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World of Trouble

The Last Policeman Book III

Written by Ben H. Winters

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WORLD OF

TROUBLE

The Last Policeman Book III

by Ben H. Winters



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For Diana

*“ . . . I'm gonna love you
till the wheels come off
oh, oh yeah . . . ”*

“And I won’t let go and I can’t let go
I won’t let go and I can’t let go
I won’t let go and I can’t let go no more”
—Bob Dylan, “Solid Rock”

Wednesday, August 22

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Declination -70 52 35

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“Are you here about the dust? Please tell me you’re here to do something about the dust.”

I don’t answer. I don’t know what to say.

The girl’s voice is throaty and ill, her eyes looking out over a nose-and-mouth mask, staring hopeful and crazed at me as I stand baffled on her doorstep. Beautiful blonde, hair swept back out of her face, dirty and exhausted like everybody, panicked like everybody. But there’s something else going on here, something not healthy. Something biochemical in her eyes.

“Well, come in,” she says through her allergy mask. “Come on, come in, close the door, the door.”

I step inside and she kicks the door shut and whirls around to face me. Yellow sundress, faded and tattered at the hem. Starved-looking, sallow, pale. Wearing not just the allergy mask but thick yellow latex gloves. And she’s armed to the teeth is the other thing,

she's holding two semiautomatics and has a smaller gun tucked in her boot, plus some kind of heavy-duty hunting knife in a calf sheath at the hem of the sundress. And I can't tell if it's live or not, but there is unquestionably a grenade dangling from a braided belt at her waist.

"Do you see the *dust*?" she says, gesturing with the guns, pointing into the corners. "You see how we've got a serious problem with the dust?"

It's true that there are motes hovering in the sunbeams, along with the garbage scattered on the floor, heaps of dirty clothing and open trunks spilling over with all manner of useless things, magazines and electrical cords and wadded-up dollar bills. But she's seeing more than what's here, I can tell, she's in the outer reaches, she's blinking furiously, coughing behind her mask.

I wish I could recall this girl's name. That would help a lot, if I could just remember her name.

"What do we do about this?" she says, rattling out words. "Do you just vacuum it, or—? Is that it—do you just suck it up and take it out of here? Does that work with cosmic dust?"

"Cosmic dust," I say. "Huh. Well, you know, I'm not sure."

This is my first trip to Concord, New Hampshire, since I fled a month ago, since my house burned down, along with much of the rest of the city. The chaos of those final frantic hours has died down to a grim and mournful silence. We're a few blocks from downtown, in the abandoned husk of a store on Wilson Street, but there are no jostling anxious crowds outside, no frightened people rushing and pushing past each other in the streets. No klaxon howl of car alarms, no distant gunfire. The people are hidden now, those that remain,

hidden under blankets or in basements, encased in their dread.

And the girl, disintegrating, raving about imaginary dust from outer space. We've met once before, right here at this same small shop, which was once a used-clothing store called Next Time Around. She wasn't like this then, hadn't fallen prey to it. Other people are sick in the same way, of course, to varying degrees, different kinds of symptomatology; if the *DSM-IV* were still being updated and applied, this new illness would be added in red. A debilitating obsession with the gigantic asteroid on a collision course with our fragile planet. *Astromania*, perhaps. *Delusional interstellar psychosis*.

I feel like if I could only call her by her name, remind her that we have a relationship, that we're both human beings, it would ease her unsettled mind and make me less of a threat. Then we could talk calmly.

"It's toxic, you know," she's saying. "Really, really bad. The cosmic dust is real, real bad on your lungs. The photons burn your lungs."

"Listen," I say, and she makes a panicked gasp and rushes toward me, her assorted armaments jangling.

"Keep your *tongue* in your *mouth*," she hisses. "Don't *taste* it."

"Okay. I'll try. I won't."

I keep my hands at my sides, where she can see them, keep my expression neutral, soft as cake. "I'm actually here for some information."

"Information?" Her brows knit with confusion. She peers at me through clouds of invisible dust.

It's not her I'm here to talk to, anyway; it's her friend I need.

Boyfriend, maybe. Whatever he is. That's the guy who knows where I need to go next. I hope he does, anyway. I'm counting on it.

"I need to speak to Jordan. Is Jordan here?"

Suddenly the girl finds focus, snaps to attention, and the pistols come up. "Did he—did he send you?"

"No." I raise my hands. "No."

"Oh my God, he sent you. Are you with him? Is he in space?" She's shouting, advancing across the room, the barrels of the semiautomatics aimed at my face like twin black holes. "Is he doing this?"

I turn my head to the wall, scared to die, even now, even today.

"Is he doing this to me?"

And then—somehow—miraculously—the name.

"Abigail."

Her eyes soften, widen slightly.

"Abigail," I say. "Can I help you? Can we help each other?"

She gapes at me. Heavy silence. Moments flying past, time burning away.

"Abigail, *please*."