Opening Extract from...

The Death Instinct

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On a clear September day in lower Manhattan, the financial center of the United States became the site of the most massive terrorist attack that had ever occurred on American soil. It was 1920. Despite the then-largest criminal investigation in United States history, the identity of the perpetrators remains a mystery to this day.

Chapter One

Death is only the beginning; afterward comes the hard part.

There are three ways to live with the knowledge of death – to keep its terror at bay. The first is suppression: forget it's coming; act as if it isn't. That's what most of us do most of the time. The second is the opposite: *memento mori*. Remember death. Keep it constantly in mind, for surely life can have no greater savor than when a man believes today is his last. The third is acceptance. A man who accepts death – really accepts it – fears nothing and hence achieves a transcendent equanimity in the face of all loss.

All these strategies have one thing in common. They're lies. Terror, at least, would be honest.

But there is another way, a fourth way. This is the inadmissible option, the path no man can speak of, not even to himself, not even in the quiet of his own inward conversation. This way requires no mental gyrations, no transcending nature, no groveling at the altar of the inevitable. All it takes is instinct.

At the stroke of noon on September 16, 1920, the bells of

Trinity Church began to boom, and as if motivated by a single spring, doors flew open up and down Wall Street, releasing clerks and message boys, secretaries and stenographers, for their precious hour of lunch. They poured into the streets, streaming around cars, lining up at favorite vendors, filling in an instant the busy intersection of Wall, Nassau and Broad, an intersection known in the financial world as the Corner – just that, the Corner. There stood the United States Treasury, with its Greek temple facade, guarded by a regal bronze George Washington. There stood the white-columned New York Stock Exchange. There, JP Morgan's domed fortress of a bank.

In front of that bank, an old bay mare pawed at the cobblestones, hitched to an overloaded, burlap-covered cart – pilotless and blocking traffic. Horns sounded angrily behind it. A stout cab driver exited his vehicle, arms upraised in righteous appeal. Attempting to berate the cartman, who wasn't there, the taxi driver was surprised by an odd, muffled noise coming from inside the wagon. He put his ear to the burlap and heard an unmistakable sound: ticking.

The church bells struck twelve. With the final, sonorous note still echoing, the curious taxi driver drew back a corner of moth-eaten burlap and saw what was ticking. At that moment, among the jostling thousands, four knew that death was pregnant in Wall Street: the cab driver; a red-headed woman, clutching a pair of scissors; the missing pilot of the horse-drawn wagon; and Stratham Younger, who, one hundred and fifty feet away, pulled to their knees a police detective and a French girl.

The taxi driver whispered, 'Lord have mercy.'
Wall Street exploded.

Two women, once upon a time the best of friends, meeting again after years apart, will cry out in disbelief, embrace, protest, and immediately take up the missing pieces of their lives, painting them in for one another with all the tint and vividness they can. Two men, under the same conditions, have nothing to say at all.

At eleven that morning, one hour before the explosion, Younger and Jimmy Littlemore shook hands in Madison Square, two miles north of Wall Street. The day was unseasonably fine, the sky a crystal blue. Younger took out a cigarette.

'Been a while, Doc,' said Littlemore.

Younger struck, lit, nodded.

Both men were in their thirties, but of different physical types. Littlemore, a detective with the New York Police Department, was the kind of man who mixed easily into his surroundings. His height was average, his weight average, the color of his hair average; even his features were average, a kind of composite of American openness and good health. Younger, by contrast, was arresting. He was tall; he moved well; his skin was a little weathered; he had the kind of imperfections in a handsome face that women like. In short, the doctor's appearance was more demanding and opaque than the detective's – but also less easy to underestimate, and less amiable.

'How's the job?' asked Younger.

'Job's good,' said Littlemore, a toothpick wagging between his lips.

'Family?'

'Family's good.'

Another difference between them was visible as well. Younger had fought in the war; Littlemore had not. Younger, walking away from his medical practice in Boston and his scientific research at Harvard, had enlisted immediately after war was declared in 1917. Littlemore would have too – if he hadn't had a wife and so many children to provide for.

'That's good,' said Younger.

'So are you going to tell me,' asked Littlemore, 'or do I have to pry it out of you with a crowbar?'

Younger smoked. 'Crowbar.'

'You call me after all this time, tell me you got something to tell me, and now you're not going to tell me?'

'This is where they had the big victory parade, isn't it?' asked Younger, looking around at Madison Square Park, with its greenery, monuments and ornamental fountain. 'What happened to the arch?'

'Tore it down.'

'Why were men so willing to die?'

'Who was?' asked Littlemore.

'It doesn't make sense. From an evolutionary point of view.'' Younger looked back at Littlemore. 'I'm not the one who needs to talk to you. It's Colette.'

'The girl you brought back from France?' said Littlemore.

'She should be here any minute. If she's not lost.'

'What's she look like?'

Younger thought about it: 'Pretty.' A moment later, he added, 'Here she is.'

A double-decker bus had pulled up nearby on Fifth Avenue. Littlemore turned to look; the toothpick nearly fell out of his mouth. A girl in a slim trench coat was coming down the outdoor spiral staircase. The two men met her as she stepped off.

Colette Rousseaux kissed Younger once on either cheek and extended a slender arm to Littlemore. She had green eyes, graceful movements, and long dark hair.

'Glad to meet you, Miss,' said the detective, recovering gamely.

She eyed him. 'So you're Jimmy,' she replied, taking him in. 'The best and bravest man Stratham has ever known.'

Littlemore blinked. 'He said that?'

'I also told her your jokes aren't funny,' added Younger.

Colette turned to Younger: 'You should have come to the radium clinic. They've cured a sarcoma. And a rhinoscleroma. How can a little hospital in America have two whole grams of radium when there isn't one in all of France?'

'I didn't know rhinos had an aroma,' said Littlemore.

'Shall we go to lunch?' asked Younger.

Where Colette alighted from the bus, a monumental triple arch had only a few months earlier spanned the entirety of Fifth Avenue. In March of 1919, vast throngs cheered as homecoming soldiers paraded beneath the triumphal Roman arch, erected to celebrate the nation's victory in the Great War. Ribbons swirled, balloons flew,

canons saluted, and – because Prohibition had not yet arrived – corks popped.

But the soldiers who received this hero's welcome woke the next morning to discover a city with no jobs for them. Wartime boom had succumbed to post-war collapse. The churning factories boarded up their windows. Stores closed. Buying and selling ground to a halt. Families were put out on the streets with nowhere to go.

The Victory Arch was supposed to have been solid marble. Such extravagance having become unaffordable, it had been built of wood and plaster instead. When the weather came, the paint peeled, and the arch began to crumble. It was demolished before winter was out – about the same time the country went dry.

The colossal, dazzlingly white and vanished arch lent a tremor of ghostliness to Madison Square. Colette felt it. She even turned to see if someone might be watching her. But she turned the wrong way. She didn't look across Fifth Avenue, where, beyond the speeding cars and rattling omnibuses, a pair of eyes was in fact fixed upon her.

These belonged to a female figure, solitary, still, her cheeks gaunt and pallid, so skeletal in stature that, to judge by appearance, she couldn't have threatened a child. A kerchief hid most of her dry red hair, and a worn-out dress from the previous century hung to her ankles. It was impossible to tell her age: she might have been an innocent fourteen or a bony fifty-five. There was, however, a peculiarity about her eyes. The irises, of the palest blue, were flecked with brownish-yellow impurities like corpses floating in a tranquil sea.

Among the vehicles blocking this woman's way across Fifth Avenue was an approaching delivery truck, drawn by a horse. She cast her composed gaze on it. The trotting animal saw her out of the corner of an eye. It balked and reared. The truck driver shouted; vehicles swerved, tires screeched. There were no collisions, but a clear path opened up through the traffic. She crossed Fifth Avenue unmolested.

Littlemore led them to a street cart next to the subway steps, proposing that they have 'dogs' for lunch, which required the men to explain to an appalled French girl the ingredients of that recent culinary sensation, the hot dog. 'You'll like it, Miss, I promise,' said Littlemore.

'I will?' she replied dubiously.

Reaching the near side of Fifth Avenue, the kerchiefed woman placed a blue-veined hand on her abdomen. This was evidently a sign or command. Not far away, the park's flowing fountain ceased to spray, and as the last jets of water fell to the basin, another red-headed woman came into view, so like the first as almost to be a reflection, but less pale, less skeletal, her hair flowing unhindered. She too put a hand on her abdomen. In her other hand was a pair of scissors with strong, curving blades. She set off toward Colette.

'Ketchup, Miss?' asked Littlemore. 'Most take mustard, but I say ketchup. There you go.'

Colette accepted the hot dog awkwardly. 'All right, I'll try.'

Using both hands, she took a bite. The two men watched. So did the two red-haired women, approaching from

different directions. And so did a third red-headed woman next to a flagpole near Broadway, who wore, in addition to a kerchief over her head, a grey wool scarf wrapped more than once around her neck.

'But it's good!' said Colette. 'What did you put on yours?'

'Sauerkraut, Miss,' replied Littlemore. 'It's kind of a sour, kraut-y –'

'She knows what sauerkraut is,' said Younger.

'You want some?' asked Littlemore.

'Yes, please.'

The woman under the flagpole licked her lips. Hurrying New Yorkers passed on either side, taking no notice of her – or of her scarf, which the weather didn't justify, and which seemed to bulge out strangely from her throat. She raised a hand to her mouth. Emaciated fingertips touched parted lips, as if she could taste the soft stale bread in Colette's mouth or the tang of briny meat that Colette had just swallowed. She began walking toward the French girl.

'How about downtown?' said Littlemore. 'Would you like to see the Brooklyn Bridge, Miss?'

'Very much,' said Colette.

'Follow me,' said the detective, throwing the vendor two bits for a tip and walking to the top of the subway stairs. He checked his pockets: 'Shoot – we need another nickel.'

The street vendor, overhearing the detective, began to rummage through his change box when he caught sight of three strangely similar figures approaching his cart. The first two had joined together, fingers touching as they walked. The third advanced by herself from the opposite direction,

holding her thick wool scarf to her throat. The vendor's long fork slipped from his hand and disappeared into a pot of simmering water. He stopped looking for nickels.

'I have one,' said Younger.

'Let's go,' replied Littlemore. He trotted down the stairs. Colette and Younger followed. They were lucky: a downtown train was entering the station; they just made it. Halfway out of the station, the train lurched to a halt. Its doors creaked ajar, snapped shut, then jerked open again. Evidently some latecomers had induced the conductor to let them on.

In the narrow arteries of lower Manhattan – they had emerged at City Hall – Younger, Colette and Littlemore were swept up in the capillary crush of humanity. Younger inhaled deeply. He loved the city's teemingness, its purposiveness, its belligerence. He was a confident man; he always had been. By American standards, Younger was very well-born: a Schermerhorn on his mother's side, a close cousin to the Fishes of New York and, through his father, the Cabots of Boston. This exalted genealogy, a matter of indifference to him now, had disgusted him as a youth. The sense of superiority his class enjoyed struck him as so patently undeserved that he'd resolved to do the opposite of everything expected of him – until the night his father died, when necessity descended, the world became real, and the whole issue of social class ceased to be of interest.

But those days were long past, scoured away by years of unstinting work, accomplishment and war, and on this New York morning, Younger experienced a feeling almost of invulnerability. This was, however, he reflected, probably

only the knowledge that no snipers lay hidden with your head in their sights, no shells were screaming through the air to relieve you of your legs. Unless perhaps it was the opposite: that the pulse of violence was so atmospheric in New York that a man who had fought in the war could breathe here, could be at home, could flex muscles still pricked by the feral after-charge of uninhibited killing – without making himself a misfit or a monster.

'Shall I tell him?' he asked Colette. To their right rose up incomprehensibly tall skyscrapers. To their left, the Brooklyn Bridge soared over the Hudson.

'No, I will,' said Colette. 'I'm sorry to take so much of your time, Jimmy. I should have told you already.'

'I got all the time in the world, Miss,' said Littlemore.

'Well, it's probably nothing, but last night a girl came to our hotel looking for me. We were out, so she left a note. Here it is.' Colette produced a crumpled scrap of paper from her purse. The paper bore a hand-written message, hastily scrawled:

Please I need to see you. They know you're right. I'll come back tomorrow morning at seven thirty. Please can you help me.
Amelia

'She never came back,' added Colette.

'You know this Amelia?' asked Littlemore, turning the note over, but finding nothing on its opposite side.

'No.'

‘“They know you’re right”?’ said Littlemore. ‘About what?’

‘I can’t imagine,’ said Colette.

‘There’s something else,’ said Younger.

‘Yes, it’s what she put inside the note that worries us,’ said Colette, fishing through her purse. She handed the detective a wad of white cotton.

Littlemore pulled the threads apart. Buried within the cotton ball was a tooth – a small, shiny human molar.

A fusillade of obscenities interrupted them. The cause was a parade of colored people on Liberty Street, which had halted traffic. The men in the march wore their Sunday best – a tattered best, their sleeves too short – although it was mid-week. Skinny children tripped barefoot among their parents. Most were singing; their hymnal rose above the bystanders’ taunts and motorists’ ire.

‘Hold your horses,’ said a uniformed officer, barely more than a boy, to one fulminating driver.

Littlemore, excusing himself, approached the officer. ‘What are you doing here, Boyle?’

‘Captain Hamilton sent us, sir,’ said Boyle, ‘because of the nigger parade.’

‘Who’s patrolling the Exchange?’ asked Littlemore.

‘Nobody. We’re all up here. Shall I break up this march, sir? Looks like there’s going to be trouble.’

‘Let me think,’ said Littlemore, scratching his head. ‘What would you do on St. Paddy’s Day if some blacks were causing trouble? Break up the parade?’

‘I’d break up the blacks, sir. Break ’em up good.’

'That's a boy. You do the same here.'

'Yes, sir. All right you lot,' Officer Boyle yelled to the marchers in front of him, pulling out his nightstick, 'get off the streets, all of you.'

'*Boyle*!' said Littlemore.

'Sir?'

'Not the blacks.'

'But you said – '

'You break up the troublemakers, not the marchers. Let cars through every two minutes. These people have a right to parade just like anybody else.'

'Yes sir.'

Littlemore returned to Younger and Colette. 'Okay, the tooth is a little strange,' he said.'Why would someone would leave you a tooth?'

'I have no idea.'

They continued downtown. Littlemore held the tooth up in the sunlight, rotated it. 'Clean. Good condition. Why?' He looked at the slip of paper again. 'The note doesn't have your name on it, Miss. Maybe it wasn't meant for you.'

'The clerk said the girl asked for Miss Colette Rousseaux,' replied Younger.

'Could be somebody with a similar last name,' suggested Littlemore. 'The Commodore's a big hotel. Any dentists' there?'

'In the hotel?' said Colette.

'How did you know we were at the Commodore?' asked Younger.

'Hotel matches. You lit your cigarette with them.'

'Those awful matches,' replied Colette. 'Luc is sure to be playing with them right now. Luc is my little brother. He's ten. Stratham gives him matches as toys.'

'The boy took apart hand grenades in the war,' Younger said to Colette. 'He'll be fine.'

'My oldest is ten – Jimmy Junior, we call him,' said Littlemore. 'Are your parents here too?'

'No, we're by ourselves,' she answered. 'We lost our family in the war.'

They were entering the Financial District, with its granite facades and dizzying towers. Curbside traders in three-piece suits auctioned securities outside in the September sun.

'I'm sorry, Miss,' said Littlemore. 'About your family.'

'It's nothing special,' she said. 'Many families were lost. My brother and I were lucky to survive.'

Littlemore glanced at Younger, who felt the glance but didn't acknowledge it. Younger knew what Littlemore was wondering – how losing your family could be nothing special – but Littlemore hadn't seen the war. They walked on in silence, each pursuing his or her own reflections, as a result of which none of them heard the creature coming up from behind. Even Colette was unaware until she felt the hot breath on her neck. She recoiled and cried out in alarm.

It was a horse, an old bay mare, snorting hard from the weight of a dilapidated, overloaded wooden cart she towed behind her. Colette, relieved and contrite, reached out and crumpled one of the horse's ears. The mare flapped her nostrils appreciatively. Her driver hissed, stinging the horse's

flank with a crop. Colette yanked her hand away. The burlap-covered wagon clacked past them on the cobblestones of Nassau Street.

'May I ask you a question?' asked Littlemore.

'Of course,' said Colette.

'Who in New York knows where you're staying?'

'No one.'

'What about the old lady you two visited this morning? The one with all the cats, who likes to hug people?'

'Mrs. Meloney?' said Colette. 'No, I didn't tell her which hotel – '

'How could you possibly have known that?' interrupted Younger, adding to Colette: 'I never told him about Mrs. Meloney.'

They were approaching the intersection of Nassau, Broad and Wall Streets – the financial center of New York City, arguably of the world.

'Kind of obvious, actually,' said Littlemore.'You both have cat fur on your shoes, and in your case, Doc, on your pant cuffs. Different kinds of cat fur. So right away I know you both went some place this morning with a lot of friendly cats. But the Miss also has two long, grey hairs on her shoulder – human hair. So I'm figuring the cats belonged to an old lady, and you two paid a call on her this morning, and the lady must be the hugging kind, because that's how – '

'All right, all right,' said Younger.

In front of the Morgan Bank, the horse-drawn wagon came to a halt. The bells of Trinity Church began to boom,

and the streets began to fill with thousands of workingmen and women released from confinement for their precious hour of lunch.

'Anyway,' Littlemore resumed, 'I'd say the strong odds are that Amelia was looking for somebody else, and the clerk mixed it up.'

Horns began honking angrily behind the parked horse-cart, the pilot of which had disappeared. On the steps of the Treasury, a red-headed woman stood alone, head wrapped in a kerchief, surveying the crowd with a keen but composed gaze.

'Sounds like she might be in some trouble though,' Littlemore went on. 'Mind if I keep the tooth?'

'Please,' said Colette.

Littlemore dropped the cotton wad into his breast pocket. On Wall Street, behind the horse-drawn wagon, a stout cab driver exited his vehicle, arms upraised in righteous appeal.

'Amazing,' said Younger, 'how nothing's changed here. Europe returned to the Dark Ages, but in America time went on holiday.'

The bells of Trinity Church continued to peal. A hundred and fifty feet in front of Younger, the cab driver heard an odd noise coming from the burlap-covered wagon, and a cold light came to the eyes of the red-headed woman on the steps of the Treasury. She had seen Colette and descended the stairs. People unconsciously made way for her.

'I'd say the opposite,' replied Littlemore. 'Everything's different. The whole city's on edge.'

'Why?' asked Colette.

Younger no longer heard them. He was suddenly in France, not New York, trying to save the life of a one-armed soldier in a trench filled knee-high with freezing water, as the piercing, rising, fatal cry of incoming shells filled the air.

'You know,' said Littlemore, 'no jobs, everybody's broke, people getting evicted, strikes, riots – then they throw in Prohibition.'

Younger looked at Colette and Littlemore; they didn't hear the shriek of artillery. No one heard it.

'Prohibition,' repeated Littlemore. 'That's got to be the worst thing anybody ever did to this country.'

In front of the Morgan Bank, a curious taxi driver drew back one corner of moth-eaten burlap. The kerchiefed red-headed woman, who had just strode past him, stopped, puzzled. The pupils of her pale blue irises dilated as she looked back at the cab driver, who whispered, 'Lord have mercy.'

'Down,' said Younger as he pulled an uncomprehending Littlemore and Colette to their knees.

Wall Street exploded.