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OF **THE KEY TO MIDNIGHT** AND **THE EYES OF DARKNESS**

# DEAN KOONTZ STRANGERS



"A GREAT STORYTELLER...

YOU'LL BE READING... WELL INTO MORNING."

—New York Daily News

DEAN  
KOONTZ  
STRANGERS



BERKLEY BOOKS, NEW YORK



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**To Bob Tanner  
whose enthusiasm at a crucial stage  
was more important than he can know.**

Definition for "fugue" on p. 20 taken from *Taber's Cyclopedic Medical Dictionary*, Clayton L. Thomas, M.D., M.P.H., (Ed.), 12th Edition, p. F-44. Published in 1973 by F.A. Davis Company, Philadelphia.

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## **STRANGERS**

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Praise for Dean Koontz's  
**STRANGERS**

"[Koontz] is a great storyteller, and STRANGERS features a plot so original you'll be reading, with chills, well into morning."

—*New York Daily News*

"The plot twists ingeniously...an engaging, often chilling, book. I found the novel tough to put down, except when making sure that the doors and windows were securely locked."

—*New York Times Book Review*

"Koontz is a master at constructing vivid, eerily realistic worlds that hold readers spellbound. A memorable thriller."

—*Booklist*

"Dean Koontz is a master storyteller, building suspense page by page, episode by episode. He has absolutely amazing knowledge of his subject matter, whether it be religion, military weapons, medicine, or an understanding of human nature. STRANGERS is absolutely enthralling."

—*Wichita Falls Times*

"An almost unbearably suspenseful page-turner. His ability to maintain the mystery through several plot twists is impressive, as is his array of believable and sympathetic characters. STRANGERS may be the suspense novel of the year."

—*Library Journal*

*Continued...*



"Koontz has outdone himself this time. *STRANGERS* is so hauntingly beautiful that it should catapult him into the ranks of the great American authors."

—*Ocala Star Banner*

"A masterfully crafted novel."

—*Macon Beacon Journal*

"Terrifying and compelling. Koontz is especially adept at creating believable characters. He is also surprisingly good at weaving a horribly complex tale and resolving it into a simple but wonderful conclusion."

—*Grand Rapids Press*

"A spellbinding tale. You won't put this one down until you're finished."

—*Essex Journal*

"A gripping story, skillfully crafted to keep the reader strung out on suspense."

—*United Press International*

"A unique spellbinder that captures the reader on the first page. Exciting, enjoyable, and an intensely satisfying read."

—*Mary Higgins Clark*

"I thoroughly enjoyed *STRANGERS*. You can't call this science fiction, nor is it merely spooky—it is a contemporary novel of manners and morals and politics and freedom. This is a book with a capital B."

—*John D. MacDonald*

"You'll find it hard to lay the book down until finished. Exciting reading."

—*Abilene Reporter-News*

"The reader is always hanging on by the fingernails."

—*The Chattanooga Times*

"A truly exciting, suspenseful novel. Koontz is to be commended for this extremely intricately plotted novel...that builds to an enthralling climax. It's impossible to put this book down."

—*Rocky Mountain News*

"A chilling novel, near epic in its scope."

—*Knoxville News-Sentinel*

"Koontz weaves a spell in the first chapters, and readers will be hard put to close the book and go to bed at night, mostly because they won't want to turn the lights out. A real thriller...526 pages but never boring."

—*Anniston Star*

"An unusual plot and a cracking good story. The interest and suspense build to a real cliffhanging climax."

—*Waterloo Record*

"A satisfying work that leaves the reader exhausted after rushing through the last fifty pages to the final climactic confrontation. Highly recommended."

—*Mystery Scene*



*Berkley Books by Dean Koontz*

THE BAD PLACE  
COLD FIRE  
DARKFALL  
DEMON SEED  
DRAGON TEARS  
THE EYES OF DARKNESS  
THE FACE OF FEAR  
THE FUNHOUSE  
HIDEAWAY  
THE HOUSE OF THUNDER  
THE KEY TO MIDNIGHT  
LIGHTNING  
THE MASK  
MIDNIGHT  
MR. MURDER  
NIGHT CHILLS  
PHANTOMS  
THE SERVANTS OF TWILIGHT  
SHADOWFIRES  
SHATTERED  
STRANGERS  
TWILIGHT EYES  
THE VISION  
THE VOICE OF THE NIGHT  
WATCHERS  
WHISPERS

# *PART I*

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## *A Time of Trouble*

*A faithful friend is a strong defense.*

*A faithful friend is the medicine of life.*

—APOCRYPHA

*A terrible darkness has fallen upon us,  
but we must not surrender to it. We shall  
lift lamps of courage and find our way  
through to the morning.*

—ANONYMOUS MEMBER OF THE  
FRENCH RESISTANCE (1943)





# ONE

November 7–December 2

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## 1.

### *Laguna Beach, California*

Dominick Corvaisis went to sleep under a light wool blanket and a crisp white sheet, sprawled alone in his bed, but he woke elsewhere—in the darkness at the back of the large foyer closet, behind concealing coats and jackets. He was curled in the fetal position. His hands were squeezed into tight fists. The muscles in his neck and arms ached from the tension of a bad though unremembered dream.

He could not recall leaving the comfort of his mattress during the night, but he was not surprised to find that he had traveled in the dark hours. It had happened on two other occasions, and recently.

Somnambulism, a potentially dangerous practice commonly referred to as sleepwalking, has fascinated people throughout history. It fascinated Dom, too, from the moment he became a baffled victim of it. He had found references to sleepwalkers in writings that dated as far back as 1000 B.C. The ancient Persians believed that the wandering body of a sleepwalker was seeking his spirit, which had detached itself and drifted away during the night. Europeans of the grim medieval period favored demonic possession or lycanthropy as an explanation.

Dom Corvaisis did not worry about his affliction, though he was discomfited and somewhat embarrassed by it. As a novelist, he was intrigued by these new nocturnal ramblings, for he viewed all new experiences as material for his fiction.

Nevertheless, though he might eventually profit from creative use of his own somnambulism, it *was* an affliction. He crawled out of the closet, wincing as the pain in his neck



spread up across his scalp and down into his shoulders. He had difficulty getting to his feet because his legs were cramped.

As always, he felt sheepish. He now knew that somnambulism was a condition to which adults were vulnerable, but he still considered it a childish problem. Like bed-wetting.

Wearing blue pajama bottoms, bare-chested, slipperless, he shuffled across the living room, down the short hall, into the master bedroom, and into the bath. In the mirror, he looked dissipated, a libertine surfacing from a week of shameless indulgence in a wide variety of sins.

In fact, he was a man of remarkably few vices. He did not smoke, overeat, or take drugs. He drank little. He liked women, but he was not promiscuous; he believed in commitment in a relationship. Indeed, he had not slept with anyone in—what was it now?—almost four months.

He only looked this bad—dissipated, wrung-out—when he woke and discovered that he had taken one of his unscheduled nocturnal trips to a makeshift bed. Each time he had been exhausted. Though asleep, he got no rest on the nights he walked.

He sat down on the edge of the bathtub, bent his leg up to look at the bottom of his left foot, then checked the bottom of his right foot. Neither was cut, scratched, or particularly dirty, so he had not left the house while sleepwalking. He had awakened in closets twice before, once last week and once twelve days prior to that, and he had not had dirty feet on those occasions, either. As before, he felt as if he had traveled miles while unconscious, but if he actually had gone that far, he had done it by making countless circuits of his own small house.

A long, hot shower soaked away a lot of his muscle discomfort. He was lean and fit, thirty-five years old, with recuperative powers commensurate with his age. By the time he finished breakfast, he felt almost human.

After lingering with a cup of coffee on the patio, studying the pleasant geography of Laguna Beach, which shelved down the hills toward the sea, he went to his study, sure that his work was the cause of his sleepwalking. Not the work itself so much as the amazing success of his first novel, *Twilight in Babylon*, which he had finished last February.

His agent put *Twilight* up for auction, and to Dom's astonishment a deal was made with Random House, which paid

a remarkably large advance for a first novel. Within a month, movie rights were sold (providing the down-payment on his house), and the Literary Guild took *Twilight* as a main selection. He had spent seven laborious months of sixty-, seventy-, and eighty-hour weeks in the writing of that story, not to mention a decade getting himself *ready* to write it, but he still felt like an overnight success, up from genteel poverty in one great leap.

The once-poor Dominick Corvaisis occasionally caught a glimpse of the now-rich Dominick Corvaisis in a mirror or a sun-silvered window, saw himself unguarded, and wondered if he really deserved what had come his way. Sometimes he worried that he was heading for a great fall. With such triumph and acclaim came considerable tension.

When *Twilight* was published next February, would it be well received and justify Random House's investment, or would it fail and humiliate him? Could he do it again—or was *Twilight* a fluke?

Every hour of his waking day, these and other questions circled his mind with vulturine persistence, and he supposed the same damn questions still swooped through his mind while he slept. That was why he walked in his sleep: he was trying to escape those relentless concerns, seeking a secret place to rest, where his worries could not find him.

Now, at his desk, he switched on the IBM Displaywriter and called up chapter eighteen on the first disk of his new book, as yet untitled. He had stopped yesterday in the middle of the sixth page of the chapter, but when he summoned the document, intending to begin where he had left off, he saw a full page where there had been half. Unfamiliar green lines of text glowed on the word processor's video display.

For a moment he blinked stupidly at the neat letters of light, then shook his head in pointless denial of what lay before him.

The back of his neck was suddenly cool and damp.

The existence of those unremembered lines on page six was not what gave him the creeps; it was what the lines *said*. Furthermore, there should not have been a page seven in the chapter, for he had not yet created one, but it was there. He also found an eighth page.

As he scrolled through the material on the disk, his hands became clammy. The startling addition to his work-in-prog-



ress was only a two-word sentence, repeated hundreds of times:

I'm scared. I'm scared. I'm scared. I'm scared.

Double-spacing, quadruple indentation, four sentences to a line, thirteen lines on page six, twenty-seven lines on page seven, another twenty-seven on page eight—that made 268 repetitions of the sentence. The machine had not created them by itself, for it was merely an obedient slave that did precisely what it was told. And it made no sense to speculate that someone had broken into the house during the night to tamper with his electronically stored manuscript. There were no signs of a break-in, and he could not think of anyone who would play such a prank. Clearly, he had come to the word processor while sleepwalking and had obsessively typed in this sentence 268 times, though he had absolutely no recollection of having done it.

*I'm scared.*

Scared of what—sleepwalking? It was a disorienting experience, at least on the morning end, but it was not an ordeal that would cause such terror as this.

He was frightened by the quickness of his literary ascent and by the possibility of an equally swift descent into oblivion. Yet he could not completely dismiss the nagging thought that this had nothing to do with his career, that the threat hanging over him was something else altogether, something strange, something his conscious mind did not yet see but which his subconscious perceived and which it had tried to convey to him by means of this message left while he was sleeping.

No. Nonsense. That was only the novelist's overactive imagination at work. Work. That was the best medicine for him.

Besides, from his research into the subject, he knew that most adult sleepwalkers made short careers of it. Few experienced more than half a dozen episodes, usually contained within a time span of six months or less. Chances were good that his sleep would never again be complicated by midnight ramblings and that he would never again wake huddled and tense in the back of a closet.

He deleted the unwanted words from the disk and went to work on chapter eighteen.

When he next looked at the clock, he was surprised to see that it was past one and that he had labored through the lunch hour.

Even for southern California, the day was warm for early November, so he ate lunch on the patio. The palm trees rustled in a mild breeze, and the air was scented with autumn flowers. With style and grace, Laguna sloped down to the shores of the Pacific. The ocean was spangled with sunlight.

Finishing his last sip of Coke, Dom suddenly tilted his head back, looked straight up into the brilliantly blue sky, and laughed. "You see—no falling safe. No plummeting piano. No sword of Damocles."

It was November 7.

## 2.

### *Boston, Massachusetts*

Dr. Ginger Marie Weiss never expected trouble in Bernstein's Delicatessen, but that was where it started, with the incident of the black gloves.

Usually, Ginger could deal with any problems that came her way. She relished every challenge life presented, thrived on trouble. She would have been bored if her path had been always easy, unobstructed. However, it had never occurred to her that she might eventually be confronted with trouble she could not handle.

As well as challenges, life provides lessons, and some are more welcome than others. Some lessons are easy, some difficult.

Some are devastating.

Ginger was intelligent, pretty, ambitious, hard-working, and an excellent cook, but her primary advantage in life was that no one took her seriously on first encounter. She was slender, a wisp, a graceful sprite who seemed as insubstantial as she was lovely. Most people underestimated her for weeks or months, only gradually realizing that she was a formidable competitor, colleague—or adversary.

The story of Ginger's mugging was legend at Columbia Presbyterian, in New York, where she had served her internship four years prior to the trouble at Bernstein's Deli-



catessen. Like all interns, she had often worked sixteen-hour shifts and longer, day after day, and had left the hospital with barely enough energy to drag herself home. One hot, humid Saturday night in July, after completing an especially grueling tour of duty, she headed for home shortly after ten o'clock—and was accosted by a hulking Neanderthal with hands as big as shovel blades, huge arms, no neck, and a sloping forehead.

"You scream," he said, launching himself at her with jack-in-the-box suddenness, "and I'll bust your goddamned teeth out." He seized her arm and twisted it behind her back. "You understand me, bitch?"

No other pedestrians were close, and the nearest cars were two blocks away, stopped at a traffic light. No help in sight.

He shoved her into a narrow night-mantled serviceway between two buildings, into a trash-strewn passage with only one dim light. She slammed into a garbage bin, hurting her knee and shoulder, stumbled but did not fall. Many-armed shadows embraced her.

With ineffectual whimpers and breathless protests, she made her assailant feel confident, because at first she thought he had a gun.

Humor a gunman, she thought. Don't resist. Resisters get shot.

"Move!" he said between clenched teeth, and he shoved her again.

When he pushed her into a recessed doorway three-quarters of the way along the passage, not far from the single faint bulb at the end, he started talking filthy, telling her what he was going to do with her after he took her money, and even in the poor light she could see he held no weapon. Suddenly she had hope. His vocabulary of obscenities was blood-curdling, but his sexual threats were so stupidly repetitive that they were almost funny. She realized he was just a big dumb loser who relied on his size to get what he wanted. Men of his type seldom carried guns. His muscles gave him a false sense of invulnerability, so he probably had no fighting skill, either.

While he was emptying the purse that she willingly relinquished, Ginger summoned all her courage and kicked him squarely in the crotch. He doubled over from the blow. She moved fast, seized one of his hands, and bent the index finger

backward, savagely, until the pain must have been as excruciating as the throbbing in his bruised privates.

Radical, violent, backward extension of the index finger could quickly incapacitate any man, regardless of his size and strength. By this action she was straining the digital nerve on the front of his hand while simultaneously pinching the highly sensitive median and radial nerves on the back. The intense pain also traveled into the acromial nerves in his shoulder, into his neck.

He grabbed her hair with his free hand and pulled. That counterattack hurt, made her cry out, blurred her vision, but she gritted her teeth, endured the agony, and bent his captive finger even farther. Her relentless pressure quickly banished all thought of resistance from his mind. Involuntary tears burst from his eyes, and he dropped to his knees, squealing and cursing and helpless.

"Let go of me! Let go of me, you *bitch!*"

Blinking sweat out of her eyes, tasting the same salty effluence at the corners of her mouth, Ginger gripped his index finger with both hands. She shuffled cautiously backward and led him out of the passage in an awkward three-point crawl, as if dragging a dangerous dog on a tightened choke-chain.

Scuttling, scraping, hitching, and humping himself along on one hand and two knees, he glared up at her with eyes muddied by a murderous urge. His mean, lumpish face became less visible as they moved away from the light, but she could see that it was so contorted by pain and fury and humiliation that it did not seem human: a goblin face. And in a shrill goblin voice he squealed a chilling array of dire imprecations.

By the time they had clumsily negotiated fifteen yards of the serviceway, he was overwhelmed by the agony in his hand and by the sickening waves of pain rushing outward through his body from his injured testicles. He gagged, choked, and vomited on himself.

She still did not dare let go of him. Now, given the opportunity, he would not merely beat her senseless: he would kill her. Disgusted and terrified, she urged him along even faster than before.

Reaching the sidewalk with the befouled and chastened mugger in tow, she saw no pedestrians who could call the police for her, so she forced her humbled assailant into the



middle of the street, where passing traffic came to a standstill at this unexpected spectacle.

When the cops finally arrived, Ginger's relief was exceeded by that of the thug who had attacked her.

In part, people underestimated Ginger because she was small: five-two, a hundred and two pounds, not physically imposing, certainly not intimidating. Likewise, she was shapely but not a blond bombshell. She *was* blond, however, and the particular silvery shade of her hair was what caught a man's eye, whether he was seeing her for the first time or the hundredth. Even in bright sunshine her hair recalled moonlight. That ethereally pale and radiant hair, her delicate features, blue eyes that were the very definition of gentleness, an Audrey Hepburn neck, slender shoulders, thin wrists, long-fingered hands, and her tiny waist—all contributed to a misleading impression of fragility. Furthermore, she was quiet and watchful by nature, two qualities that might be mistaken for timidity. Her voice was so soft and musical that anyone could easily fail to apprehend the self-assurance and underlying authority in those dulcet tones.

Ginger had inherited her silver-blond mane, cerulean eyes, beauty, and ambition from her mother, Anna, a five-foot-ten Swede.

"You're my golden girl," Anna said when Ginger graduated from sixth grade at the age of nine, two years ahead of schedule, after being promoted twice in advance of her peers.

Ginger had been the best student in her class and had received a gilt-edged scroll in honor of her academic excellence. Also, as one of three student performers who had provided entertainment before the graduation ceremony, she had played two pieces on the piano—Mozart, followed by a ragtime tune—and had brought the surprised audience to its feet.

"Golden girl," Anna said, hugging her all the way home in the car.

Jacob drove, blinking back tears of pride. Jacob was an emotional man, easily moved. Somewhat embarrassed by the frequency with which his eyes moistened, he usually tried to conceal the depth of his feelings by blaming his tears or reddened eyes on a never-specified allergy. "Must be unusual