

Intensity

by

Dean Koontz

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This book is for Florence Koontz.
My mother. Long lost. My guardian.

*Hope is the destination that we seek.
Love is the road that leads to hope.
Courage is the motor that drives us.
We travel out of darkness into faith.*

-THE BOOK OF COUNTED SORROWS

1

The red sun balances on the highest ramparts of the mountains, and in its waning light, the foothills appear to be ablaze. A cool breeze blows down out of the sun and fans through the tall dry grass, which streams like waves of golden fire along the slopes toward the rich and shadowed valley.

In the knee-high grass, he stands with his hands in the pockets of his denim jacket, studying the vineyards below. The vines were pruned during the winter. The new growing season has just begun. The colorful wild mustard that flourished between the rows during the colder months has been chopped back and the stubble plowed under. The earth is dark and fertile.

The vineyards encircle a barn, outbuildings, and a bungalow for the caretaker. Except for the barn, the largest structure is the owners' Victorian house with its gables, dormers, decorative millwork under the eaves, and carved pediment over the front porch steps.

Paul and Sarah Templeton live in the house year-round, and their daughter, Laura, visits occasionally from San Francisco, where she attends university. She is supposed to be in residence throughout this weekend.

He dreamily contemplates a mental image of Laura's face, as detailed as a photograph. Curiously, the girl's perfect features engender thoughts of succulent, sugar-laden bunches of pinot noir and grenache with translucent purple skin. He can actually taste the phantom grapes as he imagines them bursting between his teeth.

As it slowly sinks behind the mountains, the sun sprays light so warmly colored and so mordant that, where touched, the darkening land appears to be wet with it and dyed forever. The grass grows red as well, no longer like a fireless burning but, instead, a red tide washing around his knees.

He turns his back on the house and the vineyards. Savoring the steadily intensifying taste of grapes, he walks westward into the shadows cast by the high forested ridges.

He can smell the small animals of the open meadows cowering in their burrows. He hears the whisper of feathers carving the wind as a wild hunting hawk circles hundreds of feet overhead, and he feels the cold glimmer of stars that are not yet visible.

In the strange sea of shimmering red light, the black shadows of overhanging trees flickered shark-swift across the windshield.

On the winding two-lane blacktop, Laura Templeton handled the Mustang with an expertise that Chyna admired, but she drove too fast. "You've got a heavy foot," Chyna said.

Laura grinned. "Better than a big butt."

"You'll get us killed."

"Mom has rules about being late for dinner."

"Being late is better than being *dead* for dinner."

"You've never met my mom. She's hell on rules."

"So is the highway patrol."

Laura laughed. "Sometimes you sound just like her."

"Who?"

"My mom."

Bracing herself as Laura took a curve too fast, Chyna said, "Well, one of us has to be a responsible adult."

"Sometimes I can't believe you're only three years older than me," Laura said affectionately. "Twenty-six, huh? You sure you're not a *hundred* and twenty-six?"

"I'm ancient," Chyna said.

They had left San Francisco under a hard blue sky, taking a four-day break from classes at the University of California, where, in the spring, they would earn master's degrees in psychology. Laura hadn't been delayed in her education by the need to earn her tuition and living expenses, but Chyna had spent the past ten years attending classes part time while working full time as a waitress, first in a Denny's, then in a unit of the Olive Garden chain, and most recently in an upscale restaurant with white tablecloths and cloth napkins and fresh flowers on the tables and customers-bless them-who routinely tipped fifteen or twenty percent. This visit to the Templetons' house in the Napa Valley would be the closest thing to a vacation that she'd had in a decade.

From San Francisco, Laura had followed Interstate 80 through Berkeley and across the eastern end of San Pablo Bay. Blue heron had stalked the shallows and leaped gracefully into flight: enormous, eerily prehistoric, beautiful against the cloudless heavens.

Now, in the gold-and-crimson sunset, scattered clouds burned in the sky, and the Napa Valley unrolled like a radiant tapestry. Laura had departed the main road in favor of a scenic route; however, she drove so fast that Chyna was seldom able to take her eyes off the highway to enjoy the scenery.

"Man, I love speed," Laura said.

"I hate it."

"I like to move, streak, *fly*. Hey, maybe I was a gazelle in a previous life. You think?"

Chyna looked at the speedometer and grimaced. "Yeah, maybe a gazelle-or a madwoman locked away in Bedlam."

"Or a cheetah. Cheetahs are really fast."

"Yeah, a cheetah, and one day you were chasing your prey and ran straight off the edge of a cliff at full tilt. You were the Wile E. Coyote of cheetahs."

"I'm a good driver, Chyna."

"I know."

"Then relax."

"I can't."

Laura sighed with fake exasperation. "Ever?"

"When I sleep," Chyna said, and she nearly jammed her feet through the floorboards as the Mustang took a wide curve at high speed.

Beyond the narrow graveled shoulder of the two-lane, the land sloped down through wild mustard and looping brambles to a row of tall black alders fringed with early-spring buds. Beyond the alders lay vineyards drenched with fierce red light, and Chyna was convinced that the car would slide off the blacktop, roll down the embankment, and crash into the trees, and that her blood would fertilize the nearest of the vines.

Instead, Laura effortlessly held the Mustang to the pavement. The car swept out of the curve and up a long incline.

Laura said, "I bet you even worry in your sleep."

"Well, sooner or later, in every dream there's a boogeyman. You've got to be on the lookout for him."

"I have lots of dreams without boogeymen," Laura said. "I have wonderful dreams."

"Getting shot out of a cannon?"

"That would be fun. No, but sometimes I dream that I can fly. I'm always naked and just floating or swooping along fifty feet above the ground, over telephone lines, across fields of bright flowers, over treetops. So free. People

look up and smile and wave. They're so delighted to see that I can fly, so happy for me. And sometimes I'm with this beautiful guy, lean and muscular, with a mane of golden hair and lovely green eyes that look all the way *through* me to my soul, and we're making love in midair, drifting up there, and I'm having spectacular orgasms, one after another, floating through sunshine with flowers below and birds swooping overhead, birds with these gorgeous iridescent-blue wings and singing the most fantastic birdsongs you ever heard, and I feel as if I'm full of dazzling light, just a creature of light, and like I'm going to explode, such an energy, explode and form a whole new universe and *be* the universe and live forever. You ever have a dream like that?"

Chyna had finally taken her eyes off the onrushing blacktop. She stared in blank-faced astonishment at Laura. Finally she said, "No."

Glancing away from the two-lane, Laura said, "Really? You never had a dream like that?"

"Never."

"I have lots of dreams like that."

"Could you keep your eyes on the road, kiddo?"

Laura looked at the highway and said, "Don't you ever dream about sex?"

"Sometimes."

"And?"

"What?"

"*And?*"

Chyna shrugged. "It's bad."

Frowning, Laura said, "You dream about having bad sex? Listen, Chyna, you don't have to *dream* about that-there are lots of guys who can provide all the bad sex you want."

"Ho, ho. I mean these are nightmares, very threatening."

"Sex is threatening?"

"Because I'm always a little girl in the dreams-six or seven or eight-and I'm always hiding from this man, not quite sure what he wants, why he's looking for me, but I know he wants something from me that he shouldn't have, something terrible, and it's going to be like dying."

"Who's the man?"

"Different men."

"Some of the creeps your mother used to hang out with?"

Chyna had told Laura a great deal about her mother. She had never told

anyone else. "Yeah. Them. I always got away from them in real life. They never touched me. And they never touch me in the dreams. But there's always a threat, always a possibility

"So these aren't just dreams. They're memories too."

"I wish they *were* just dreams."

"What about when you're awake?" Laura asked.

"What do you mean?"

"Do you just turn all warm and fuzzy and let yourself go when a man makes love to you or is the past always there?"

"What is this-analysis at eighty miles an hour?"

"Dodging the question?"

"You're a snoop."

"It's called friendship."

"It's called snooperly."

"Dodging the question?"

Chyna sighed. "All right. I like being with a man. I'm not inhibited. I'll admit that I've never felt as though I'm a creature of light going to explode into a new universe, but I've been fully satisfied, always had fun."

"Fully?"

"Fully."

Chyna had never actually been with a man until she was twenty-one; and her intimate relationships now totaled exactly two. Both had been gentle, kind, and decent men, and in each case Chyna had greatly enjoyed the lovemaking. One affair had lasted eleven months, the other thirteen, and neither lover had left her a single troubling memory. Nevertheless, neither man had helped her banish the vicious dreams, which continued to plague her periodically, and she'd been unable to achieve an emotional bond equal to the physical intimacy. To a man whom she loved, Chyna could give her body, but even for love, she could not entirely give her mind and heart. She was afraid to commit herself, to trust without reservation. No one in her life, with the possible exception of Laura Templeton-stunt driver and dream flier-had ever earned total trust.

Wind shrieked along the sides of the car. In the flickering shadows and fiery light, the long incline ahead of them seemed to be a ramp, as if they were going to be launched into space when they reached the top, vaulting across a dozen burning buses while a stadium full of thrill-seekers cheered.

"What if a tire blows?" Chyna asked.

"The tires won't blow," Laura said confidently.

"What if one does?"

Wrenching her face into an exaggerated, demonic grin, Laura said, "Then we're just girl jelly in a can. They won't even be able to separate the remains into two distinct bodies. A total amorphous mess. They won't even need coffins for us. They'll just pour our remains in a jug and put us in one grave, and the headstone will read: *Laura Chyna Templeton Shepherd. Only a Cuisinart Would Have Been More Thorough.*"

Chyna had hair so dark that it was virtually black, and Laura was a blue-eyed blonde, yet they were enough alike to be sisters. Both were five feet four and slender; they wore the same dress size. Each had high cheekbones and delicate features. Chyna had always felt that her mouth was too wide, but Laura, whose mouth was as wide as Chyna's, said it wasn't wide at all but merely "generous" enough to ensure an especially winning smile.

As Laura's love of speed proved, however, they were in some ways profoundly different people. The differences, perhaps more than the similarities, were what drew them to each other.

"You think your mom and dad will like me?" Chyna asked.

"I thought you were worried about a blown tire."

"I'm a multichannel worrier. Will they like me?"

"Of course they'll like you. You know what *I* worry about?" Laura asked as they raced toward the top of the incline.

"Apparently, not death."

"You. I worry about you," Laura said. She glanced at Chyna, and her expression was uncharacteristically serious.

"I can take care of myself," Chyna assured her.

"I don't doubt *that*. I know you too well to doubt *that*. But life isn't just about taking care of yourself, keeping your head down, getting through."

"Laura Templeton, girl philosopher."

"Life is about *living*."

"Deep," Chyna said sarcastically.

"Deeper than you think."

The Mustang crested the long hill, and there were no burning buses or cheering multitudes, but ahead of them was an older-model Buick, cruising well below the posted limit. Laura cut their speed by more than half, and they pulled behind the other car. Even in the fading light, Chyna could see that the round-shouldered driver was a white-haired, elderly man.