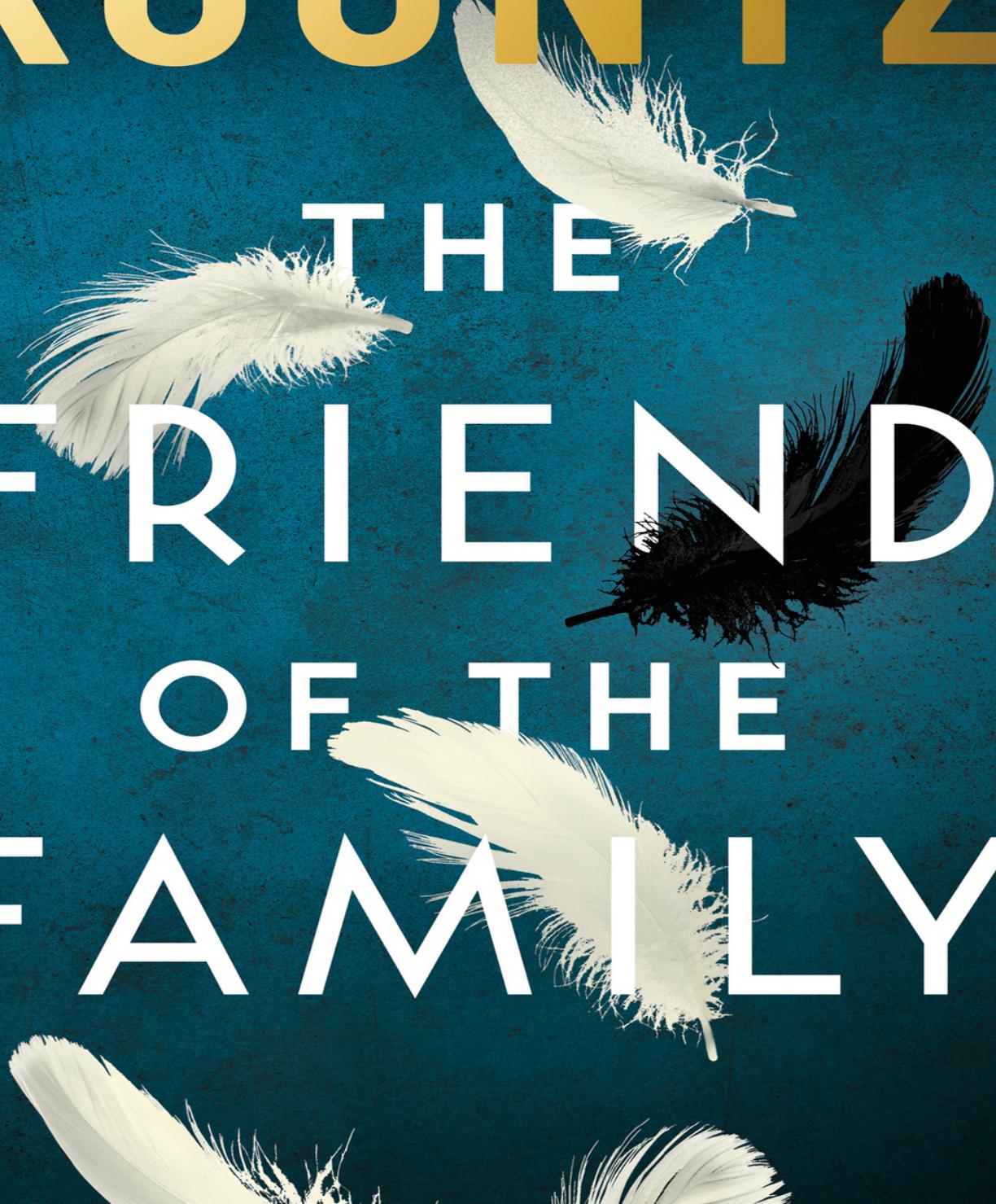


#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

DEAN KOONTZ

THE FRIEND OF THE FAMILY



THE
FRIEND
OF THE
FAMILY

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THE
FRIEND
OF THE
FAMILY

DEAN
KOONTZ

 THOMAS & MERCER

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First edition



*Every life is meaningful. Every life has
the potential to lift others by example.*

*This book is dedicated to
Canine Companions for Independence,
to all the employees and volunteers,
to the puppy raisers, to those who
bravely face their challenges with
the help of assistance dogs, and to
the beautiful, unforgettable dogs.*

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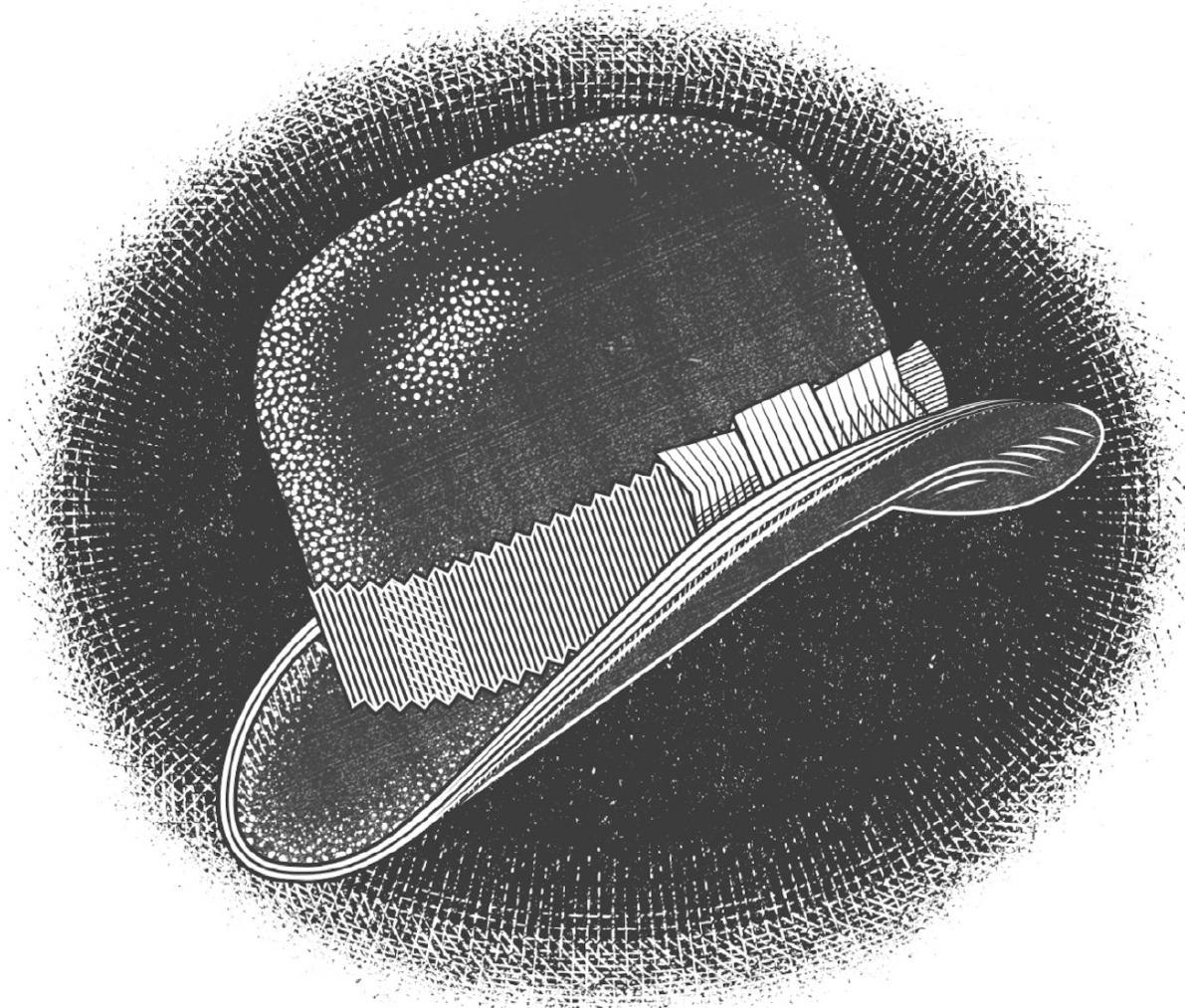
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From childhood's hour I have not been
As others were—I have not seen
As others saw.

—*Edgar Allan Poe, “Alone”*



Part One

1930

“Dear child, be not afraid.” So it begins with a voice that is melodious and comforting—a dream in shades of blue and eerie light. Visitors of fantastic forms and faces descend a staircase invisible, with the moon above and stars diamonding the darkness all around. In the waking world, some of these people would be thought beautiful, others horrific, though to me, the sleeper, they are equal to one another and no more or less than enchanting.

They descend into my room and gather around my bed. Although I have not once awakened, I have been aware of them arriving. No fear troubles me when, one at a time, they enter my mind as if passing through a door. Each succinctly tells me of his or her life with powerful images and emotions that require no words to convey deep understanding. Although they come to me in a dream, they are not figments of my imagination. They are people as real as I am. They are not just the Ghosts of Christmas Past but of all the ages of mankind, outcasts like me, having come out of time immemorial to comfort me, to say in essence, “Yes, I know.”

—from a letter by Alida, April 17, 1927

ONE

For much of my life, I had no last name. During those years, I never felt at home or loved. I was called Alida, a name under which I lived in miserable circumstances with unusual companions.

Everyone called Forest Farnam “Captain,” which was how he billed himself. He had never been a captain of anything, and his real name was not Forest Farnam. Although he claimed to be six feet tall, he would have been five nine if he’d taken the two-inch lifts out of his boots. A person of ample dimensions, Captain wore three-piece tweed suits even on the hottest days, but he perspired no more than a penguin dwelling in the Antarctic. He remained perpetually pale regardless of how much time he spent outdoors, as if he were immune to natural light just as he was inoculated against respect for natural law.

McKinsey Shows, the country’s largest traveling carnival, which owned all its rides and select other attractions, also leased midway space to entrepreneurs. The shooting gallery, the high-striker, the mouse-in-the hole scam, the various winner-every-time games, and the grab joints that offered eat-while-you-walk fare were all owned by individuals who made an excellent middle-class living. The Captain operated a popular ten-in-one, an attraction that put on display ten “human wonders,” which he called “freaks” in private. Each of the ten had his or her stall along a sawdust-carpeted viewing corridor that wound from one end of the tent to the other. Outside, luridly illustrated banners provided a backdrop to the pitchman—often Captain—who ballyhooed the passing crowd, swearing on his mother’s grave that the experience of a lifetime awaited them inside.

In Captain Farnam’s Museum of the Strange, as it was called, most of the “biological oddities” were less wondrous than the rubes had been promised. The man with the “iron throat” was actually just a sword swallower, a former vaudeville performer from Pittsburgh. At four hundred pounds, the bearded lady was said to be the fattest of her kind in all the world, which maybe she was or maybe she wasn’t, but at least the beard was real. Rubberman was double-jointed and capable of seemingly impossible postures, though he could not shake hands with himself behind his back as boldly depicted on the banner outside. The littlest person on

display was Miss Cora Wallingham, an achondroplastic dwarf with shortened extremities and a large head. Cora was a buoyant, witty woman. While many of her fellow performers refused to converse with the marks, Cora enjoyed answering questions from them, charming even the most boorish individuals.

Conrad Heinz, a kindly man cursed with a mean face and a third eye in his forehead, gave the customers more of what they expected. Although the orb was milky white and blind, it rolled in its shallow socket, seeming to focus on this or that face among the crowd. When he growled, most women and more than a few men recoiled in fear.

In spite of all that Conrad had to offer the morbidly curious, I was the main attraction in the Museum of the Strange. Onstage, I wore only the bottom of a two-piece bathing suit. No one was likely to entertain erotic fantasies about me. I was minimally clothed for the sole purpose of exposing my unique nature so that the paying customers would feel they had gotten their money's worth.

Most of the time, I sat on a padded stool, though twice an hour I was required to "parade," as Captain called it, moving about the small stage, which had a mirrored back wall so that the marks could fully appreciate how different I was from them.

I had learned to deafen myself to everything they said to one another and to me. I rarely glanced at them, and when I did, they looked like wide-eyed fish peering through the wall of an aquarium, nothing but silence issuing from their open, moving mouths.

Judge not lest you be judged. That is one of the principles by which I live as best I can, although I am not always faithful to my intention. When I was very young and first put on display, I watched the rubes as they watched me. I saw among them dark souls who took pleasure in the sight of me for whatever reasons, and others who clearly found me disgusting. Sometimes there were men with pity in their eyes and women unable to hold back tears, but their compassion was no more meaningful to me than the contempt and sick delight of the others. Whatever sympathy they felt for me was insufficient to inspire them to take action that might free me from enslavement. Although I wasn't old enough to attend grade school, perhaps they convinced themselves that I enjoyed a variety of options and had considered all paths forward and had chosen a life of servitude and degradation. I forgave them. Day by day, year after year, I forgave them and

wished no ill upon them. I ceased to hear the marks and ceased to see them except as a blur of faces, because it was easier to forgive them en masse than as gaping, goggling individuals.

Judge not lest you be judged. I was incapable of forgiveness when it came to Captain Farnam. I judged him. I imagined a place in Hell awaited him, that in fact it was Hell from which he had come into my life.

He claimed that my mother—of whom I had no memory—was his sister and that she supported his adoption of me when I was two years old. He possessed a thick sheaf of legal documents to support his contention. I was nine before I began to suspect his official-looking paperwork was a sheaf of forgeries. However, in 1922, child welfare wasn't a big concern of authorities, who had finally passed a law restricting child labor only six years earlier. If a crusading lawyer took my case, Captain knew how to buy his way out of any kind of trouble. If he retained custody of me following a legal skirmish, he would make my life even more miserable than it had been.

Besides, I had no money or skills with which to support myself. A penniless “biological oddity,” alone in the world, seemed certain to fall into the hands of some monster more vicious than Captain. At least my current keeper never beat me or exhibited the slightest sexually perverse interest in me.

The nine other oddities in the Museum of the Strange were contract performers, as was usually the case in freak shows. They prospered, receiving a slice of the box office. In the offseason, mid-October through mid-March, they retreated to their homes in Gibsonton, Florida, a small town that welcomed carnies and even oddities from McKinsey Shows and all other carnivals in America. Those with the strangest deformities could live relatively quiet lives in that community.

I had no contract, no slice of the box office. To all intents and purposes, I was *owned* by Forest Farnam.

The Captain shunned Gibsonton. He had purchased a property on the Southern California coast, where he intended to build his dream home upon retirement in twelve years.

By that schedule, when eventually he closed or sold the Museum of the Strange, I would be in my twenties. At night, lying awake, I sometimes wondered what might become of me on the day that Captain no longer needed me. Would I then be sold to the owner of another ten-in-one?

Having enslaved me all my life while pretending to be my guardian, he might worry that, once he relinquished control of me, I would find an advocate with the dedication to pursue him and bring him to justice. More than once, I dreamed that Captain drove me along a lonely, unpaved back road in the high desert on a bitter winter night and abandoned me to the mercy of coyote packs and deadly cold. He wasn't by nature a violent man, though he could no doubt conceive of a dozen largely passive ways to dispose of me such that my death would be less than a featherweight on his conscience.

In the interest of fattening his net worth, Captain remained busy during the offseason, and I continued to be the property that he peddled. In his black and boxy Ford Model T, and later in his Cadillac V-8 town car, we traveled the West and South to engagements in those elegant speakeasies catering to a monied and sophisticated clientele.

In public beyond the grounds of the midway and when not in the company of carnies, I dressed in lace-up boots, gloves, and a long, roomy robe with wide sleeves and a hood. I had no need to cover my face, of which I had reason to be proud. I'd been called pretty by those who were able to see only my face. My hair was thick, silky, and the color of spun gold. Mother Nature sometimes bestows a grace on those she otherwise disfigures and makes grotesque. I was given the consolation of my face and my mind. I have a very good mind.

When touring, I rode always in the back seat. We often traveled a hundred miles or more without exchanging a word. Captain thought of me less as a person than as an object. I suspected that, though he was the most callous person I had ever known, he was troubled by the fact that I was intelligent, a truth that conversation would force him to consider. He wanted to believe that I was little more than a trained dog with a repertoire of tricks, but the smartest of dogs does not read Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* or the novels of Jane Austen and Charles Dickens.

In those days, books were my salvation, a window on the fullness of life that I would never otherwise know. Indeed, books remain so precious to me that I am unable to put into words how I feel each time that I open a new one to begin the tale it offers. In the back seat of the car, I had a lot of time to read.

In spite of his hard heart, Captain acquired books for me. He never bought them. His larcenous nature and related skills enabled him to visit

libraries and bookshops along the way and walk out with a volume or two under his coat. He was never caught.

We stayed in “motels,” which was a new word in those days. Often the establishment was a collection of small cabins arranged in an L or semicircle. I was always provided with my own room or cabin. Captain brought my favorite foods from local restaurants. As he said without irony, “A good farmer would never starve those animals he intends to bring to market.”

If anyone caught sight of the Gothic figure I presented in my hooded robe, the Captain explained that I was a nun excused from the monastery to be taken to the bedside of our father, who was in his last days on this Earth. Or he said I was his sister, tragically disfigured in a fire and mortified to be seen in my diminished condition. He was a natural-born liar, and his native talent for deception was polished to a high gloss by years on the pitchman’s platform, conning the marks into paying out their dimes—and later quarters—for the experience of a lifetime.

That autumn, Captain and I left the carnival when it was still in season, with the nine biological oddities having agreed to look after the business, allowing us to undertake a longer and more ambitious road trip. And so it was that on Thursday, September 4, in my seventeenth year, we motored south from Los Angeles to San Diego, after three weeks of engagements at clandestine supper clubs in the City of Angels from which Captain had profited greatly. The Cadillac V-8 provided a roomy and almost plush back seat compared to that of the previous Ford Model T. The smooth ride was ideal for a reader who wanted nothing more than to remain happily submerged in William Makepeace Thackeray’s *Vanity Fair*.

We were booked into twenty-nine speakeasies operated by the same syndicate. Our tour had begun in San Francisco. After we had completed two performances a night for five nights at a place called Blue Mood in San Diego, we would move on to Texas, Arkansas, and Louisiana, finishing in New Orleans.

However, that wouldn’t be the end. Loath to remain idle through the month of February, Captain had arranged a shorter second tour at upscale speakeasies in Mississippi, Alabama, and Tennessee.

Those were among the states where bootlegging and gambling were controlled from Chicago by the Capone gang. Al Capone was reputed to be making sixty million dollars annually, an almost incomprehensible fortune

in those days. One year had passed since he solidified power in the St. Valentine's Day Massacre. Captain admired the gangster and hoped that, if audiences responded well to us, we'd be booked throughout Capone's territory when the forthcoming carnival season ended and winter was again upon us.

Being exhibited in Captain Farnam's Museum of the Strange with nine other biological oddities was so degrading that I wouldn't wish it on anyone, but that was nothing compared to the indignities to which I was subjected on many speakeasy stages. In movies featuring these secret supper clubs, lead characters and their friends are often lighthearted fun-loving individuals who are merely rebelling against government oppression in a spirit of adolescent naughtiness. I never took the stage in front of a crowd as innocent as that, although I'm sure there were a few such people among the rabble.

On Friday, September 5, my first night on display in Blue Mood, I endured lacerating and prolonged humiliation more painful than any beating could have been. Throughout the ordeal, Captain never came to my defense. The exuberance of the audience excited him, because he thought it guaranteed a booking with the same syndicate for the following year and at a much higher price.

Although I sometimes longed to be done with this life, I never considered suicide. Because of books, especially those written by the wonderful Mr. Dickens, I believed this was a made world with profound meaning. I kept faith that each of us has a purpose and that if we fulfill it, we will rise from even the lowest position as surely as a night mist rises from a lake in the morning sun. After my two sets on the Blue Mood stage, however, after Friday became Saturday, as I was lying abed in my room, I spent time contemplating how one might kill oneself in a painless fashion.

Six years were to pass before Mr. F. Scott Fitzgerald would write, *In a real dark night of the soul it is always three o'clock in the morning*. When I read those words in 1936, I was conveyed by a vivid memory to that motel room in San Diego.

Long before Blue Mood, I had read *The Great Gatsby*. The novel was too acerbic for my taste, but I identified with Gatsby. He might have been a shady character, even a bootlegger, but I sympathized with his yearning to be accepted in a higher social strata than the one into which he was born, to be thought respectable.

In the real dark night of the soul, where I found myself at three o'clock on that San Diego night, I thought of the ill-fated Jay Gatsby. His problem was that he tried to lift himself with the wrong hoist, by accumulating wealth and mimicking the attitudes and fashions of those who presumed to be his betters. He did not believe this was a made world with profound meaning or that he had a purpose greater than his own needs and desires if only he could find it. Had he believed as much, he would have understood that the only chance we have of being lifted ourselves is by lifting others.

Although I was a biological oddity, a freak, I had been waiting all my life for the opportunity to lift others and thereby rise with them. That dismal California night, I could not know that my purpose was soon to be placed before me and that the challenge of fulfilling it would be the work of a lifetime.