

# **Cold Black Hearts**

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# 1

They were dead, all of them dead, and so was she.

As the brilliant flare faded from Annie O'Brien's eyes and the roar faded and the hail of debris tapered off, all she could think was that her father had always told her to look for the silver lining, and while for her that lining often turned out to be aluminum foil, cheap and easily torn, this time she was able to console herself with the realization that there was indeed silver, polished and pure: At least the bomb had taken care of her Christmas shopping predicament.

The date was the 19th of December. Annie and four fellow cops were closing in on a murder suspect (Annie's case; the dirtbag had killed two high school girls, and she had been working it for a couple of weeks, with their pictures taped up over her desk at work and on her bathroom mirror at home), having ascertained that he had holed up in a third-rate trailer park near Buckeye and 43<sup>rd</sup>. One of the four cops was Ryan Ellis, with whom she was sleeping in spite of

both the Phoenix Police Department's regulations and her better judgment. He was so gorgeous and so good in bed that she couldn't help herself. She'd been looking for a way to break it off, but maybe not looking as hard as she might have. It was, after all, almost Christmas, and it seemed heartless to break up with someone at the holidays. But she had to get it done. Ryan seemed to be falling hard. She knew he had shopped for her. He had already mentioned making plans for next summer. She hadn't shopped for him because she'd had every intention of being broken up by the holiday, and why go to the trouble if she knew she'd be returning whatever she bought on December 26th?

But she hadn't managed to let him know her intention, and he hadn't picked up on her subtle hints. Too subtle, she supposed, too nuanced. He was gorgeous but not that smart. The best present for a guy like him would be a clue. Or maybe a full-length mirror, because he was all surface, with nothing inside.

When she had learned where Trey Fairhaven was hiding out—he had ordered digital cable in his own name, dumb even for a criminal, a class of people not generally known for feats of intellect—she told Lieutenant Carson and Carson assigned Ryan, two uniformed officers, and Will Matson, a detective who had just

transferred over from Vice, to check out the place with her. Annie drove, Ryan riding shotgun, Matson in the back. The two units took a squad car.

“Annie O’Brien?” Matson said on the way. “With that red hair and those emerald eyes? You must be pure Irish.”

“No cigar for you, Matson. My dad was a mutt, but mostly a British Isles mutt—Irish, Scottish, English. But Mom was French. Not French-American, French. They met when Dad was stationed in Frankfurt and vacationing in Paris. I’m not sure what they saw in each other, but they stayed together long enough to have me, and then for her to get really tired of living in the States. She’s back where she belongs now, a stone’s throw from the Seine. If you’ve got a good arm.”

“And your dad?”

“Gone. Five years now, I’m used to the idea. He was on the job.”

“I’m sorry, Annie.”

“Don’t be. And it isn’t really even Annie. It’s Annicka. I just go by Annie because it’s easier for the cops and other Neanderthals I usually hang around with.”

“I know I have a hard time with more than two syllables,” Ryan

said.

*How I wish you were joking,* Annie thought. But they were pulling into the Frontier Town RV Resort, her unmarked Crown Victoria in front, the squad car behind, so she shut up and focused on scanning the trailers for any sign of Fairhaven. If the trailer park had ever resembled a resort in any way, it didn't now. The road was paved but crumbling like dried-out cookie dough. The trailers were bleached out by the sun to the point that everything had a kind of pale grayness to it, including the ceramic gnomes and deer and rabbits standing sentinel around some of them. A few spindly ocotillos and a half-dead saguaro cactus, spines drooping from a split up one side, passed for natural beauty. Last Resort might have been a more appropriate name for the dump.

"Pretty place," Ryan said. "Maybe I should move my grandma here."

"What, and lose her spot under the freeway?" Annie said.  
"Look for space fifty-seven."

Curtains fluttered in the window of a mobile home that slanted awkwardly toward one corner, where the cinder blocks that supported it seemed to have disintegrated. The curtains had daisies on them and moth holes lacing them, and the hand that Annie

glimpsed holding them back, then releasing them, was brown, pudgy, and female. Trey Fairhaven was a white guy, thirty-three years old--a year younger than Annie—and built like a tweaker, like he hadn't eaten a solid meal in a month.

“We're being watched,” Matson said.

“Since the second we pulled in the driveway,” Annie said.

“You'd almost think there were lawbreakers about.”

So far she liked Matson. He wasn't as attractive as Ryan, so she wouldn't feel compelled to sleep with him. And he seemed smarter. Not hard to achieve, but still, bonus.

“This is forty-four,” Ryan said, pointing to a wooden sign poking up from the gravel beside a trailer bedecked in those cheap decorative blankets you could buy from guys who parked their vans in vacant lots and hung their wares on poles. Phoenix didn't get a lot of rain, but these blankets had seen a monsoon season or two; Annie had to work to make out the Diamondbacks logo, an American flag, the familiar silhouette of a mud-flap girl.

On the other side of the drive, two barefoot toddlers stopped dragging a doll carriage across a patch of dusty artificial turf to gaze solemnly at them. Annie tried on a smile, which drew no reaction at all.

She gave up and stopped beside the blanketed trailer. The squad car braked behind her. She got out and the other four cops met her by the Crown Vic's hood. They all wore dark blue windbreakers with gold letters spelling out "POLICE" on the backs and the badge of the Phoenix P.D. printed over the breast. Annie counted out the remaining trailers, pointing to each one. "That's the one," she said. "Shit-brown stripe along the side, dry birdbath in front."

The others indicated that they saw it.

"We have a warrant. We'll go in hard. You guys bring the battering ram?"

One of the unis, a patrol officer named Ruiz, nodded, returned to the squad car's trunk, and brought back a tactical entry ram. It was about twenty inches long and would knock in most doors—looking at the trailer in space 57 again, Annie hoped they didn't knock it into space 60.

"I don't know if he's home, but the cable TV people say his set's on, so let's assume he's there. Ryan and Perry," she said, reading the name on the other uni's nameplate, "you two go around to the back. Ruiz, you get to knock on the door. Matson and I will back you."

They all drew their weapons and approached the hideous box

cautiously, keeping other mobile homes between it and them as long as possible. When they were close enough, Ryan and Perry circled around back. Annie gave them ninety seconds, then nodded to the other two and pointed toward the house.

“Let’s do this,” she said.

The December sky was pale blue, cloudless, as flat as if it had been painted on a ceiling. From somewhere, Annie heard “Silver Bells.” That and a scraggly aluminum tree mounted on top of the trailer in space 55 were the only reminders that Christmas was nigh.

She swallowed hard as they approached the three peeling wooden steps propped outside the trailer’s front door. Something buzzed in her gut, as if she had swallowed a pump motor. She summoned the images of Kelly Montero and Beth Schreib, the murdered high school girls—Kelly with her throat slashed open by a big knife, Beth with dozens of stab wounds all across her chest and neck—to harden herself against whatever was to come.

At Annie’s signal, Ruiz drove the battering ram through the trailer’s shoddy door, ripping it from its hinges. Matson followed Ruiz in, his weapon extended in front of him. Annie moved in next, feeling the steps sag under her weight.

Inside, Trey Fairhaven stood, unshaven and shirtless, jeans

hanging loose around his gaunt hips. He stared toward the doorway, blinking fast, as if they had woken him up. He had two wires in his hands, leading to a mound of something on a table.

“Down!” Annie screamed. She threw herself down the stairs, rolling and tucking as much as she could underneath the bottom one, fully anticipating that she would never rise again. At the same time Fairhaven’s bomb—because that’s what it was, she had known he had construction experience and should have anticipated this—exploded with a flash as bright as the sun, leaving afterimages burned into her retinas even after she closed her eyes. The booming sound wave hit her at the same time as the concussive wave, while she was falling, parallel to the ground. Heat singed her hair, her flesh. The trailer flew apart. Weeks later, a piece of flashing from an air duct on the roof was found lodged in the V of two tree branches in Falcon Park, more than a mile away.

\* \* \*

Annie woke up in a critical care bed at Good Samaritan Medical Center.

After a few moments of disorientation, she figured out that she was in a hospital. There were tubes in her arm and one of those ID bracelets encircling her wrist. One of those tubes must have been

delivering morphine or something like it, because she felt like she was lying in a bed of cotton candy. She couldn't quite feel anything except the dull throbbing of her arm, where the tubes went into it. She remembered the bomb, and was surprised to be alive at all. She wondered what had happened to Ryan and the others, and if she had missed Christmas.

And she wondered why it was so quiet. Shouldn't there be beeping noises, the chuff of an air circulation system, something? All she could hear was the ringing in her ears, as if she had gone to a heavy metal concert and sat in front of the amps—something she had done in tenth grade, and largely regretted.

The lights were low, but there had to be a call button somewhere to summon help. After pawing about, she found it, attached to a cord that ran into the wall behind her bed. She pushed it.

A minute passed. The door opened and a shaft of light fell into the room. Annie blinked. A nurse passed through the light, entered, moved her mouth. She was Hispanic, solidly built, with a sympathetic face.

She carried a pad of paper and a marker.

Annie began to weep.

The nurse summoned a doctor, who brought a laptop computer with her. She set it on the swiveling tray Annie's meals would sit on, so she could type and then move it to where Annie was able to read the screen. The nurse stood by the door with her pad, "I'll be right back" still scrawled on the top sheet.

After a few basic questions to determine Annie's physical and mental states—both, Annie thought, should be considered suspect at the moment—Dr. Ganz went into the specifics. "Your left tympanic membrane is ruptured," she typed. "The right one is also damaged, but less severely."

"Will my hearing come back?" Annie asked. Her voice sounded strange, as if it had been recorded and played back at the wrong speed. She was desperately thirsty, and had been sipping water from a pitcher by her bed since the nurse had poured some while waiting for the doctor.

Dr. Ganz looked about fifty. Her blond hair, showing traces of gray, was pulled back and tied behind her head. A few strands had escaped her scrunchy and framed her lean face. She wore glasses with black plastic frames, and a gold chain linked their temple pieces so they would hang on her chest when she wasn't using them. She wore little make-up, if any—maybe a touch of lip-gloss, and the only jewelry Annie could see were a pair of simple gold stud earrings. She smelled clean, but wore no perfume to undercut the antiseptic odor of the hospital. Annie had the impression that she was a no-nonsense woman, with an undercurrent of melancholy about her. “We can't know that yet,” Dr. Ganz typed. “Surgery can repair the membrane. Sorry, eardrum, to real people. But there could be residual scarring on both eardrums, and until we know how extensive that will be we don't know the extent of your hearing loss. I wish I had better news for you.”

As Annie read, Dr. Ganz touched her hand. Annie understood it was meant to express sympathy, since the laptop didn't provide tone of voice. And if she had filled the screen with smilies, Annie would have thrown her computer across the room.

“What about the others?” Annie asked. She could tell that her voice quaked, and she had held off asking the question this long

because she was afraid of the answer. “Ryan and Matson and the rest, when can I see them?”

Dr. Ganz shook her head as she typed, those gray-blond wings wagging as she did. “I’m so sorry, Annicka. You’re the only one who pulled through. The EMT said the stairs might have saved you by blocking some of the concussive wave and the brunt of the debris. You were unconscious for thirty-seven hours. You have a concussion, and a compression fracture of your left clavicle. Collarbone. Some minor lacerations, a lot of bruising. Basically, considering what you went through, you’re in remarkable shape.”

Annie felt tears welling in her eyes again. Not for herself, this time. She wasn’t ordinarily so emotional—in fact, she took great pride in her ability to shove her feelings into a big, black metaphorical garbage bag and leave them at the curb, unless, like the anger that had spurred her investigation of Trey Fairhaven, she could use them to her advantage—but she figured after what she’d been through, she was entitled to a little lapse. She glanced over at the nurse, who had turned her head away but dabbed at her nose with a tissue. “So I’m in great shape, but I’m deaf,” Annie said.

Dr. Ganz swiveled the tray again, tapped the keys. “For now,” she wrote. “That’s not at all uncommon with any loud noise. In

most cases the hearing returns, although it's sometimes reduced. Do you hear a ringing or buzzing now?"

"Yes," Annie said. "Like there's a chain saw in my head. Or a combination chain saw/kitchen timer."

"I'm not surprised," Dr. Ganz wrote. "That may or may not go away."

Annie swallowed hard, her stomach suddenly churning, afraid she might vomit right on the doctor's computer. Two days ago she had been a reasonably happy, healthy cop. Now she was deaf and broken, her lover dead. Did she have a job anymore? She didn't see how. She had insurance, but how much would that cover? She had about four months' salary in a savings account, which she had a feeling would disappear in a hurry if she couldn't work.

"Do you have any more questions for me right now?" Dr. Ganz typed. "Or would you like to rest?"

Annie had a million questions, but most of them Dr. Ganz couldn't answer. She tried to narrow down the most important of them. "Have I had any visitors?"

"Several," Dr. Ganz wrote. "In fact there's been an officer out in the waiting area the whole time. If you think you're ready to see people, I can let him know you're awake."

“But...I can’t hear.”

Dr. Ganz pointed at the nurse. “She has a lot of pads,” she wrote. “We’ll need to do some testing later on, later today or tomorrow, but for now I want you to rest. You can see a few visitors, but Helen will make sure nobody stays too long.”

“Helen?”

Dr. Ganz smiled and gestured toward the nurse again. “Helen,” she mouthed. Or said out loud. Annie couldn’t tell which. And that was the crux of her problem.

\* \* \*

A patrol officer Annie didn’t know had been stationed at the hospital to keep an eye on her. Presumably he was one of several, given the length of time she’d been out. After Dr. Ganz and Helen left, Helen reappeared with the officer, who looked in at her, gave a wan smile, and left again.

Thirty-five minutes later Lt. Dale Carson and detective Errol Hathaway were in her room with her. Each had a pad and a black marker. Carson, lean and dark as seventy percent chocolate, was a heavy smoker who brought the stink of a burning tobacco plantation with him everywhere, and Annie had never been so glad to smell it. It meant she was alive, a condition she didn’t associate with hospital

rooms.

The last time she had been in a hospital for any extended duration had been when her dad had died, gutshot by a skull on the northeast side of town. Dying had been certain almost from the start, but he had managed to hang on for three days. She had hardly left the building that whole time. Her last conversation with him had been in a hospital room—not this hospital, not this room, but there was a sameness to them all that made the differences pale.

As usual, it had started with one of his war stories. He had come out of sleep and seen her dozing in a visitor's chair, a book spread open on her lap. He had started laughing, and the laugh turned into a hacking cough, and that startled her awake. She blinked and closed the book, disturbed by his red, blotchy complexion. "Are you okay, Dad?" she asked.

He wiped his mouth on the back of his hand. "Right as rain," he said weakly. "Don't I look it?"

"You look like hell."

"Honesty isn't always the best policy, Annie. Anyway, reason I was laughing is I saw you snoozing there and I thought, I hope she doesn't do that on stakeouts. Buddy of mine fell asleep on a stakeout once, sitting in his unmarked outside an apartment complex. He was

supposed to watch the exit, make sure the suspect, who was inside, stayed inside.”

“But he dozed off?”

“That’s right. I guess the suspect came out, saw him there, figured out what was up. Bernie was a hell of a sleeper, once he got going—his snoring was probably shaking the whole car. So he didn’t wake up when the suspect started spray-painting his car windows. By the time he did come around, the car was completely blacked out, and Bernie said he thought he was going blind at first.” He laughed again, this time managing to do it without coughing or popping any stitches. “Son of a bitch sat there for five minutes, sweating bullets, before he tried to get out of the car and figured out what had happened. Good thing for him the suspect wasn’t a violent type, or Bernie would’ve probably never woke up.”

“Good thing,” Annie agreed.

Her father’s expression changed, the smile flickering away. He wiped his mouth again, as if making sure his smile was gone.

“Annie, you got to make me a promise.”

She could tell, by his demeanor and tone, that he was going to start talking about dying again. She didn’t want to hear it. He had brought the subject up several times since he’d been in the hospital,

but the doctors still said he had a slender chance and he was a fighter, goddammit, and she wasn't interested in listening to him talk about giving up.

"I already promised you, Dad. Virgin until married, that's me."

He chuckled, but wouldn't be so easily dissuaded this time. "I never gave a shit about that, Annie. Not since you were out of high school. Long as you're careful."

"Well, if you'd told me that ten years ago it would have saved me a lot of sneaking around."

"You never could listen for crap," he said. "But I want you to listen now."

"Sorry, Dad," Annie said. Her cell phone went off before she could say any more, and she flipped it open. "O'Brien."

The call was from her lieutenant, telling her about a possible break in a string of check cashing store robberies she'd been working. She listened, hung up, and turned to her father. "Listen, Dad, I have to run. I'll be back in a couple of hours, three or four at the most, and we'll talk about whatever you want to talk about. Okay?"

He started to say something, but the words caught in his throat and he started coughing again, his eyes tearing up, mucus spraying from his nose. She grabbed a tissue, wiped his face, tossed it in the

trash. She dropped a glancing kiss on his cheek. “Love you, Dad,” she said before she left his room. “See you later.”

Before she made it back to the hospital, he was gone.

She hadn’t much liked hospitals before that. Ever since, she had hated them with a passion reserved for few things in life. Traffic jams, skulls and creeps—especially those who targeted kids—infomercials and *American Idol* all had made her list at one time or another, and hospitals became the latest entry.

Now here she was, in a room of her own. At least Carson brought some of the outside world in with him, even if it was in the form of stale smoke.

“You saved me,” Annie said. She couldn’t tell if she was talking too loud, like people listening to music with through headphones or earbuds often did, but she felt she probably was. “I was watching daytime TV with closed captioning on. That’s worse punishment than being deaf.”

“Why do you think I never take vacations?” Hathaway scribbled.

“U doing ok?” Carson wrote. His handwriting was neat but he wrote slowly, and he took shortcuts whenever he could. “N E thing u need?”

“That’s a notepad, not a cell phone,” Annie said.

Carson shrugged and wrote something else. When he turned the pad toward her, it said, “I M LA-Z.” Then he flipped back to the previous page, tapped it.

“I don’t know what I need yet,” she said. “I guess my cell phone would be a good idea, so I can get text messages—if they’ll let me use one in here when I’m not on the job. It was in the unmarked. And a laptop, if they have wireless service here, so I can do e-mail. Mostly I need to get out of here. I need my ears back. I doubt they’ll let me drink in here but I could use one or two of those too.”

“They won’t,” Hathaway wrote. “Their assholes about it.”

“They’re,” Annie said, pointing to his pad.

Hathaway was a thick guy with the whitest skin Annie had ever seen on a man who had lived in Arizona for more than twenty minutes, and fair hair, short and curly. He stared at her and said what she believed was “What?” She pointed again, but he looked at his pad and didn’t get it.

“Maybe send Keller over to my place,” she said. Nanci Keller was another female homicide detective, and had bunked at Annie’s for a couple of weeks when pipes had burst in the kitchen of her 1950s ranch house. “Have her bring some underwear, some clothes,

pajamas, my robe and my slippers. There's a Laura Lippman novel beside my bed. And a toothbrush, you know, toiletries. She knows what I need."

Carson was writing furiously on his pad. In a minute, he turned it over. He had written down the things she had asked for, followed by, "Seriously, O'B. If there's anything else you need, just ask. Don't worry about the job. You guys got that scum Fairhaven. I know you were close to Ellis. I'll let you know when the funeral is, ok?"

Annie's chest tightened. Her heart started racing—she could hear it in her ears, altering the buzz with each pulse of blood. She recognized the symptoms of fear—not the heart-thumping, adrenaline-soaked fear she'd felt outside Fairhaven's trailer, that had made beads of sweat gather at her hairline on a cool December day, but something more deep-seated. Closer to her core. She just didn't know where they had come from. Now that she tried to isolate it, she realized she had been a little afraid since she woke up, but that had been tamped down, like everything else, by the drugs they had her on. It got worse when Carson and the others came in, but now, when the topic of Ryan's funeral was broached, it reached a level she could no longer ignore.

Was she afraid that Carson knew about them? That might have

mattered once, but it didn't anymore. There were no departmental regs, that she knew of, against having had sex with a guy who had since died.

Whatever had caused it, now it gripped her, keeping her on edge through the rest of the brief, awkward conversation. Finally, the men gave her gentle hugs and left her alone.

Almost immediately, the tension bled from her, as if a spigot had been opened and drained it off.

*What the hell?* she thought. If she had more mood swings like that one, she might have to see a shrink. And she hated the thought of that even more than she hated hospitals.

Annie bit back a yawn, then gave in to the next one. The doctor had told her to rest, anyway. And the daytime TV really was god-awful.

She nestled back into her pillow and closed her eyes.

### 3

The next day Annie was allowed out of bed. The IVs were removed, because she could eat for herself. Everything that hurt—everything the painkillers had blocked—hurt more. Her arm ached and itched where the IVs had been. Her ears rang like mad, like a cymbal crash that never ended, but when she shook her head, instead of clearing them, it just made the racket seem to bounce around inside, and that made an ache rise up just behind her temples. Dr. Ganz had called the buzzing *tinnitus*, and said it was caused by damaged hair cells, which Annie thought should be cells that grew hair but were, in fact, the tiny sensory cells in the inner ear that converted sound energy into electrical signals that the brain could interpret.

She shrugged on a blue terry robe over her hospital gown and the clavicle splint she wore—basically two bands that looped under her armpits and behind her neck, all buckling together in the back, to

keep her from moving her collarbone wrong (as a fringe benefit, it gave her incredibly straight posture)—and stuck her feet into the softest leather slippers she had ever found. She needed to move, to try to work out some of the kinks that had settled in from lying in bed for so long, exacerbating the aches from the bomb.

The walls of the hospital had generic, nondenominational holiday decorations hanging on them: paper snowmen, snowflakes, sleighs, and carolers, Mylar tinsel streamers and stars. Walking past a nurse's station in her corridor, Annie saw a couple of nurses working on computers. Lights glowed on the front of a mini-stereo and she wondered if they were listening to holiday music. Would "Silver Bells" be the last Christmas song she would ever hear? It had never been a favorite, so she hoped not. These past few years, she had been partial to the Leon Redbone/Dr. John version of "Frosty the Snowman," and hated the idea that she might die without enjoying it again. One of the nurses, a tall, skinny guy with a shaved head and a lightning bolt tattooed on his forearm, looked up at her and said something. She had no idea what, so she just smiled and kept going. She figured non-English speakers probably acted the same way, pretending they understood, nodding, smiling, and making themselves scarce.

Her room was on the fourth floor of the patient tower. She pressed a down button for the elevator and looked at the framed notices on the wall, counting on the elevator's soft bong and the *shush* of the doors opening to let her know when it came. She heard neither—*of course, you idiot!*—and it was only a changing of the light on the wall that let told her an elevator had opened, and was closing again. Annie spun around, making herself dizzy, shoved an arm between the doors, and they opened again. She stepped inside and leaned against a wall until the dizziness passed.

When the doors opened on the second floor, a middle-aged couple stepped in. Stealing a surreptitious glance, Annie could see that they were grieving, their loss fresh and raw. Tears tracked down the woman's face, carving rivers through her light foundation. The man's Adam's apple bobbed and his eyes and nose were as red as if he'd just stared down a hurricane.

Annie didn't recognize them, had never seen either of them in her life, but their sorrow swallowed her whole, as if she had fallen into an unexpectedly deep pool. She caught the doors again and stepped quickly off the elevator. She didn't have a particular destination, just wanted to walk around a bit, learn the layout of the hospital and stretch her muscles, but suddenly she knew she couldn't

bear another instant in their presence. When the doors closed, the feeling passed, leaving only a residue of grief, like an oily film.

The second floor held the emergency / trauma unit, where she had been taken after the bomb at Fairhaven's trailer, according to nurse Helen, and surgery and cardiology. The grieving couple could have come from any of those. Annie glanced at the directory on the wall and decided to go up one floor. She pushed the elevator's UP button, this time watching for the glow to disappear. The third floor was where women went to have babies, and although Annie had never really thought of herself as mommy material, she thought looking at other people's babies might cheer her up after that horrific moment in the elevator.

What she wasn't prepared for was the intensity of the joy she felt, standing outside a nursery with a handful of parents and friends, looking in at a bunch of strangers' newborns. The emotion swept her up, lifted her off the floor, until she thought her heart would burst from love for people she didn't know, babies she would never hold, fathers and sisters and grandmothers gazing at their offspring, nieces, nephews, and grandkids.

Tears welled in her eyes. Someone spoke to her but she looked away, pretended she didn't know she had been addressed. Quickly,

while tears of happiness glistened on her smiling cheeks, she hurried back to the elevator, back to the safety of her room.

*What the hell is going on?* she wondered. *This isn't me.*

*This isn't me at all.*