



**MARCUS
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**AT THE
CITY'S
EDGE**

'Crackles and sears like a rip-roaring fire'
Tess Gerritsen

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At the City's Edge
by
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Penguin Books Ltd

This is a limited extract from At the City's Edge

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August 11, 1992

His heart pumps fire.

Jason's feet are impossibly heavy, and his world is blurring. Shin muscles stretch to snapping, rubber bands wound too tight. When they began racing, the breeze was like cool water he could melt into. But it has been an hour at least, and now the air is something to fight through, humid and thick.

Arms pumping, Jason risks a sideways glance at his older brother.

Michael catches it. His features are crinkled in effort, and sweat soaks the thin dark hairs pointing scraggly on his upper lip. His shirt is stained a dark V. But he manages to cock one corner of his mouth up at an ugly angle. 'Give up yet?' he asks. His voice the same as the upperclassmen in gym, the ones who snap locker room towels, who laugh at Jason's hairless body, call him faggot.

Jason leans into the run, speeding up. Feet tingling. Mouth open. Gasping.

He will never stop running. Never.

1. Funny in a Dark Sort of Way

When the man pointed a gun at him, Jason Palmer was cooling down after his daily five and picturing the first beer of the day, a sweating Corona-and-lime that he figured he'd drink in the shower. Happy hour had been coming early lately, but he'd decided not to worry about it. To pretend this was summer vacation. Spend it running along the lake, scoping the bikini-girls that hit North Avenue Beach every afternoon like rent was a concept they weren't familiar with. He pushed sweat-damp bangs out of his eyes, laced his fingers overhead, and turned into the pedestrian tunnel beneath Lake Shore Drive. The change from blast-furnace sun to cement-cool shadows left him blinking, but when his eyes adjusted there the guy was, standing like he'd been waiting.

Maybe twenty, with dark skin and predator's eyes. A sharp-edged soul patch cropped the same length as his hair. A chromed-up Beretta with the safety off. He held the weapon wrong, elbow cocked out and wrist twisted sideways, but his hand was dead steady.

'Yo, I wanna talk to you.' A diamond-studded Cadillac crest hung on a rope chain around his neck.

Adrenaline tingled up the back of Jason's legs. His heart, still racing from the run, thudded louder as he

stared at the black hole pointed at his chest. He tried to remember everything he'd heard about getting mugged, how you weren't supposed to look at the guy, that it could make him nervous. 'Easy.' Jason slowly unwound his hands from his head. 'It's no problem. Take the money.'

Soul Patch tilted his head slightly, the smile wider. 'I say anything about money?'

Jason froze. He'd never seen the man before, and didn't suspect they had much to talk about. He stood at the mouth of the tunnel, the sun roasting his back; behind him he could hear the sound of gulls calling to one another, fighting over garbage. There were always people on the beach.

Then Soul Patch narrowed his eyes. 'Further than you think.' His finger curled against the trigger. 'You don't want to be playing.'

Reluctantly, Jason stepped forward. Soul Patch nodded down the underpass. 'Slow.' He draped his track jacket to cover the pistol. A tattoo curled on his forearm, a six-pointed star with letters inside, a G, maybe a D.

Jason's sneakers crunched sand as he walked toward the far end, Soul Patch falling in behind. The sound of their passage echoed in the closed space, scuffing back mingled with the faint rumble of cars above. His shirt went cold and clammy. *Keep it easy*, he thought. *Get him off balance.*

'You know,' Jason said, voice light, 'I like the Cadillac myself.'

‘What?’

‘Saw your necklace, is all.’

Suddenly, he heard voices. For a minute, he was relieved. Then two girls turned from the ramp to the hallway, their voices young, college freshmen maybe, laughing like the whole world was their keg party. Soul Patch stiffened at the sight of them.

Jason’s fingers tingled. One thing when it was just him on the line; this was responsibility he didn’t need. He had to keep the situation under control. ‘Yup. Beautiful vehicles.’ Dry tongue forcing the words. ‘I got a ’72 Eldorado. Convertible.’

‘Shit, one of those old boats? I don’t roll that way.’

‘What do you like, the Escalade?’

‘I’m black, I gotta drive an Escalade?’

‘I don’t know,’ Jason said. The girls were ten feet away. ‘Just guessing.’

‘Man, I got me a XLR.’

Jason looked over his shoulder. ‘No shit?’

‘Leather interior and a DVD in the dash.’

He nodded, trying to ignore the tension in his muscles. ‘Nice.’ The girls drew parallel, and Jason clenched to jump if Soul Patch even looked their direction. But the blonde and brunette passed smooth-faced and oblivious. Jason let out a relieved breath, walked another dozen feet, out of earshot, and then stopped. Enough. ‘Listen, I’ve only got twenty bucks on me.’

‘So?’

‘So, take it.’ He started to reach, froze when Soul Patch shook his head slow.

‘Son, I wanted your money, you think you’d still have it?’

‘What *do* you want?’

‘I want to talk.’ He cocked his head. ‘About what your brother’s up to.’

Michael.

Jason felt his fingers go to fists. He fought the urge to jump the fucker right there. But the man’s gun was steady and his smile was cruel. ‘What do you mean?’ Jason’s voice thinner than he intended.

Soul Patch cleared his throat in a sticky gurgle and spat a chunk of phlegm against the wall. ‘Move.’

He forced himself to obey, biting at his lip, limbs raw with adrenaline. Ten more steps took him out of the tunnel, the sun landing with physical force on his shoulders, the faint burn on his neck. He walked up the concrete ramp to a two-story parking deck, most of the spaces filled, the BMWs, Hummers, and Mercedes of a class of people who saw Monday as just a quieter afternoon to take the yacht out. Soul Patch followed, gestured to the stairs.

Jason climbed, mind working furiously. What could possibly connect his brother and this man with the killer’s eyes? He tried and discarded a dozen explanations with every step, but couldn’t make the pieces fit. It had to be a mistake. They reached the second floor and started down the row of cars. The whole thing was funny in a dark sort of way. Used to be that every time the squad hit the street, someone might have been watching, sweaty finger on a radio detonator,

waiting for Jason to step a little too close to death. It was a feeling he'd grown used to, that proximity to nothingness, the way he might just disappear in a roar of flame. Now here he was, safe and sound at home, getting hijacked by somebody who couldn't tell one white dude from another. It would have been hysterical if it weren't actually happening.

So what are you going to do about it, soldier?

A delivery truck was parked forty yards up, the angular rear jutting out past the car beside, and he began to drift toward it, rolling on the balls of his feet to fight adrenaline-stiffness. Six cars to go: A couple of imports, a big SUV, one of the new Beetles, and then his truck. A lunge would get him behind it. Soul Patch might snap a shot off, but it would be hurried. And after that, it was just a matter of staying low and weaving. Killer or no, a man who held his weapon sideways didn't have the skill to hit a moving target at any distance. Just a few more steps, and he'd be clear.

Three cars short of the delivery truck, a man leaned out from behind the big SUV and slammed his fist into Jason's stomach.

Breath exploded from his lungs. He doubled over, hands flying out for something solid, coming to rest on the SUV. Pain blossomed in his gut, a warm and living thing. As his body fought for air, his mind raged, telling him to take the pain. He struggled to straighten, one hand against the rear door, the other up in a clumsy defense.

The man who'd hit him stood five and a half.

Elaborately muscled shoulders tapered directly into his shaven head. He wore a spotless white T-shirt that hung almost to his knees and ornate gold rings on every finger of his punching hand. Soul Patch stood beside him, chuckling, the gun steady on Jason's heart.

Every breath was razors in his belly. Slowly, he forced his shoulders back, took the hand off the SUV. He glanced at it as he turned away, did a double-take, then looked at Soul Patch.

'I thought,' Jason said, 'you didn't like the Escalade.'

The man smiled, his tooth gleaming. 'I was just playing.'

'No DVD?' He struggled to stay cool, to show that he wasn't panicking, that they didn't need to jump him.

'Oh, I got the DVD. You can watch it in back.'

A shiver ran through Jason's belly. This couldn't be happening, not really. 'Listen man, you've got the wrong guy.'

'I feel you. Hop in, we'll discuss.' He gestured, and the wrestler stepped forward to open the back, standing like a limo driver on the other side of the car door.

Jason could feel the blood vibrate through his palms, pound in his neck. In the truck he'd be trapped. That action-movie stuff about people rolling out of moving cars and walking it off, that was crap. Bail out of a car going faster than twenty miles

per, you weren't walking anything off. Plus, here, in a public parking lot, he had some hope. A single bullet might be dismissed, but a firefight would attract attention. He hesitated.

'I said get in.' Sun made Soul Patch's eyes glow yellow.

'Okay.' Jason held his hands up. 'Easy. I'll come.' Electricity burnished his skeleton as he started for the car.

Then, for the first time, Soul Patch made a mistake. He stood still.

It was as much of a window as Jason could hope for. Continuing his forward motion, he stepped into Soul Patch like they were dancing, right hand closing on the guy's wrist to lock the gun in place. But instead of grappling for the weapon, he spun, planting his back against the man's chest, the gun arm now in front of both of them. The wrestler startled awake with a snort. Soul Patch gave a surprised yelp, struggled to free his hand. Jason continued his spin, remembering this fucker talking about Michael, threatening his brother. He yanked, and as he felt the man come off balance, he kept turning, transforming the fall into a throw that hurled the gangbanger against the half-closed car door. It flew open and slammed into the wrestler, the frame catching him square in the face with a meaty thump. The double impact knocked the wind out of Soul Patch, and the gun clattered from his hand.

The moment it did, Jason shoved away. Two

awkward steps and he had his balance. His heart screamed to run, but his head was cool. They were enemy combatants. He didn't want to leave them armed. The grip of the pistol was warm and slightly sweaty as he snatched it from the concrete.

Then he took off in a sprint, knowing that he hadn't incapacitated either man. His legs pumped clean and strong. He crossed the open asphalt to the next row, then planted his left foot and lunged behind a car. A window exploded with a sharp crack. All the old energy came back. He jerked to the side again and broke from the row, then poured it on in a straightaway to the boundary of the lot. Leapt for the concrete abutment, planted one foot, and sprang off the second-story parking deck.

In the endless instant he floated through the air, Jason Palmer realized he was smiling.

Then he hit the soft earth of the park. He kept the fall going, tucking one shoulder and rolling it off the way he'd seen Jump School candidates do it. He was back on his feet and moving in a fraction of a second, knowing he was clear but running anyway, loving the rush, the gun part of his hand. A copse of carefully arranged trees lay twenty yards away, and he angled for them. The wind on his face cooled the sweat, and as he dodged branches he could smell the fetid dampness of the earth, a good clean scent like sex. After another thirty yards, he risked a glance back.

Soul Patch stood at the edge of the parking lot, his face twisted into a furious snarl. The wrestler

leaned beside him, chest heaving, a pistol in one hand, the other clutching his nose. Blood seeped between his fingers.

Jason couldn't resist. Smiling, he stood at attention and threw them a salute. The pure hate on Soul Patch's face was the most beautiful thing he'd seen in days.

With a laugh, Jason tucked the pistol into his pants, dropped his shirt to cover it, and set off at a gentle jog. Just another guy working out on a beautiful day. When he reached the edge of the grass, he crossed the street and cut into the neighborhood.

He knew a bar two blocks away, thought about heading there to call the cops, decided against it. If he'd had his cell on him, maybe; those two stood out in white-bread Lincoln Park. But by the time he reached a payphone, they'd be rolling down Lake Shore Drive.

Anyway, there was Michael to think about. Jason turned right, digging for the keys to the Caddy. Forget the police. He had to check on his brother, just to be sure. No way this had anything to do with Michael – you could take the boy out of the choir, but never the reverse – but no harm in being certain. They'd probably share a laugh about the absurdity of the thing, a gangbanger trying to hijack him. But Jason doubted he'd ever know what it had really been about.

He was wrong.