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DEAN
KOONTZ

THE
HOUSE
AT THE
END
OF THE
WORLD



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First edition

*To Gerda. To mark fifty-six years of marriage—the halfway
point!*

CONTENTS

ONE ALONE

THE LAST LIGHT OF THE DAY

A LITTLE FORTRESS

A WORK OF ART

DEPTH CHARGES

TURNING DOWN THE BED

AN ARTIST IS A MATHEMATICIAN WHO KNOWS THE
FORMULAS OF THE SOUL

SHADES

DINNER WITH DAPHNE

SCANNERS

THE MYSTIC

A MESSAGE FROM THE DEAD

JUST IN CASE

3:26 A.M.

AN INQUIRING MIND

TWO VISITORS

GUNNER LINDBLOM

EVIDENCE

BEFORE JACOB'S LADDER: THE THERAPIST

FOXES

THE GROTTO

A SLIGHT INCONVENIENCE

THE GULLS AND THE FOX

BEFORE JACOB'S LADDER: THE ATTORNEY

KEEPING WATCH

THREE MEN

THEIR NAMES

THREE LOCKDOWN

THE LONG WAY HOME

A YOUNG MAN'S ACCOMPLISHMENTS

FEVERISH CALCULATION

ONE LESS OPTION
A USELESS APPLE
SHOW NO FEAR
THE CRY
LUPO AND HAMAL TOGETHER
HAMPTON RICE
WITHOUT TEA AND TABLE
ALONG FOR THE RIDE
MOTHER, ARE YOU THERE YET?
FOUR STORM
IN MEMORY OF THE DOG
AN ERROR OF TIMING
MEANWHILE, ON OAK HAVEN
THE SOUND THAT IS NOT THUNDER
GOODBYE TO ALL THAT
WHISPERING
TO GO DOWN IN HISTORY
BELOW
THE HARD WAY OUT
HIS HANDS ARE INSTRUMENTS OF JUSTICE
FIVE PURPOSE
KITCHEN
TO THE BOATHOUSE
THE CALL
CONTROL
DOWN THE DRAIN
RALEIGH CONSIDERS MOLOCH
THE CROSSING
THE WHY OF IT
THE DEVIL OF THE STAIRS
A KNOCK ON THE DOOR
RALEIGH ANSWERS RALEIGH
AN EXCHANGE IN THE HALLWAY
SIX BRINK
COFFEE
SIX YEARS BEFORE THE CRISIS ON RINGROCK
MOLOCH
RALEIGH RECEIVES THE DEMAND
WHAT WALKS THE NIGHT
INTO THE OUTER DARK

BEFORE JACOB'S LADDER: THE CREMATORIUM

WHO GOES THERE?

PITY

SEVEN PRACTICE

TO THE MAINLAND

FUTURE TENSE

STREETS OF REFLECTION

SCARECROW

FIVE DAYS EARLIER: GRANDMA'S KITCHEN

THE LIVES OF OTHERS

EIGHT NEST

GRIMM

A DISAGREEMENT

ELECTRICITY

DIABOLIC

NINE AFTERMATH

THE FOX AND THE ARTIST

THE EAGLE, THE LION, AND THE CROCODILES

OUT OF THE DARKNESS

THE MOON AND THE MAN

NEWS

THE JAWS OF THE VISE INVISIBLE

BY A ROUTE OBSCURE AND LONELY

BAD NEWS

DAMNATION ALLEY

OTHERNESS

HANDBASKET

HOUSE

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

image



**ONE
ALONE**

THE LAST LIGHT OF THE DAY

Katie lives alone on the island. She lives less for herself than for the dead.

This is just another day in April, a Tuesday defined by isolation and hard-won serenity—until it isn't.

Built in the 1940s, her small house is a sturdy structure of stone. In addition to a bath, the residence has a kitchen, bedroom, living room, armory, and cellar.

The house is on a knoll, surrounded on four sides by a yard, on three sides by woods beyond the yard. The front door faces a slope to a shingle shore, a dock, a boathouse, and open water.

Her domain is a quiet refuge. She has not heard any human voice but her own in a few months, and she rarely speaks aloud.

Lacking television, radio, or internet, she hoards seven CD players with six-disc magazines, which are no longer manufactured. For a few hours a day, she has music, always classical—Mozart, Beethoven, Brahms, Chopin, Haydn, Liszt.

She has no interest in pop tunes or American standards. Regardless of how beautiful the voice, the lyrics too poignantly remind her of all that she has lost and all that she has forsaken.

Having found peace in isolation, she won't put it at risk.

Set into the hillside, a flight of concrete stairs with a painted-iron railing leads to the shore. As she descends, a pied rock dove waits for her at the bottom, perched on the newel post.

The bird seems always to know when she will walk the shoreline or come down from the house for another purpose. It is not afraid of her, never takes wing at her approach, but seems merely curious.

Katie wonders if the scent of civilization has so faded from her that the creatures of the island now consider her one of them rather than either an interloper or a predator.

Soon more than a thousand blue heron will migrate to a rookery on another island far to the north of Katie's retreat. When breeding is done, one will now and then stalk the shallows of this shore for sustenance, like a beautiful descendant of the Jurassic era.

Tied up in the boathouse, a twenty-foot cabin cruiser with an inboard-

outboard engine controlled from the wheelhouse offers range and speed. She uses it two or three times a month, taking a cruise to nowhere and back.

As necessary—*only* as necessary—she goes to the mainland to have the boat serviced at the nearest marina. She has not gone into town in five months, since visiting her dentist.

She parks a Range Rover in a rented garage there. She pays a local to drive it twice a month and keep it ready for her use. There is nowhere in the world she wishes to go, but experience has taught her to be prepared for all contingencies.

Even the islands at this remote end of the archipelago now enjoy cell-phone service. She rarely makes a call. She sends text messages to no one but Hockenberry Marine Services.

Hockenberry delivers groceries, tanks of propane, and other goods twice a month. They are pleased to carry any items up the stairs to the house, but she always declines, as she does today.

She is only thirty-six and in superb physical condition. She needs no assistance. Besides, she has given Hockenberry a boathouse key and prefers not to interact with anyone.

The boathouse is of the same stone as the residence. At the inland end, a separate and well-soundproofed chamber houses the propane-fired generator that provides the electricity for the residence and for the pump that brings water from the well.

The cabin cruiser is belayed in the lower, forward chamber, tied to cleats in the floating slip and snugged against rubber fenders. It wallows almost imperceptibly as mild currents wash beneath the big roll-up door.

A gangway leads up from the slip to a storage area at the same level as the dock. Here, among other things, is a refrigerator in which the deliverymen leave perishable goods. Sturdy cardboard boxes contain the other items and stand beside the fridge.

When propane is needed, they leave the tanks in the generator room, where they also leave three-gallon cans of fuel for the boat.

Now Katie straps the grocery cartons on a dolly with large wheels designed to climb steps easily, and she pulls it up to the house. Two trips are required to transfer the entire order.

After she returns the dolly to the upper level of the boathouse and closes the door, she stands at the end of the dock, surveying this world of hers in the last ninety minutes of daylight.

The sky is for the most part blue, though a filigree of white clouds decorates it randomly, like a long ribbon of lace unraveling. When the sun

westers a little farther, those scrolls and arabesques will be transformed to gold in the oblique light.

Decades earlier, the water was murky. The introduction of zebra mussels, which feed on algae, improved the clarity. The rocky floor and some shipwrecks are visible to a depth of eighty feet or more.

Here at the tail of the archipelago, facing south-southwest, she can see only two other islands. When she purchased this property—which is more than half a mile long and somewhat less than half a mile wide—its remoteness suited both her mood and bank account.

In 1946, when the first resident moved here, a young World War II veteran, the island had no name, and he didn't give it one. The second owner, Tanner Walsh—a poet, novelist, and mystic—called it Jacob's Ladder, a reference to the Old Testament prophet who claimed to have seen a treadway to Heaven.

In the first week of her occupation, gripped by bitterness and anger, Katie thought of her new home as Bottom Rung Island. Back then, the climb to Heaven seemed impossibly long and arduous, the attainment of grace forever beyond reach.

The smaller of the two nearest islands, Oak Haven, lies half a mile to the east, nearer the mainland. It's a third the size of her sanctuary, with a large, shingled Cape Cod house that has a charming, white veranda.

She doesn't know the names of those who live there, and she has no desire to know.

The other interruption in the wideness of water looms two miles south-southwest of Katie's position. It is four times the length of her property and perhaps twice as wide.

Watercraft and helicopters—some big twin-engine models—traffic between the mainland and that last, most isolate island, some days more frequently than others. The stone quay is long and formidable, with a deepwater port; on a few of Katie's outings, she's seen the dock bustling with workers off-loading vessels.

A facility of some kind lies at the heart of the place, but those structures can't be seen. A dense pine forest encircles the island, needled palisades that screen out prying eyes.

The island is Ringrock, named for the immense pillar, a natural formation, on which it stands. Even the Hockenberry deliverymen know nothing more about Ringrock, and never go there.

If the helicopters bore the insignia of one service or another, that would be proof that Ringrock is a military installation. Except for the registration numbers on the aft section of the fuselage and shorter numbers

on the engine cowling, however, none of the aircraft is ever identified. Likewise, the boats that visit there.

The week during which Katie first toured Jacob's Ladder and made an offer for it, distant Ringrock had been in a period of relative quiet. She hadn't been concerned about it.

The Realtor, Gunner Lindblom, implied that Ringrock was a research station operated by the Environmental Protection Agency.

That seemed benign.

It also proved to be a mere rumor.

Perhaps some residents on the hundreds of islands northeast of hers or those in the shore communities know what facility occupies that last island in the chain. However, Katie never associates with the other islanders, rarely with mainlanders, and when she does interact with the latter, she never gossips.

If she asks questions of others, they will surely ask questions of her. By sharing her past, she cuts herself with sharp memories; having stopped bleeding at last, she is determined not to reopen the wounds.

Her hope is that the mysterious island is nothing but a retreat for corporate honchos or serves some other purpose for a private enterprise. People who are driven by the profit motive do not scare her. With rare exception, their ultimate intention is to get rich by serving customers, not by crushing them.

If the installation is under the auspices of the EPA, the CDC, the NSA, the CIA, or some federal black-op outfit with no name, that is more problematic.

Katie is suspicious of authority. She distrusts those who prefer power to money or who seek money not by working but by exercising their power.

She isn't a survivalist, but she intends to survive. She's not a prepper, though she makes preparations.

She does not believe that she's living in the End Times, even if on occasion she wonders.

Isolation is a wall against fear and despair. Only nature, quiet, and time for reflection can heal her. If she can be healed.

After twenty-six months on Jacob's Ladder, her fear has largely faded, and her despair has gradually eased into a settled sorrow. She is not happy, nor is she unhappy; she takes pleasure in her endurance.

Now, as she turns away from the water, intending to go to the house to have a glass of wine while making dinner, an eruption of activity at Ringrock startles her. She pivots toward the noise and squints into the slant

of late-afternoon sunlight.

As though they are elements of an elaborate Swiss clock as it strikes the hour, two helicopters abruptly rise out of the center of the island—the first a pilot-and-passenger model, the other perhaps with four seats—just as a flotilla of fiberglass racing boats departs the quay. The latter are sleek, low in the water; she thinks there are six. The shriek of turbine engines, the hard clatter of air-chopping rotors, and the growl of outboard motors slap across the water like skipping stones.

One chopper heads south, the other north. They appear to be searching for something on Ringrock, traversing the ground from right to left, then left to right. Sunlight slides like molten gold across the advanced-glass cockpit of the aircraft heading in this direction. Two racing boats follow the shoreline to the northeast while two speed southwest, and the remaining pair sweep back and forth along the quay—a perimeter patrol.

Ringrock is not a prison. The presence of a penitentiary would be known to Gunner Lindblom and other locals, both as an important employer and as an object of concern.

Most likely, she's witnessing not an escape, but a penetration. If the facility is a high-security operation, those guarding it will react like this when an electronic fence is breached.

Whatever is happening, it is none of Katie's concern. She is in retreat from the company of strangers and is acutely aware of the danger of calling attention to herself by being concerned about the activities of others.

She has no family in the outside world. They are all dead.

Life insurance proceeds and the sale of two houses were a significant contributing factor to her ability to buy this remote and little-valued island. Enough funds remain to support her longer than she expects to live.

As the searchers at Ringrock rattle the day with their frenzied actions, Katie leaves the dock.

The rock dove has abandoned the post at the foot of the stairs.

As Katie ascends, she sees a raven on the chimney cap. The bird faces east, as if it is a sentinel charged with welcoming the night that, just beyond the horizon, crawls up the turning world.

A LITTLE FORTRESS

Joe Smith, the war veteran and first owner who oversaw the building of the house in 1946, was a superb carpenter; he lovingly crafted the interior himself. The ceiling beams, the shiplap between them, the paneling—a golden, encompassing warmth of knotty pine finished to a gloss—comprise a masterwork of design and joinery that storms and time haven't warped or worn in any way.

He also built most of the furniture, some of pine and some of oak, which remains as well. The second owner, Tanner Walsh, merely reupholstered to his taste; Katie has done the same.

The stone fireplaces—one in the kitchen, one in the living room—are capable of heating the entire house. Walsh preferred to avoid the mess of burning wood and installed electric space heaters in all four chambers; Katie has updated them.

She has replaced the faux Persian area carpets with Navajo rugs by a weaver with a special talent for producing traditional designs in softer and quite beautiful variations.

The front—and only—door is of ironbound oak. Three inches thick.

The casement windows are smaller than she prefers, and they open inward. Screens keep out flies and mosquitoes, but each window also features one vertical and one horizontal bar of steel solidly seated in concrete casings.

In the 1940s, the nation enjoyed a low crime rate. Even these days, while foolish water-traveling thieves might rarely target houses on the hundreds of closely grouped islands at the head of the archipelago, felonies in this remote region are all but unknown.

Tanner Walsh had researched the life of Joe Smith and recorded his own thoughts about the house and the island during the year before his death. Being a mystic as well as a writer, Walsh was of the opinion that Joe intended the two bars to be cruciform, and this conviction led him to see symbolism in nearly every aspect of the building.

Katie believes the reason for the bars is less otherworldly. For one thing, the two crossed lengths of steel require the minimum expense and labor to ensure that no one can gain entry through a window.

For another thing, in 1945, Joe Smith was in the contingent that liberated the prisoners in Dachau. What this farm boy from upstate New York saw there haunted him for the rest of his life and drove him to live apart from most of his fellow human beings. Thirty boxcars filled with decomposing corpses. A “skinning room” where freshly murdered prisoners were carefully peeled to provide “quality lampshades.” A decompression chamber in which experiments regarding the effects of high altitude caused subjects to go insane and made their lungs explode. All had been done in the name of the people, in what the authorities insisted was a pursuit of a more just society. There can never be too much justice in Utopia.

She has thought of this place as the house at the end of the world, her world.

A WORK OF ART

Initially, the thick stone walls prevent the continuing ruckus at Ringrock from disturbing the tranquility of the house.

After pouring a glass of good cabernet sauvignon, Katie does not at once begin preparations for dinner. Instead, she takes her wine into the armory.

She mocks herself by using the word *armory*. Unloaded and propped in one corner are a pistol-grip pump-action 12-gauge shotgun and an AR-15 that is often called an assault rifle by people who don't know anything about guns. She also keeps a substantial supply of ammunition for each weapon.

Most of the room, however, is furnished with a large drawing table and adjustable stool, an artist's easel, cabinets containing art supplies, and an armchair into which she sometimes sinks to contemplate a work in progress.

In addition to the three mortal fears—of terrible pain and disability and death—everyone needs at least one additional reason to live, a task that inspires. Since her adolescence, Katie's art has been one of her reasons for being. In her life on the island, art has become her *only* inspiration.

During her twenties, she enjoyed a flourishing career. She achieved major gallery representation at twenty-two. Her paintings sold at steadily increasing prices.

Currently, she creates solely for herself, because not to create is to die inside. She has no intention of returning to the art market. She destroys more finished works than she keeps. None hang on the walls of this house.

She paints in rebellion against abstract impressionism and all the soulless schools of modernism and postmodernism. Her signature style is hyperrealism, an attempt to capture everything a photograph might and then much more: what the mind knows about a scene that the scene itself does not reveal; what the heart feels about the subject before it; how the past lives in the present and how the future looms real but unrevealed; what any moment on the Earth might mean, if it means anything at all.

Now, wineglass in hand, she stands before the canvas that is mounted

on the easel, a work in progress. It's four feet wide, three high. The mundane subject is a trio of storefronts in a seven-store strip mall—a nail shop, an ice cream shop, and a neighborhood pizza parlor.

To any eye but Katie's, the painting is finished, a work of photorealism with the depth of trompe l'oeil. For her, the scene remains incomplete; tomorrow the hard work on it will begin.

Most artists would deem this room an inadequate studio. They would insist on larger windows, good northern light.

Katie wants nothing more than what she has. In this diminished life, she is content to paint by artificial light. Sometimes lately, she does her best work surrounded by shadows, with no light but what she focuses on the canvas.

Wine almost slops out of the glass when she is startled by a distant explosion that, though muffled, rattles the windowpanes and creaks the ceiling beams.

DEPTH CHARGES

Common curiosity, perhaps underlaid by lingering paranoia from her mainland life, ensures that Katie has an interest in any unusual maritime traffic. She keeps a pair of powerful binoculars on a small table in the living room. Now she snatches them up before stepping outside. As she opens the door, a second muffled explosion throbs through the afternoon.

She hurries across the yard, pauses at the brink of the bluff above the shore, and brings the binoculars to her eyes. The racing boats with outboard motors have retreated from the scene.

Katie doesn't know—doesn't remember—as much about US Marine helicopters as she should. The aircraft patrolling the water a few hundred yards off Ringrock is larger than the pair that quartered the island a short time ago. It appears to be akin to a Sea Horse or Sea Stallion. Like the first two, it bears no insignia, which would be required of any military ordnance. Not many private companies have a use for rotary aircraft with this power and load capacity.

Unlike the smaller helos, this one is engaged in violent action that makes no sense in this place and time. While the craft hovers, crew members dispense a barrel half the size of an oil drum from the loading ramp at the rear. As the object plummets a hundred feet to the water and sinks below the surface, the big chopper moves on. The detonation is a muffled whump, though of sufficient power to suggest it occurred within a fathom or two. The lake surface swells as though a leviathan is breaching. White water boils. A momentary geyser spouts high before collapsing. Another depth charge drops.

Stunned, Katie lowers the binoculars just as gentle waves from the initial explosion wash against the pilings of her dock and lap the shingle shore.

She can imagine no explanation for the event she's witnessing. What are they attacking? No submarine could make its way into this system of freshwater lakes. Besides, no war has been declared; this isn't ever likely to be a naval battleground. Nor is it a suitable place for such training exercises.

The fourth detonation appears to satisfy whatever mandate inspired

this foolishness. The Sea Horse—or whatever it is—arcs back toward Ringrock, ejecting nothing more.

From around the northeast end of the island, the larger of the previous two helos reappears, a type of Bell executive chopper common in the business community. She pulls it close with the binoculars to confirm the pilot, copilot, and two passengers in the rear seats. They are figures at this distance, silhouettes, and she isn't able to discern if they're wearing uniforms.

Following the course of the craft that dropped the explosives, the pilot commences quartering that stretch of water in much the way he earlier searched a portion of Ringrock island.

An instrument of some kind, not visible until now, has extruded from the belly of the fuselage. Katie can assume only that it is an array of sensors of various kinds, seeking evidence that the four depth charges have achieved their purpose.

Because there can be no submarine—neither Russian nor Chinese, nor a vessel commanded by Captain Nemo that has manifested here out of the imagination of Jules Verne—perhaps they are looking for the body or bodies of one or more scuba divers.

Who were guilty of what? Penetrating the island's security? Escaping with top-secret material or evidence of grave crimes?

That might be a sequence in a James Bond film. She isn't able to convince herself that this sleepy archipelago is a likely venue for such glamorous melodrama.

Furthermore, if such divers existed, meeting their incursion with mortal force, especially employing massive quantities of high explosives against them, was not a proportional response, was in fact absurdly violent. The law required arrest, indictment, a trial in a court of law. Whether the facility on Ringrock is an operation of government or private enterprise, in neither case are those in command of it inclined to risk their freedom by exposing themselves to charges of excessive force resulting in manslaughter or murder.

The outrage of environmentalists, who might have witnessed the explosions from watercraft or the mainland, is enough to dissuade Ringrock authorities from doing what they appear to have done.

In spite of what Katie has seen, it must not be what it seems to have been. She lacks crucial information that would allow her to imagine a logical and reasonable explanation.

The sole remaining helicopter moves right to left, left to right, across water that is three hundred feet deep in that area.

As the late-afternoon sky slowly dims, the enormous lake has less blue to reflect. Below Katie, gray tongues of water lick the shore stones that centuries of wet caresses have worn as smooth as the granite of grave markers.

Gone to gold, the filigree of clouds graces the sky like ornamentation spun with jeweler's wire.

For whatever reason, atmospheric or otherwise, the clap of the helo's rotary wing comes and goes, so that sometimes, in an eerie silence, the craft seems to remain aloft without a functioning engine, floating as if it were only a figment of her imagination.

The strangeness of the moment encourages a feeling of being exposed and vulnerable, even watched.

Those who work—or live and work—on Ringrock no doubt also have binoculars. However, considering how bold and noisy they've been, they shouldn't be concerned that she is curious about them.

Nevertheless, she returns to the house and locks the door and finds her unfinished glass of wine.

She doesn't need to know what they were doing. They are of that world she shuns and to which she will never return. She has a world of her own. Only here can she live to fulfill the Promise she made.