nothing. From downstairs, he heard other sounds and then Kyle, shouting, "Hey, get out of here – get the hell out!" Followed by some kind of frantic thrashing.

Ned dropped the phone, crossed the bedroom and descended the stairs. Near the bottom, he halted where he had a sight line into the kitchen. The refrigerator door was fully open and the light from it cast an eerie glow. Kyle was stretched out on the floor, a huge black form covering his body, looking like it was smothering him. Kyle's legs were quivering. A cry rose from somewhere inside Ned and the black form turned.

A bear, a huge one, rose on its hind legs, emitting a deep moan.

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Ned gaped at the enormous creature. Blood was covering its snout, and what had been half of Kyle's neck dangled from its mouth.

Ned, frozen, tried to think of what he could get hold of, a carving knife from the drawer, anything. Then the bear, in a black mass of furious energy, was bounding up the stairs.

Ned flailed his arms but the bear's massive head butted his chest and Ned was sent upwards and back as though blasted by some tremendous explosion. Next thing he knew, he was on the floor in front of his bedroom as the five hundred pound bear once again rose to its full height of nearly six feet and let out a roar that shook the walls of the house.

The beast was on him again and Ned felt its exposed claws rake his face before it flung him toward the half-open door of the bathroom.

There was silence for a moment as Ned felt something in his eyes and realized it was his own blood. Then he was brutally picked up and thrown through the glass doors of the shower.

Ned lay in the tight space, dazed and grievously wounded. He curled up in a ball but the bear wasn't stopping. With raging teeth it ripped a huge piece of Ned's cheek then gnawed the top of his head, ripping the scalp open. Ned's blood was flowing as though a spigot had been turned on. He remained curled up in surrender with the bear bent over him, thrashing and tearing as though Ned Haddock were the last meal he would ever have.

* * *

Jessica Rafferty lay petrified, covers up to her chin, in an unfamiliar bed in an unfamiliar house. Whatever had happened in the kitchen was still happening upstairs.

She'd been awakened from a dream. In the dream, a tall man in a black hat and long black coat was trying to get in through the front door of Kyle's parents' house. Jessica had both hands tightly gripped on the doorknob and the intruder was on the other side. The man was pure evil. Jessica knew if she let him in he would try desperately to kill everyone in the house.

(Continues...)

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by .

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