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The Black Ice

Written by Michael Connelly

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**MICHAEL
CONNELLY**

**The
Black Ice**



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ONE

The smoke carried up from the Cahuenga Pass and flattened beneath a layer of cool crossing air. From where Harry Bosch watched, the smoke looked like a gray anvil rising up the pass. The late afternoon sun gave the gray a pinkish tint at its highest point, tapering down to deep black at its root, which was a brushfire moving up the hillside on the east side of the cut. He switched his scanner to the Los Angeles County mutual aid frequency and listened as firefighter battalion chiefs reported to a command post that nine houses were already gone on one street and those on the next street were in the path. The fire was moving toward the open hillsides of Griffith Park, where it might make a run for hours before being controlled. Harry could hear the desperation in the voices of the men on the scanner.

Bosch watched the squadron of helicopters, like dragonflies from this distance, dodging in and out of the smoke, dropping their payloads of water and pink fire retardant on burning homes and trees. It reminded him of the dustoffs in Vietnam. The noise. The uncertain bobbing and weaving of the overburdened craft. He saw the water crushing through flaming roofs and steam immediately rising.

He looked away from the fire and down into the dried brush that carpeted the hillside and surrounded the pylons that held his own home to the hillside on the west side of the pass. He saw daisies and wildflowers in the chaparral

below. But not the coyote he had seen in recent weeks hunting in the arroyo below his house. He had thrown down pieces of chicken to the scavenger on occasion, but the animal never accepted the food while Bosch watched. Only after Bosch went back in off the porch would the animal creep out and take the offerings. Harry had christened the coyote *Timido*. Sometimes late at night he heard the coyote's howl echoing up the pass.

He looked back out at the fire just as there was a loud explosion and a concentrated ball of black smoke rotated up within the gray anvil. There was excited chatter on the scanner and a battalion chief reported that a propane tank from a barbecue had ignited.

Harry watched the darker smoke dissipate in the larger cloud and then switched the scanner back to the LAPD tactical frequencies. He was on call. Christmas duty. He listened for a half minute but heard nothing other than routine radio traffic. It appeared to be a quiet Christmas in Hollywood.

He looked at his watch and took the scanner inside. He pulled the pan out of the oven and slid his Christmas dinner, a roasted breast of chicken, onto a plate. Next he took the lid off a pot of steamed rice and peas and dumped a large portion onto the plate. He took his meal out to the table in the dining room, where there was already a glass of red wine waiting, next to the three cards that had come in the mail earlier in the week but that he had left unopened. He had Coltrane's arrangement of 'Song of the Underground Railroad' on the CD player.

As he ate and drank he opened the cards, studied them briefly and thought of their senders. This was the ritual of a man who was alone, he knew, but it didn't bother him. He'd spent many Christmases alone.

The first card was from a former partner who had retired on book and movie money and moved to Ensenada. It said

what Anderson's cards always said: 'Harry, when you coming down?' The next one was also from Mexico, from the guide Harry had spent six weeks living and fishing and practicing Spanish with the previous summer in Bahia San Felipe. Bosch had been recovering from a bullet wound in the shoulder. The sun and sea air helped him mend. In his holiday greeting, written in Spanish, Jorge Barrera also invited Bosch's return.

The last card Bosch opened slowly and carefully, also knowing who it was from before seeing the signature. It was postmarked Tehachapi. And so he knew. It was handprinted on off-white paper from the prison's recycling mill and the Nativity scene was slightly smeared. It was from a woman he had spent one night with but thought about on more nights than he could remember. She, too, wanted him to visit. But they both knew he never would.

He sipped some wine and lit a cigarette. Coltrane was now into the live recording of 'Spiritual' captured at the Village Vanguard in New York when Harry was just a kid. But then the radio scanner – still playing softly on a table next to the television – caught his attention. Police scanners had played for so long as the background music of his life that he could ignore the chatter, concentrate on the sound of a saxophone, and still pick up the words and codes that were unusual. What he heard was a voice saying, 'One-K-Twelve, Staff Two needs your twenty.'

Bosch got up and walked over to the scanner, as if looking at it would make its broadcast more clear. He waited ten seconds for a reply to the request. Twenty seconds.

'Staff Two, location is the Hideaway, Western south of Franklin. Room seven. Uh, Staff Two should bring a mask.'

Bosch waited for more but that was it. The location given,

Western and Franklin, was within Hollywood Division's boundaries. One-K-Twelve was a radio designation for a homicide detective out of the downtown headquarters' Parker Center. The Robbery-Homicide Division. And Staff Two was the designation for an assistant chief of police. There were only three ACs in the department and Bosch was unsure which one was Staff Two. But it didn't matter. The question was, what would one of the highest-ranking men in the department be rolling out for on Christmas night?

The second question bothered Harry even more. If RHD was already on the call, why hadn't he – the on-call detective in Hollywood Division – been notified first? He went to the kitchen, dumped his plate in the sink, dialed the station on Wilcox and asked for the watch commander. A lieutenant named Kleinman picked up. Bosch didn't know him. He was new, a transfer out of Foothill Division.

'What's going on?' Bosch asked. 'I'm hearing on the scanner about a body at Western and Franklin and nobody's told me a thing. And that's funny 'cause I'm on call out today.'

'Don't worry 'bout it,' Kleinman said. 'The hats have got it all squared away.'

Kleinman must be an oldtimer, Bosch figured. He hadn't heard that expression in years. Members of RHD wore straw bowlers in the 1940s. In the fifties it was gray fedoras. Hats went out of style after that – uniformed officers called RHD detectives 'suits' now, not 'hats' – but not homicide special cops. They still thought they were the tops, up there high like a cat's ass. Bosch hated that arrogance even when he'd been one of them. One good thing about working Hollywood, the city's sewer. Nobody had any airs. It was police work, plain and simple.

‘What’s the call?’ Bosch asked.

Kleinman hesitated a few seconds and then said, ‘We’ve got a body in a motel room on Franklin. It’s looking suicide. But RHD is going to take it – I mean, they’ve already taken it. We’re out of it. That’s from on high, Bosch.’

Bosch said nothing. He thought a moment. RHD coming out on a Christmas suicide. It didn’t make much – then it flashed to him.

Calexico Moore.

‘How old is this thing?’ he asked. ‘I heard them tell Staff Two to bring a mask.’

‘It’s ripe. They said it’d be a real potato head. Problem is, there isn’t much head left. Looks like he smoked both barrels of a shotgun. At least, that’s what I’m picking up on the RHD freek.’

Bosch’s scanner did not pick up the RHD frequency. That was why he had not heard any of the early radio traffic on the call. The suits had apparently switched freeks only to notify Staff Two’s driver of the address. If not for that, Bosch would not have heard about the call until the following morning when he came into the station. This angered him but he kept his voice steady. He wanted to get what he could from Kleinman.

‘It’s Moore, isn’t it?’

‘Looks like it,’ Kleinman said. ‘His shield is on the bureau there. Wallet. But like I said, nobody’s going to make a visual ID from the body. So nothing is for sure.’

‘How did this all go down?’

‘Look, Bosch, I’m busy here, you know what I mean? This doesn’t concern you. RHD has it.’

‘No, you’re wrong, man. It does concern me. I should’ve gotten first call from you. I want to know how it went down so I understand why I didn’t.’

'Awright, Bosch, it went like this. We get a call out from the owner of the dump says he's got a stiff in the bathroom of room seven. We send a unit out and they call back and say, yeah, we got the stiff. But they called back on a land line – no radio – 'cause they saw the badge and the wallet on the bureau and knew it was Moore. Or, at least, thought it was him. We'll see. Anyway, I called Captain Grupa at home and he called the AC. The hats were called in and you were not. That's the way it goes. So if you have a beef, it's with Grupa or maybe the AC, not me. I'm clean.'

Bosch didn't say anything. He knew that sometimes when he was quiet, the person he needed information from would eventually fill the silence.

'It's out of our hands now,' Kleinman said. 'Shit, the TV and *Times* are out there. *Daily News*. They figure it's Moore, like everybody else. It's a big mess. You'd think the fire up on the hill would be enough to keep them occupied. No way. They're out there lined up on Western. I gotta send another car over for media control. So, Bosch, you should be happy you aren't involved. It's Christmas, for Chrissake.'

But that wasn't good enough. Bosch should have been called and then it should have been his decision when to call out RHD. Someone had taken him out of the process altogether and that still burned him. He said good-bye and lit another cigarette. He got his gun out of the cabinet above the sink and hooked it to the belt on his blue jeans. Then he put on a light-tan sport coat over the Army green sweater he was wearing.

It was dark outside now and through the sliding glass door he could see the fire line across the pass. It burned brightly on the black silhouette of the hill. It was a crooked devil's grin moving to the crest.

From out in the darkness below his house he heard the coyote. Howling at the rising moon or the fire, or maybe just at himself for being alone and in the dark.