

#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

DEAN
KOONTZ

THE
OTHER
EMILY



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 **THOMAS & MERCER**

*To Gerda, the love of my lives—this one
and the next.*

Though they go mad they shall be sane,

Though they sink through the sea they shall rise again;

Though lovers be lost love shall not;

And death shall have no dominion.

—Dylan Thomas

PART



ALONE AMONG THE MILLIONS

| 1 |

She is lost, and he must find her, but she leaves no trail, no footprints or spoor of any kind, and the way is dark, for she has gone into the forest of the night, where the trees are black and leafless, where the moon and stars do not exist, where the sun will never rise, where the path is ever downward, yet he descends in a desperate search, for she does not belong here among the dead, not when she is so alive in his mind and heart, does not belong here, does not belong here, and although finding her is his only hope of joy, his only reason to exist, there are moments when he senses her within arm's reach in the blinding darkness—and terror wakes him.

| 2 |

Crystal confetti showered on the city, a final celebration of a winter that, on this twenty-fourth day of March, lingered past its official expiration date.

Scarfed and booted, with his topcoat collar turned up, David Thorne walked the streets of Manhattan, ostensibly in search of inspiration. But his imagination was not stimulated.

The end-of-season storm lacked force. Snow spiraled through windless canyons, as gray as ashes until it fell below the hooded streetlamps and was bleached by the light.

If inspiration was not in fact his goal, if instead he was in need of company, he found none of that, either. The traffic in the streets might as well have been self-driven and without passengers, machines on errands of their own intention. Footprints patterned

the inch of snow on the sidewalks. The bitter chill did not dissuade other pedestrians from being out and about, but to David they were as immaterial as ghosts.

By the time he returned to his apartment, he knew that he would soon be leaving for California.

That night he toured a cellar that he had never seen other than in dreams, a maze of half-lit chambers containing abominations from which he woke in a state of terror, his flesh and bones colder than the night beyond his windows.

In the morning, he called his literary agent, Charlie Placket, to say that he would be going to California for a month or two, until an idea for the next novel fully jelled.

"I have it on my calendar for April fifteenth," Charlie said.

"Have what on your calendar?"

"You and California. It's never been this early before."

"I'm not that predictable, Charlie."

"David, David, you're thirty-seven, I've been representing you for eight years, and every ten months, you're off to Newport Beach for a two-month retreat. Never anywhere else. It's a damn good thing your novels aren't as predictable as your travel schedule."

"The place inspires me, that's all. The sun, the sea. I always come back with an idea for a novel that I absolutely *need* to write."

"So why ever leave there if it inspires you that much?"

Some things were not for sharing, even with a good friend like Charlie Placket. "I heard it said if I could make it here, I could make it anywhere."

"I ask you the same question every time," Charlie said, "and you always have a different bullshit answer."

"I'm a writer. Bullshit is my business."

Newport Beach luxuriated in spring warmth when David Thorne arrived late on the afternoon of March twenty-sixth. In an otherwise clear sky, a long filigree of white clouds ornamented the west, soon to be gilded by the declining sun.

A taxi brought him from John Wayne Airport to his home in that neighborhood of Newport known as Corona del Mar. His cottage-style single-story residence stood three blocks from the beach and lacked an ocean view, but the lot was of great value. He would not have sold the place for ten times what it was worth.

He had purchased the property with earnings from his first bestseller, when he'd been a twenty-five-year-old wunderkind. He still liked its cottage charm: pale-yellow stucco, windows flanked by white shutters with scalloped slats, a porch with a canary-yellow swing. The house was shaded by palm trees and skirted with hibiscus soon to be laden with huge yellow flowers.

A property-management firm maintained the place in immaculate condition and also looked after his SUV, a white Porsche Cayenne. They would have rented the house when David was in New York; but he didn't allow it to be occupied by others. In spite of its humble style and dimensions, it was something of a shrine.

The urge to return had overcome him in January. But that would have been only seven months since his previous visit, which felt wrong. Self-restraint was required. Always, after he flew back to New York, on landing at the airport, he was seized by a desire to return at once to Newport. He had not yet visited twice in the same year, but he kept the cottage vacant in case one day he could not resist the pull this property exerted on him.

Sometimes he thought he should never have left. Maybe he would be happiest if he lived here full-time.

But intuition argued that to make this his only home would put at risk not just what qualified contentment he had found in the past ten years but also his sanity.

He understood that, in his case, creative talent was twined with a tendency to obsession. He needed to stay in touch with this place, this important period of his past; but if he didn't resist its attraction, he would be consumed by it.

The time he spent here began in denial and hope, but week by week the denial gave way to guilt, and the hope melted into sorrow.

After he had unpacked, he stood for a while staring at the queen-size bed. Then he removed the spread and folded it and put it aside on a bench. His hands trembled when he turned back the sheets.

Later, at a restaurant on the harbor, where the decor was black and silver with blue accents, full-on Art Deco, he had a drink at the bar and then dinner at a window table.

Sailing yachts and motor cruisers plied the waters, returning from an afternoon at sea.

He would dine here most nights. He always did. The food was excellent. If he drank too much, there was strong coffee or a taxi.

He didn't recognize any of the staff from earlier visits. If any remembered him, they didn't say so. That was as he wanted. He preferred anonymity and had no desire to engage in conversation.

At the bar and again as he repaired to a table, an expectation overcame him—of what, whether of good or bad, he couldn't say. Alert, he sat alone at a window table for two, surveying the other patrons, but they were as ordinary as they were well-to-do.

The fleecy clouds alchemized to gold against an azure sky and then curdled blood-red against a sapphire backdrop. But it wasn't the sunset that filled him with anticipation.

Gradually his presentiment faded as the stars came out. On the dark water of the harbor, reflections of shoreside lights cockled like colorful skeins of rippled-ribbon sugar candy.

He and Emily had come here back in the day, when the decor had been somewhat less glamorous. But she didn't haunt this place, only his heart.

During the ten-minute drive home, he felt that the night was as incomplete as the half-moon.

He dreamed of the many-chambered cellar, that labyrinth of wickedness and cruelty. Although it was a real-world place, he had avoided watching news film of it; but his imagination took him there again in his restless sleep. So vivid were these nightmare images that when he woke at three fifteen, he went into the bathroom and threw up.

| 4 |

The following evening, Thursday, the horseshoe-shaped bar was busy early. Well-dressed singles in their twenties and thirties were getting a buzz and on the prowl—but not too obviously—for someone with whom to hook up. Eagerness could be easily misinterpreted as desperation. This was a moneyed crowd that associated desperation with economic rather than emotional need; the men and women alike shied from

anyone whose net worth might be tied up in the clothes and jewelry they wore and who might be fishing for a catch.

The bar was too crowded for David. He tipped the hostess for the window table at which he'd dined the previous night. She seated him and saw to it that his waiter brought a glass of Caymus cabernet by the time that he unfolded the napkin and placed it on his lap.

The anticipation that had drawn his nerves taut the previous evening rose in him once more. He expected nothing would come of it. Nothing ever did.

Nearby on the harbor, two twentyish women in bikinis, standing on paddleboards, oared their way past the docks, making progress so effortlessly that they were conducting an animated conversation at the same time and laughing with delight.

They were beautiful and lithe, with tanned and silken limbs, but though they gave rise to a certain need in David, they didn't fill him with true desire.

The swollen sun was still five minutes from immersion in the sea when he glanced toward the noisy bar and saw her. He froze with the wineglass halfway to his mouth and for a moment forgot that it remained in his hand.

She was in that highest rank of beauties that inspired stupid men to commit foolish acts and made wiser men despair for their inadequacies.

He thought he must be wrong about her. Then she looked his way and for a moment met his eyes at a distance, and he put down his glass for fear of spilling the cabernet.

Her gaze didn't linger on David or on anyone. She turned her elegant head to the bartender as he placed a martini before her.

Balanced on the horizon, the fat sun poured apocalyptic light through the huge tinted windows.

The restaurant and bar occupied one enormous space designed to allow patrons to see and be seen by the largest possible audience. Yet as the room filled with the fantastic light of the dying day, David felt as if everyone but he and this woman had been vaporized.

The sun sank, the night rose like a tide, and the restaurant dimmed to a romantic glow.

Although he considered approaching the woman at the bar, he didn't dare. She surely couldn't be true.

He ordered a second glass of cabernet and the filet mignon, and he watched her surreptitiously for the next hour. She did not glance at him again.

The other unescorted women at the horseshoe bar recognized impossible competition and despised this black-haired blue-eyed beauty.

A few men found the courage to approach her, but she gently turned them away with a minute of conversation and a lovely smile. To a one, they seemed to feel that a courteous rejection from her was a kind of triumph.

Gradually couples paired up and moved to dinner or departed together, and those who were unlucky either amped up their alcohol consumption or moved on to some other watering hole.

She ordered a second martini and then took her dinner at the bar with a glass of red wine. She ate with an appetite and a concentration on her plate that was familiar to David.

The expectation that had possessed him two nights in a row and that had been fulfilled with this woman's arrival surely counted as something more than mere hope or intuition. There seemed to be some strange destiny unspooling.

He paid his check but carried his unfinished glass of wine to the bar, where he settled on the stool beside hers.

She didn't so much as glance at him, but concentrated on the last of her steak.

David didn't know what to say to her. His throat felt swollen, and he had difficulty swallowing. He was light with hope and heavy with a dread of disappointment.

When she finished and put her fork down and took a sip of her wine, he finally said, "Where have you been all these years?"

She licked her lips, her tongue taking extra care with the right corner of her mouth, as he had known it would.

When she turned her eyes to him, they were striated in two shades of blue, as radiant as jewels.

She said, "I would expect a much better pickup line from a writer."

His heart had felt tight, laboring as though constrained by scar tissue from an old wound. Now it slipped free of those knots and raced like the whole and healthy heart of a boy.

"I was afraid . . . afraid you'd say you didn't know me."

"A lot of this crowd probably doesn't read," she said, "but I do. I've always thought you look so different from the kind of thing you write."

The buoyancy that swelled in him now diminished. "That's how you know me—from book-jacket photographs?"

She tilted her head to regard him quizzically, with a half smile. "Well, I didn't see you on TV. I never watch TV."

Her stare was achingly familiar, not just the color of it but the directness.

"You're not playing some game?" he asked.

"Game? No. Are you?"

He bought a moment of silence by taking a sip of wine. "I don't believe in staggering coincidences."

"What coincidence has just staggered you?"

"Emily."

"Excuse me?"

"Your name is Emily."

"My name is Maddison."

"Then you must have a sister named Emily."

"I'm an only child."

"I never knew of a sister," he said.

"Because there isn't one."

"This is extraordinary."

"What is?"

She was too young. He saw that now. A decade too young, but otherwise a dead ringer.

"You're too young," he said, though he didn't mean to express that thought aloud.

She sipped her wine and propped an elbow on the bar and cupped her chin in her hand, exactly as Emily had done, and studied him for a long moment. "This has become a much better pickup pitch. It was so lame at the start. 'Where have you been all my life?'"

"It was 'Where have you been all these years?'"

"Whatever. But you've polished it up considerably in subsequent drafts, adding a nice note of mystery."

He felt disoriented. As if he'd been folded into some universe parallel to the one in which he'd been born. "Ten years. She was twenty-five when I last saw her."

“I’m twenty-five.”

“But you’re not Emily.”

“I’m glad we finally agree on that.”

He didn’t remember finishing his wine, but his glass was empty. “No two people, unrelated, could look so alike. You must have an older sister you don’t know about.” He took his smartphone from a jacket pocket. “May I take your picture?”

“That’s all you want of me—a picture?”

That question left him nonplussed.

She said, “What about your younger brother?”

“I don’t have a brother, younger or otherwise.”

“Too bad. He might have taken me home by now.”

“You’re playing with me. Just like she did.”

“‘She’ being the fabled Emily, I suppose.”

“You wouldn’t go home with me if I asked. She wasn’t that easy, and neither are you.”

Maddison shrugged. “As though you know me. If all you want is a picture, go ahead and take it.”

He took three. “What’s your last name?”

“Sutton. Maddison Sutton.” As he put the phone away, she said, “Now what?”

He wasn’t smooth at this, not these days, not since Emily. He said, “There *is* an age difference.”

“Good grief, you’re just thirtysomething.”

“Thirty-seven.”

“I’ll call you Grandpa, you can call me Lolita.”

“Okay, it’s not a millennium. Will you have dinner with me?”

"I just finished dinner. So did you."

"Tomorrow night."

"I'm free," she said.

"Is this place all right?"

"It's delightfully expensive."

"I'll pick you up at five thirty."

"Let's take it slow. I'll meet you here."

"A moment ago, you were ready to go home with me."

"Not with you," she said. "With your brother."

Although unnerved by her resemblance to Emily, he nevertheless laughed.

"Fortunately for me, I'm an only child."

"So you say. Most likely, your brother's cuter."

"You even talk like her."

"Which is how?"

"Always half a step ahead of me."

"Do you like that?"

"I guess I must."

He wanted no more wine. She nursed the last of hers as if to avoid leaving with him and being mistaken for just another meat-market matchup. He said, "Well, okay then, see you tomorrow," and departed.

The night was pleasantly cool, the air soft rather than crisp, appealingly scented with the faint, musky odor of the invading sea that rose and fell and rose ceaselessly within the confines of the harbor.

After retrieving his SUV from the valet, David drove across Pacific Coast Highway and parked in the empty lot of a bank. He had a clear view of the restaurant.

Ten minutes passed before she appeared. At the sight of her, the valet hurried to fetch an ivory-white two-seat Mercedes 450 SL that was at least forty years old but impeccably maintained.

As she stood waiting for the car, bathed in the golden glow of the portico, she seemed to be not the subject of the light but the source of it, radiant.

The sight of her gave rise to that certain need in David, but this time also to desire.

Even though she didn't know what car he drove, he dared to follow her only at a distance. Traffic remained light, and he was never at risk of losing her.

He expected to be led to a house, perhaps one in a gate-guarded community. She went instead to the Island Hotel.

From a distance, he watched her leave the Mercedes with another valet, who stood at the open driver's door to watch her until she had disappeared into the lobby.

David went home, and for five hours he slept as if drugged. He dreamed of searching the Island Hotel for Emily.

The bellmen wore black and carried automatic carbines and refused to help him with his luggage, which didn't matter, because he had no luggage; he wasn't checking in; he was just looking for Emily. The man at the front desk insisted that no one was currently staying in the hotel, and this proved to be true when David went room by room, floor by floor, his sense of urgency growing, seeking someone who might have seen Emily. He thought she must have gone to the bar for a drink. But the bar had been turned into an infirmary, where wounded men were stretched out on rows of cots. Although he didn't recall having been wounded, he found himself on a cot, being attended to by a nurse in a black uniform. Employing a rubber tube as a tourniquet, she used a needle to tap one of his veins and drew blood into a collection tube. Because her uniform was black rather than white, he worried that she wasn't a real nurse, but she assured him that she was a nurse and a trained phlebotomist. "I have

much experience of blood,” she said. Only then did he realize that she was Emily, and with considerable relief, he said, “At last I’ve found you,” and she said, “You won’t remember this. Sleep and forget. You won’t remember.”

| 5 |

He woke and showered during the night.

In a vague sort of way, he remembered the dream in spite of the nurse encouraging him to forget. In the crook of his left arm was a tiny red swelling. A spider bite. Having been bitten in his slumber, he had felt the nip and fashioned part of the dream around it. The sleeping mind was an inventive if strange playwright.

Dawn had not yet broken when he imported the three smartphone snapshots of Maddison Sutton to the computer in the study and printed them on glossy photographic paper.

He put the photos on the kitchen table with the intention of studying them over breakfast. He drank coffee and ate nothing.

The early sun had slowly moved a window shape across the table to the photographs, as if light were tropic to her sublime face.

In the bedroom, he opened the bottom drawer of the highboy and took from it a nine-by-twelve white box. He returned to the kitchen and opened the box and removed an assortment of pictures of Emily Carlino.

He had put them away in the highboy after . . . she was gone. He had not looked at them in years, because the sight of her caused him such pain and longing—and fear.

Although he spent half an hour examining the evidence, he could not see the slightest difference between Maddison and Emily. They were no less alike than identical twins who had formed from one fertilized egg, sharing one amniotic sac and one placenta until they had been delivered into the world.

After he fetched a magnifying glass from the study, further examination of the photos availed him nothing. Her eyes were owlsh under the enlarging glass, and she met his stare with her own.

| 6 |

Isaac Eisenstein wasn't just a private investigator, a gumshoe with a third-floor walk-up office on a shabby side street. He owned one of the largest security companies in New York City, providing alarm systems and armored vehicles and armed bodyguards. With his staff of licensed PIs, he was able to conduct investigations of any complexity. A valued research source for David's novels, Isaac was also something of a friend. He was in his office at nine o'clock eastern time, when David placed the call.

Standing by the kitchen sink, watching through the window as a ruby-throated hummingbird took its breakfast from the flowers on a red-bark arbutus, David said, "Isaac, I need help."

"So I've told Pazia like a thousand times."

Pazia, his wife, was a psychiatrist with a thriving practice.

"I might actually want to talk to her before this is done. But right now, I'm going to send you six photographs."