

# STRANGE DAYS

By

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## Prologue

October 31, 1976

Foreboding clouds blanketed the sky in black shades of malevolence, holding hostage the sun and its life-giving rays. Litter and garbage swirled into the air like man-made tornadoes of destruction. Palm trees slashed about as if under attack from an invisible enemy. The wind whipping around the old Victorian house and whistling through the eaves sounded strangely musical. The gate to the white, picket fence continuously swung open and slammed shut, keeping time with the eerie melody of the wind, like a bass drum: *thud, thud, thud*. Lightning ripped the sky in two, and thunder boomed in the distance, a crescendo to the evil cacophony of sound that raged outside Edna Gear's window.

Inside the house, the hardwood floor creaked to its own scary tune.

Worry and panic haunted Edna as she lay in bed, awaiting the birth of her son. No one else was in the house—she knew that—but still, she had the uneasy feeling of not being alone. The raging storm outside and the strange house noises inside did little to ease her mind. The ongoing labor pains only served to heighten her fear, and still she managed to stifle screaming. The increasing intensity and frequency of stabbing pain, however, made it more and more difficult to hold back.

Lightning sliced the sky. Thunder rumbled. The most intense labor pain yet slashed her, as if the storm inside her belly corresponded with the one brewing within Mother Nature. Her fingernails dug into the mattress. She screamed, no longer able to subdue her raging beast from crying out. Labor for her was already almost two hours old, and still no baby came forth. How long must she suffer? As long as it takes Mother Nature to bring forth rain? Will the birth of her child come with the first patter of drops?

Lightning flashed. Thunder boomed. Another pain cut her deep. She arched her back and howled. When the knife pulled free and the pain subsided, she gasped for air.

The baby would come soon.

She reached down and pulled her nightgown up around her hips.

*The baby will come with the rain,* she told herself.

Spreading her legs, she waited.

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A malevolent entity moved about the room, unseen. The monster came from the shadows, closer to the bed. In the dimension it now existed, it

wasn't able to camouflage its evil, as it could when it had lived in three-dimensional time. In this unearthly dimension, its face ballooned to twice the size of its body. Large eyes popped from their sockets, yellow and bloodshot, with elliptical, red pupils that glowed wickedly. Its nose was long and hooked. Its ears were pointed and hairy. A serpent's tongue slithered in and out of yellow fangs, while green ooze exuded steadily from its mouth. Its long and hairy hands had a yellow claw on the end of each finger. A stench of decay and death hung in the air all around it.

It hovered over Edna Gear as she writhed in pain and waited for the birth of her baby. It too waited. It waited for the right moment to enter the child and begin a new life in three-dimensional existence, as it had so many times before. It knew this woman would be the perfect mother, serving its purpose well. She would be just abusive enough to help form the malicious personality it needed. In its new physical shell, with a little mother's help, it would be able to perform many wicked deeds.

Within the dimension it now existed, its knowledge of the past was all knowing and its vision of what was to come—or at least what could be—was formidable. Not perfect. It didn't know everything. Nevertheless, it had learned to trust its instincts, and it was seldom disappointed. It had picked other lives and then entered three-dimensional time to find an enrichment of violence and destruction. It knew instinctively that it would live many more.

Hovering over its mother's bed, waiting for its new life, it remembered the past lives that not only held special memories, but also had contributed heavily to its growing power.

*Christian Wirth was a Nazi in Hitler's army and camp commandant at Belzec Village. Belzec was a wonderful place. He loved the sight of misery and the stench of death. This day, like most days, he walked the one hundred and fifty meters of open corridor that led to the death-chambers. A sign hung on the outside wall. It read: Heckenholt Foundation. The Star of David hung above the sign. This amused him very much.*

*August 19, 1942, a train from Lemberg arrived. There were forty-five cars with more than six thousand people crammed into them. He watched as his Ukrainian soldiers flung open the doors and drove the Jews out with leather whips. The sound of leather cracking against human flesh always brought a smile to his face. Waiting with eager anticipation, he listened to the loudspeaker give instructions. The Jews were to strip off all of their clothes. They were to take off artificial limbs and glasses as well. Then, the Nazis ordered them to hand in everything they owned at the "valuables" window.*

*He slapped the leather strap he always carried against his thigh with excitement as the march to the Heckenholt Foundation began. He almost laughed out loud when, on his orders, the Jews were told that they would not be hurt...to just breathe deep and it would strengthen their lungs, that this was all just a way to prevent contagious disease. A good disinfectant! He could hardly contain himself as he watched them voluntarily march and push their way to their own deaths.*

*Suddenly a Jewish woman broke from the ranks, cursing and spitting at him. He took great satisfaction in whipping her half to death, then pushing her into the gas chamber behind the rest of the Jews. There were*

*now seven to eight hundred of them crowded into ninety-three square meters of death. When the doors closed, he ordered Heckenholt—whose name hung on the chamber—to start his diesel. For it was Heckenholt's exhaust, that would kill the Jews.*

*Then a wonderful thing happened. Heckenholt's engine wouldn't start.*

*Colonel Wirth—secretly delighted by this turn of events—ranted and raved as the lunatic he was so proud of being. He whipped Heckenholt and the Ukrainian that was helping him. His leather strap smacked against the men as he cursed them for being idiots. Everyone in camp thought that he was furious and out of control, but he secretly enjoyed everything that transpired. The moans and weeping from inside the chamber grew to a fevered pitch as the Jews waited to die. For two hours and fifty-nine minutes, he reveled in their fear.*

*Then the engine started and all were dead within thirty-two minutes.*

Edna's painful howls stirred the monster from its daydream. It gazed wickedly upon the woman in bed. It delighted at the sight of the baby's head, just beginning to peek out from between his mother's legs.

“Soon it will be time,” it whispered, clicking one yellow claw against another.

It waited patiently, reveling again in old memories.

*Sir Glatissant, the Black Knight, lived in old England of the twelfth century. He wore armor the color of midnight and rode a great steed the same pitch black. On a fateful day, he and his warriors rode into the tiny*

*village of Gramarye. That day, he had gotten his first taste of ending a life before it was ever born. He had killed infants before, and that was very good—their life's blood always made him very strong. However, killing an unborn child was the ultimate achievement.*

*They began by setting fire to the village. Once Gramarye was ablaze, they waited for the villagers to begin running from their homes. When they did, the warriors rode upon them and smacked them with mighty swords. Heads rolled and decapitated bodies ran for another ten yards before dropping to the ground.*

*As the slaughter continued, the Black Knight caught sight of a young, pregnant woman running from her home, the bottom of her skirt just beginning to catch fire. She screamed and her eyes shone bright with terror. He circled, riding up behind her, the hooves of his black horse pounding into her as she rolled in the dirt. When he thought her dead, he pulled back on the reins, bringing his mighty horse three steps backwards. The horse turned in circles, its hooves prancing against the ground in an eagerness to finish the job.*

*The woman lay perfectly still.*

*Nevertheless, he watched patiently, hand gripping his sword. All the while, he prayed to the demons of Hell that she still was alive, that she had an ounce of breath in her to expel. As if in answer to his prayers, she moved, just slightly at first. Soon, however, she pushed herself into a sitting position. She gasped and gulped for air, and a sound, as if something were broken inside her, escaped from deep within her lungs. He looked down upon her. He smiled devilishly. He relished the moment, dismounting his horse and*

*standing over her. She sat perfectly still as he raised his sword and then sent it crashing against her skull.*

*Although the woman lay dead, he thrust his sword into her abdomen, pushing it as far as it would go, twisting it inside of her until it made a gaping hole. He pulled the sword from her, looking on with an evil glee as her insides spilled onto the ground.*

*With those human organs came the unborn fetus.*

*He stabbed the fetus, drawing power from the life that never would be, drawing that power into his own being.*

*Angelique Drapeau lived in the late 1700's, a French immigrant from the poorest section of Paris. For years, she lived among the rat-infested ghettos of that beautiful city. She existed close enough to see the splendid carriages and the magnificent horses as they taxied the gentry to and fro. But never close enough to touch, feel, or be even a small part of that splendor.*

*Through the selling of her body, she was able to scrape the money together that she needed for passage to America. After months of living at sea with rats and drunken sailors, she finally set foot in the New World. Once on American soil she vowed that never again would she live among the squalor she had endured the first twenty years of her life.*

*Fortune soon smiled on her. She met a gentleman, Nicholas Mandell, who took an instant fancy to her. At first, Nicholas felt sorry for her—she looked so lost, so ragged—but soon her beauty stirred something within his heart. After hearing of her journey, first across the ocean and then her*

*ordeals traveling from New York to Boston, he couldn't help think what a remarkable woman she was. However, after seeing her clean, with a gorgeous new gown that accentuated every curve and line of her figure, he truly fell in love. As Nicholas looked upon her, he wanted nothing more than to hold her and keep her safe.*

*On May 10, 1780, Nicholas and she were married at Saint Michael's Church in the heart of Boston. She knew that never again would she have to sell herself for food, and never again would she share that food with the rats of the city.*

*They soon moved into a spacious mansion that once belonged to Nicholas' grandfather. Nicholas was the last of the Mandells. An only child, with both grandparents and parents deceased; Nicholas wanted nothing more than to lavish his wealth on his new wife.*

*In a very short time, Angelique became very comfortable in her new surroundings and her new station in life. However, after six months of marriage, she was growing ever more tired of Nicholas, as well as her dependence on him and his charity. She wanted desperately to be free, but she was not willing to give up the benefits of being Mrs. Mandell.*

*After eight months of marriage, Nicholas returned home one late afternoon to find her waiting for him in bed. Pushing the covers aside, she exposed her naked body. Nipples erect. Legs spread wide. She beckoned him to come to her.*

*Neither of them spoke as Nicholas undressed and knelt down on the bed between her legs. He gently massaged the inside of her thighs. As she sat up, she reached for the glass of champagne that was waiting for her*



*husband and brought the glass to his lips. He sipped the bubbly liquid and then, taking the glass from her hand, drank the rest, and threw the glass to the floor. Holding her by the shoulders, he pushed her backward with the weight of his own body and thrust himself into her.*

*The poison began to spread throughout her husband's body as they made love—bodies intertwined, hearts racing, and blood pumping with passion—making its way to his heart. He gasped for air and his heart felt as if the devil himself squeezed it with mighty claws. She curled her legs around him, pushing him deeper and holding him still as he gasped his final breath. She held his dead body, massaging his back as his cock shrunk and slipped from inside of her. She stared at the ceiling, her eyes wild, lips parted. With Nicholas' dead body on top of her, she never felt more alive or free. His wealth would take her places she had never been. It would help her meet people she could've never hoped to meet. Wealthy men. These wealthy men would leave money to her as they died in the throes of passion.*

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Edna screamed bloody murder. Beads of sweat gleamed on her face. She pushed with all her might. The first splattering drops of rain tapped against the window. She tucked her feet under her butt, and with her knees in the air and legs spread wide, she pushed again.

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Slowly and reluctantly, the monster freed itself from thoughts of the past. It was difficult, for the memories of past lives were of immense pleasure. It was the culmination of these lives—the pain endured and the violence, destruction, and pain inflicted so unsparingly upon others—that

now resulted in its great power, strength, and unearthly appearance.

But now, watching on with evil pleasure as Edna Gear's pain and struggle heightened, it thought of future havoc it could bring upon the world.

“It's time,” the monster croaked, seeing the baby's entire head and part of his shoulders exposed.

It rubbed its hairy hands together with the excited anticipation of once again existing in the physical world. With cat-like swiftness, it flew to the child.

Entering him, the two became one.

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Edna let loose with one last beastly howl as she pushed with every ounce of resolve she could. The baby finally and miraculously slipped from inside her and rested on the now blood-soaked sheet between her legs. She gasped great breaths of air while listening to the pouring rain lash against the windowpane. Then, the baby's silence smacked her into action. She quickly pushed herself up, scooped him into her arms, and pinched his bottom. The baby rewarded her with a cry of life, and she breathed easier as the baby's deathly pallor turned to a lively tomato color. She held the baby gently in her arms as she reached for the scissors on the end table. After snipping the umbilical cord, she put down the scissors and picked up a blanket. Gently, she cleaned her new son. Needles of rain pounded against the windows, as if desperately trying to get to them.

She ignored it and whispered her son's name, “Louis.”

# Chapter 1

## TODAY

### In The Beginning... It Was Evil

Louis Gear looked like a Greek god as he stood under a large oak tree, muscular arms folded in front of him, chiseled features of his face taut with stony resolve. But if he had ever been a god, he had surely fallen out of favor and been cast out of Mount Olympus long ago and into the fiery depths where demons dwell, for it was a demon that possessed him, a monster from another time and dimension. This monster controlled his every malevolent thought and manipulated his every sinister deed. It had resided within him since the time of his birth, and like a cancerous tumor it grew into a horrible mass of wickedness. His dear mother helped the heinous tumor along with her own brand of torturous child rearing, thus completing his transformation from human to monster.

He stood across the street from a house that reminded him of his mother's—an old Victorian with a large porch leading to the front door, and

a picture window that looked into the living room. The sight of it had caused dark memories to bubble within him like a witch's brew. The dark memories had frozen him as surely as Medusa's stare. He could not take his gaze from the house, even though it was not the decrepit pile of cracked walls, broken windowpanes, missing boards, and peeling paint that his mother's house had been. The lawn wasn't even burned brown by neglect and the hot California sun. This house was in impeccable condition, painted a soft violet color with white and rust trim. All the windowpanes were intact in the bay windows, and the grounds were green and lush, planted with bougainvillea bushes, hibiscuses, roses, wildflowers, and ferns. Those differences should have been enough to break the morose spell the house cast upon him at first glance, but it inexplicably held him in agonizing rapture and bittersweet memories.

The front door opening is what broke the spell. The sight of a young woman bounding onto the porch and down the steps brought him back to his senses. She wore a baggy T-shirt with STANFORD written across the front, white shorts, and was barefoot. Her pretty face, short, blonde hair, and athletic build conjured up a depraved desire. The fact that she left the front door standing open gave him fiendish hope. She picked up the garden hose and moved gracefully along the front of the house, stopping to give the hibiscuses and ferns long drinks of water. She basked in the sun along the way. It was as if the sun's warming rays called to her and only gravity prevented her from going to it. She rose up onto her toes, flexing the muscles in her long, tanned legs, and with eyes closed, stretched her swan-like neck toward the sky. It was the sight of that long, beautiful neck that

altered a simple lascivious craving within him into an urgent violent need. He unfolded his arms, dropped them to his sides and clenched his hands into tight fists as he concentrated hard on her neck. Suddenly, he longed for the feel of her throat in his hands and knew that he must have her.

From inside the house, the telephone rang. The woman jumped, as if the loud ring had brought her out of a deep thought. She dropped the hose, hurried to the side of the house, and turned off the faucet. By the fourth ring, she bounded up the porch steps and ran for the telephone. In her haste, she again let the front door stand open.

Fiendish hope turned to supreme confidence. He stepped down off the curb and crossed the street, going rock hard as he calculated his next move.

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Frank Talbort used the top of his desk as a chair. He held the telephone to his ear with one hand and listened to what seemed like endless ringing from the other end. He used his other hand to push back the sweat-soaked hair matted to his forehead. He was thirty-nine years old, with fine, blonde hair and dark green eyes, was in fairly good shape except for the slight paunch from too much deskwork and not enough exercise, and had the face of an everyman—handsome enough but not memorable. Today, however, he looked little better than a wet, limp rag. His tie hung at half-mast, sleeves of his white dress shirt were rolled to the elbows, and sweat blotches attacked his armpits, spreading across the front and back of his shirt like an infectious disease. As luck had it, the air conditioner in his building had broken down on what seemed like the hottest August day ever recorded in San Francisco. Work, at best, was difficult. Thinking was impossible. The

heat had turned a bad day to miserable, as surely as the full moon in a horror movie turns a man to beast.

On good, air-conditioned days, he usually loved his job—working for a large advertising firm was his dream—but ever since he inherited the Zuckerman Toilet Paper account, he dreaded the start of another day. Today, he had scheduled a lunch with Mr. Zuckerman to go over his new ideas, but the awful truth was he hadn't had any new ideas. He found it difficult to be enthused over toilet paper. All of his ideas for this account were crap. At lunch, Zuckerman had agreed with that analysis. Now, with the unbearable heat, only his body odor stunk worse than his Zuckerman Toilet Paper campaign.

Finally, the day mercifully ended, so he could now go home, but he longed so much for the sound of his wife's sweet voice that he decided to call Emily before heading out into the heavy, commuter traffic. He really had nothing important to say. He just wanted her to know that she was in his thoughts. That he loved her. However, when the phone rang for the fifth time, he almost hung up. Luckily, on the sixth ring, she answered.

“Hello,” Emily said.

Her voice sounded like a soothing symphony of sweet notes.

“Hi, baby,” whispered Frank.

“Who is this?” asked Emily, a light-hearted tone to her symphonic voice.

“It's your sweetie,” countered Frank.

“Oh yeah, which one?” teased Emily with a giggle.

“Well, you're supposed to guess,” Frank teased back, enjoying the

game.

“Oh, let's see. I have so many. But whichever one you are, I told you not to call me at home. What if my husband answered?”

“I'd tell him how madly in love I am with you. That I want to spend the rest of my life with you, and that you feel the same about me.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

“But I'm not even sure which sweetie you are.”

“I'm the one with the big—”

“Frank!” Emily cut him short. She giggled girlishly.

“That's right. You *do* remember me.”

“You shouldn't say those things at work. What if someone were listening?”

“I don't care, baby. How are you?”

“Okay. I've been doing some watering and enjoying the warm afternoon.”

“Warm! Try hot! It's like an oven here. The air conditioner is on the blink.”

“Well, you think it's hot there? Come home and find out what hot really is,” Emily flirted.

“Emily! What if someone were listening?”

“I don't care. Just come home.”

Frank glanced at his watch. “I'll be home in twenty minutes. Is that soon enough?”

“No,” Emily said emphatically. “I want you now.”

“That's me coming in the door.”

“Okay.” Emily giggled.

“I love you,” Frank whispered.

“I love you too,” Emily said.

Just as Frank hung up, his boss stuck his head inside the office door.

“Frank! What are you still doing here?”

“I'm leaving now, boss.”

“Well get home and rest up. And Frank, while you're resting, think toilet paper. Think Zuckerman.”

Frank hopped off his desk, grabbed his suit coat, and headed for the elevator.

“Remember, Zuckerman,” his boss called after him.

Frank couldn't wait to get home. Zuckerman Toilet Paper was the furthest thing from his mind. He now reserved his thoughts only for Emily.

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Lou slipped into the house, unnoticed. He kept the door slightly ajar so as not to create undo noise of alarm. The soft whispers of his intended floated in from the kitchen where she talked on the telephone. He quietly pulled closed the curtains to the picture window, plunging the room into dark shadows.

“Frank!” she said loudly from the kitchen.

Lou turned to stone at the increased volume in his intended's voice.

She giggled. “You shouldn't say those things at work,” she continued.

“What if someone were listening?”

When her voice softened, he reanimated, stepping softly across the



plush carpet in the living room to the swinging door that separated it from the kitchen. He didn't push through, however. Instead, he waited and listened, confirming by her soft murmurs that she was still on the phone. Listening to her, his crotch ached with anticipated excitement. He looked forward to not only the sex but also the violence. That was what truly excited him.

“I love you too,” the woman said. Then, she softly hung up.

That was his cue. He sprang into action, pushing through the swinging door. He stopped on the other side as she came toward him. At the sight of him looming in the doorway, she froze as solid as any ice statue. He watched with growing amusement as only her face thawed. Her flirtatious grin melted away and at glacial speed her features changed from apprehension to dismay to fright and finally to pure panic. He took one step toward her. She reacted as ice reacts to a hot desert sun. No longer solid, she began backing up toward the kitchen counter. He took another step to her, savoring the sweet scent of her terror.

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Emily backed up into the counter. She dared not take her eyes away from the stranger in her kitchen. Why was he there? What did he want? She knew what he wanted. There was no fooling herself. The lascivious look in his eye and the snot-eating grin on his face told her what he had come there to do. She wouldn't let him. She had to get away, somehow. With her gaze never faltering and her back to the counter, she slid down it, using her hands like the blind to guide her. She stopped when finally feeling the sharp edge of the corner. From there, she knew the backdoor and escape was only three

or four steps away. Beyond that, freedom and salvation awaited her in the form of both the outdoors and helpful neighbors. But she hesitated, doubt and fear immobilizing her.

He, however, kept coming, slowly and deliberately.

She lost a precious step or two. She could ill afford to lose any more.

He took another step, rubbing at his crotch as he did so.

That sight gave her renewed determination. She pushed away from the counter, using the momentum to catapult herself across the room.

Unfortunately, this put her back to her assailant, so she could no longer track his movements. But there was no turning back. She had to move quickly.

She grabbed at the doorknob and twisted it, but not before powerful hands caught her by the shoulders. Suddenly she was yanked backwards, spun around, and lifted into the air as if she weighed no more than a tiny baby.

With feet dangling, she was slammed into the backdoor, the very backdoor that she had plotted her escape. On impact, her spinal cord felt as though it had snapped in two. Air pushed out of her lungs in sickening gasps. Blood trickled from the corners of her mouth. The room spun dizzily. Her assailant's face, looming before her, was mercifully out of focus. But the unearthly heat and stench of his breath assaulted her senses as he held her there, her feet still dangling, her back still pressed hard against the door.

Suspended by the grip of her assailant, time stopped, as if to emphasize the horrible reality of her fate; there was nothing she could do to save herself.

Then time started again. He dropped her, and she crumpled to the floor like a broken toy.

Before she could gather herself, he grabbed a handful of her hair,

pulled her head back, and thumped it against the door. Broken or not, he wasn't through playing with her yet.

“Wake up bitch,” he hissed.

The terrible ordeal had blinded and dazed her. She almost convinced herself that she was only in the throes of a nightmare and that the voice she heard was that of a harmless snake.

“You're going to like this,” he assured with a hiss. “Just like all the rest, you're going to like it.”

It turned out to be a deadly snake that haunted her all-too-real nightmare. She woke from her dazed confusion with a scream when the snake ripped her T-shirt down the front and bit hard into her exposed breast. Able to see again, she stared into the malevolent face of her assailant. The face was not that of a snake but of a human monster. And it was her blood that was smeared across that monster's mouth and chin.

“That's better,” he hissed. “I want you awake for this.” He let go of her hair and stood. Stepping over her, he left her for the kitchen sink.

Emily groaned. Everything hurt. Blood ran from her breast, onto her stomach. Despair and resolution to a horrible fate burdened her thoughts. However, a glimmer of hope presented itself when the kitchen faucet turned on and she heard him splashing water, as if washing up for dinner. God help her, she was to be his meal, and if she were to save herself then it was now or never. Standing at the sink and washing meant his back would be to her. That was the chance she needed. She went flat to the floor and started her escape on her stomach. Now she was the snake, slithering across the linoleum toward the swinging doors. As she gathered strength, she struggled

to her hands and knees, into a baby's crawl. She managed to get her feet under her at the swinging doors. She stumbled through them and into the living room. She stopped at the sofa, using it as support to keep her legs from collapsing under her weight.

A cackle of wicked delight followed on her heels. He was right behind. He had her by the throat before she could make another move. He forced her to the floor and onto her back. With his other hand, he ripped her shorts open and yanked them down. He was already half undressed, clad only in his shirt. While she thought she was making good her escape, crawling on her hands and knees across the kitchen floor, he was apparently undressing, toying with her like a cat ready to pounce on the mouse. She had no fight left in her as he climbed on top and forced her legs apart.

“You're really going to like this,” he hissed.

She choked and groaned when he rammed inside her.

“You're going to like this,” he repeated, as if he needed to convince him as well as her.

He took her while using both hands to strangle the life from her.

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Frank had keys poised to unlock the front door when he noticed it ajar, just a crack, not detectable from the driveway or even from the porch steps but only standing directly in front of it. Without hesitation, he pushed the door open. When he stepped across the threshold, he plunged through a black hole that somehow transported him into a nightmarish world of murder and mayhem. The chilling sight pounded him senseless. He swayed and stumbled under the beating, as if about to crash and burn into a useless pile

of shocked wreckage. But the appalling idea of losing Emily stabilized him, like an injection of a life-saving drug. Shock and despair went into remission, suddenly replaced by a shot of determination and adrenalin.

“Emily!” Frank screamed.

He propelled himself at Emily’s attacker, but it was like hitting the side of a mountain, immovable. He pummeled the guy with blows to the back of the head and torso but to no effect. He only succeeded in hurting his own fists. In final desperation, he pulled off his tie and whipped it around the guy’s throat. Using a ballpoint pen from his shirt pocket, he quickly fashioned a tourniquet of death. As he twisted and tightened the noose, he caught a glimpse of Emily’s face; a deathly pallor had set in, blood oozed from mouth and nostrils, and life only flickered slightly in her eyes.

“Emily!” he bellowed, hoping the very sound of his cry would revive her, giving her renewed hope and life.

It worked. The sound of his voice reanimated her. Emily’s hands instantly shot to the ones around her throat. Her fingernails dug in, drawing blood. She still had a reserve of fight left.

“Emily!” Frank bellowed again. He mustered more strength and twisted the tourniquet tighter. The guy made choking noises but didn’t release his death-grip on Emily’s throat.

“Emily!”

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Charlie Talbort inched up the driveway to his younger brother’s house as if his huge bulk was too large a load to carry.

The cries from inside the house kept his wife Pat rooted to the

passenger seat of their Mercedes CLK. Although slight in stature and light as a bird, terror turned her as immovable as a giant redwood. “Charlie, come back here!” she yelled through her rolled-down window. Guilt over her immobilizing fear compelled her to convince her husband not to approach whatever horror waited inside. How could he summon the courage to investigate, no matter how slowly, if she could not? And then there was his heart condition. The strain could prove too much for him. That added more fuel to her fire of guilt. She should investigate, not him, if only to protect him from heart attack. Still, she couldn’t move. “Charlie,” Pat persisted, “your heart!”

The appeal fell on deaf ears. Charlie continued his slow-motion rescue attempt. Finally he made it to the open doorway.

“Charlie, you old fool,” Pat mumbled. She watched with growing trepidation and gripped her door handle as if it were a weapon she could wield if necessary. She wished it were a weapon when she heard him let loose a blood-curdling scream.

Charlie’s retreat proved much faster than his charge. He ran frantically back to the car. Stumbling. Almost falling. Somehow staying on his feet. Clutching his chest, he lunged onto the car’s hood with a loud thud.

“Charlie!” Pat screamed. Her husband’s impending heart failure fanned the flames of guilt raging within her, but still she remained rooted, playing spectator as Charlie struggled back inside the car. She turned to face him, embarrassment, concern, and fright all battling for control of her emotions. “Charlie, what is it? What did you see?” Fear won control, trembling in her voice.

Charlie's wild-eyed look didn't help matters. He looked like a late castoff from the Survivor series. He massaged his chest and gulped for air. Words wouldn't come.

“Charlie!” Pat prompted again. “What's going on in that house?”

Charlie choked out one word in response, “Police.”

Seismic waves shot through her hand as she reached for the cell phone.

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Officer David Kemp rode shotgun in the police cruiser. As he stared out the passenger's window, a ghostly reflection stared back—boyishly young, with a dark complexion. He absentmindedly played with a strand of wavy, black hair. As usual, Sarah monopolized his thoughts. But today those thoughts were laced with guilt, and he couldn't forgive himself for what he had done.

His partner Sgt. Tom Browning drove. A veteran of the force, he was a good fifteen years older than David, and had the size and demeanor of a Sasquatch. Twice divorced, he had become a confirmed bachelor and womanizer, seeing women as sex toys and not much else. He had been in a constant patter since their shift began, relating his latest conquest. And although David hadn't been paying much attention, he didn't seem to mind or notice.

“Davy-boy, I mean to tell you, she was a real looker,” Browning said. “She had legs that stretched on to eternity. A butt that looked as ripe as two melons. I've always been partial to the buttocks, you know. Just something about the way a woman's ass moves when she walks. I don't know, just does

something to me.”

David twirled the lock of his hair and stared back at his reflection, lost within a labyrinth of guilt-ridden thoughts.

“Oh, and she had the biggest blue eyes, Davy-boy,” Browning continued, unflappable even by his young partner’s silence. “Like pools of water. Pools so deep, a man could drown in them. And let me tell you, Davy-boy, I drowned in more than her eyes. Oh, it was a night I shall never forget.” Browning glanced at his partner as he braked for a red light. “Okay Davy, out with it. What's been eating at you all day, kid?”

David gaped at his partner in silence. He couldn’t believe Browning had even noticed his preoccupation.

“Davy!” Browning growled.

“Yeah, Sarge?” David asked, not sure what else to say.

“That's better,” Browning said. The light turned green and he continued. “Now that I finally have your attention, what the hell's eating at you? I've spent the whole day telling this steering wheel about my love life. Now, I realize the steering wheel is about the only thing that would believe me, but you could at least try to listen and pretend that you're mildly interested.”

“I'm sorry,” David said, flustered. “It's not you or your story. I just have something on my mind.”

“No kidding. What's up?”

“You'd probably think I was overreacting.”

“Probably, but try me anyway.”

David sighed. Knowing Browning’s persistence, he decided to give in



right away. “It’s my anniversary. Sarah and I have been married one year today.”

“Congratulations. I don't believe in the institution any longer, but I'm happy for you, kid. So, what's the problem? Another woman?”

“No! No, I’m hopelessly in love.”

“Yeah, I know, Davy-boy. I was just trying to get a laugh out of you. So, what is the problem?”

“I didn't get her anything. I forgot our first anniversary.”

“Is that all?”

“See, I told you. You think I’m making a big deal out of nothing.”

“No, kid, I’m sorry. So, what did Sarah do? Kick you out on your rump? Told you to come home tonight on your knees or not come home at all?”

“Worse.”

“Worse?” Browning said. “Hey, I was just kidding, kid,” he continued, suddenly sounding very serious. “I always thought Sarah seemed the sensible type. What’d she do, Davy-boy?”

“She made a joke out of it.”

“What?”

“She joked about it.”

“And that's worse than making you grovel like a dog?”

“Yeah, at least then I could satisfy my guilt feelings and make amends. But this way I can't even do that. I not only have to feel bad about forgetting, but she's not allowing me the pleasure of releasing my guilt by becoming angry. She thinks it's funny for God's sake.”

Browning started to laugh.

“Stop!” David yelled. “Not you too!”

Browning laughed even harder, bringing tears to his eyes. “That's the biggest crap of logic that I've ever heard, kid,” he said, wiping the tears from his cheeks. “You've got problems, kid ... real problems.”

“I knew you wouldn't understand.”

“No, I'm sorry. Tell me what she said about it.”

“No, forget it.”

“All come on, Davy-boy. Tell me. Please.”

David eyed his partner for a moment, trying to decide if he was sincere or just in need of another laugh at his expense. He decided to take a chance on Browning's sincerity. “Well, she said that this kind of thing usually happens after thirty years, not just one year. And that on our thirtieth anniversary I owed her two presents. If I didn't come through then there would be hell to pay.”

Browning laughed long and hard.

“Damn it, Browning,” David yelled at him. “I knew I shouldn't trust you.”

However, as Browning continued to cackle, David had to smile in spite of himself.

Their moods quickly sobered, however, when they got the call from dispatch: Code 2—proceed immediately with lights/without siren—a possible 187 in progress.

Homicide.

\*\*\*

Emily's hands fell from her attacker's hands to the floor. Her chalk-white face went slack. Dark, cavernous eyes stared out at the cruel world.

"Emily!" Frank bellowed.

But this time, even the sound of his voice couldn't revive her. No spark of life remained.

"Emily! God, no!"

In desperation and rage, Frank tightened the tourniquet until Emily's murderer finally released his death-grip and gave forth a choking cry for air. The guy reached over his head to claw at Frank but to no avail.

"Die, you son of a bitch," Frank bellowed. "Die!"

As if in answer to Frank's demand, Emily's murderer collapsed in a mountainous heap. Dead.

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"God help me," Frank murmured.

Rage died alongside his wife and her murderer. Only grief and despair survived. Alone in the corner of the room, he sat as still, and almost as lifeless, as the two dead bodies on the floor. Shock paralyzed him. Misery and heartache hammered him senseless—ears could no longer hear and eyes could no longer see. The only sights and sounds transmitting to his brain were the ones within his own tormented imagination, as it took him on a runaway train ride into wretchedness:

*The train he traveled was an express to Hell. To arrive at that destination, it rambled through a gloomy countryside of bittersweet memories, at breakneck speed to allow only fleeting looks of happier times. He glimpsed Emily as she looked when opening the door to greet him on*

*their blind date—a blonde, earthbound angel for whom he fell instantly in love. He saw her in the little chapel on their wedding day, all smiles and white lace. The next instant, she stood in their front yard, clapping and giggling over the thrill of owning their own house. These images were just a blur, until the train finally slowed to a crawl. It came to a complete stop deep within the heart of his nightmare. Here, Emily lay on the floor. Dead. She stared at him with blank eyes, swollen tongue lolling from her gaping mouth, her face the granite pallor of a gravestone. The train's arrival in the hellish station reanimated her corpse. The zombie Emily sat up stiffly. She peered up at him with dead eyes and reached for him with decaying arms. Her purple lips formed a ghoulish smile. With that, a ghostly whistle blew and the train lurched as it pulled from the station, picking up incredible speed as it shot into a long, pitch-black tunnel. A small dot of white light waited for him at the end of that blackness.*

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The monster hovered like a grotesque blimp over the two dead bodies. Disbelief held it hostage, staring at the now empty shell it had once inhabited. When it turned toward Frank, its eyes turned crimson and its large, disfigured face contorted with hatred. A serpent's tongue flicked in and out as it hissed, "How could this weakling of a man destroy me? He is nothing, nothing."

Frank sat—comatose—in a corner of the physical room.

"Nothing," it whispered again.

It wasn't fair. This weakling had unjustly interrupted its physical existence, one built on a strong foundation of mistreatment, cruelty,

violence, and destruction. After all, it had just begun enjoying Lou Gear's malicious life. To have it cut short when there was so much more havoc to spread cheated it out of not only immense pleasure but also amassing additional malevolent powers.

A forked tongue swiped at a flood of green drool. Hatred for the weakling blew like a hot desert wind across the stark landscape of its blackened heart. A mushroom cloud of revenge exploded at its core, and the fallout of vengeful radiation coursed through its every thought. To exact retribution, however, it needed to return to the third dimension and physical existence. It couldn't afford to be reborn again, living through another infancy and childhood of hatred. There was no time. It needed to return now. It needed a shortcut.

Its malevolent stare penetrated deep into the weakling's soul. In that instant, it somehow knew there was no need to worry. It wouldn't need to be reborn. It wouldn't need to wait long. Something strange was about to happen, and the weakling would come to it.

“He's mine,” it hissed gleefully. “He's now mine.”

It slipped into the shadows. Hiding. Waiting. Revenge festering.

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*The train sped toward the light at a frightening speed. Frank couldn't look away. He both feared and welcomed the oncoming brightness until finally he and the train were engulfed by it.*

Frank's astral being slipped from his body easily, as if it were nothing more than dirty clothes to discard. He drifted toward the ceiling and hovered

there, a bit confused and disoriented but surprisingly not afraid. His body below looked to be in a deep slumber, nothing more. He peered at his hands, turning them over and over. Other than being translucent, they were the same familiar hands. He couldn't see his face but imagined that, like his hands, it too looked the same. He even wore clothes, as though nakedness was just as embarrassing in this ghostly state. In spite of himself, he smiled at that.

His smile quickly faded, however, when his gaze found Emily's broken body. What caused this out of body experience? Was it the trauma of her violent death? He couldn't be sure, but even in a spirit state, grief and despair knotted his stomach.

He whispered, "Emily, are you here? Your spirit must still be alive somewhere if my spirit can live separate from its body. If so, then where?"

He shut his eyes, concentrating. He was convinced there had to be a subconscious reason for leaving his body, a reason that only he knew, hidden deep inside his mind. Maybe it was an attempt to find Emily's spirit. Maybe he needed to prove to himself that she lived on after death.

On the other hand, maybe he wasn't really having an out of body experience. This could be nothing more than a dream or worse, the elaborate fantasies of a madman.

The shriek of a wild banshee answered that thought. His eyes shot open and he whirled toward the deafening sound. The unearthly cry proved not to be that of a banshee but a demon or monster that could've only been born from the seed of Satan. It was on him with unnatural speed. Huge, gnarled hands clutched his throat. Pointed claws pierced him as if he had

skin, but no blood poured forth only pain. Shark's teeth snapped at his face. Fetid breath battered his senses. He grabbed the disfigured head with both hands and held it at bay. But it possessed supernatural strength. He wouldn't be able to keep those massive jaws away much longer, and he had to wonder if his spirit could die.

“You can die,” the monster hissed, as if able to read his thoughts.

He must be mad. This couldn't be happening. This thing couldn't exist. But as he stared deep into the eyes of pure evil, he somehow knew without a doubt that this monster was all too real, and he was again in a deadly struggle with the thing that had murdered his Emily.

His hands suddenly slipped in green drool that exuded from its mouth. The thing's horrid face drew nearer. Its jaws snapped dangerously close.

“I won't die!” Frank exclaimed.

“There's far worse,” the monster hissed back.

While still clutching his throat with one enormous hand, it reached down and clasped his crotch with the other. He screamed in agony as it swiftly hauled him up overhead. An instant later, the thing flung him with demonic might. He flew across the room, arms and legs flailing as uselessly as the wings of an ostrich. He sped toward the wall, bracing himself for impact. But the fatal collision never came. Instead, he soared through the wall and out into the cold world beyond.

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The monster cackled with delight. Revenge was at hand. It turned swiftly to Frank's abandoned body. It couldn't reanimate the dead, but this body had not died. The man's spirit had simply vacated it temporarily. With

him out of the way, it was now free to take up residence. This body was weak in comparison to Lou's but undamaged. Besides, evil strengthens and the ultimate puppet master would be in command. It would control every hateful thought and every hostile deed. That was its revenge. It had defeated the weakling, and to the victor goes the spoils.

Quickly, it captured the weakling's body.

The evil puppet master opened *Frank's* eyes. He breathed deeply, relishing the sweet air of three-dimensional time. He rose on the unsteady legs of a newborn. He was not a newborn, however. He was a monster, a Frankenstein, reborn into another man's life.

"I'm alive," the monster whispered.

He looked down at his hands, turning them over and over at the unfamiliar sight. They were not the hands he remembered. He inspected the rest of him, from feet to shoulders. Nothing looked the same. He wished for a mirror, a reflection to confirm what he feared; he was not the same man.

He ran a thick tongue across dried, cracked lips, shook his head to knock away the cobwebs, and concentrated. Short-term memory deserted him. Confusion rattled his brain. The last thing he remembered was taking the woman and then fighting with her husband. All else was lost.

He scanned the room for anything that might jog his memory. The two dead bodies called to him, not with ghostly voices but with grisly fascination. Apprehension kept him company as he stepped to them. A closer look at the man's crumpled and half-naked body left him almost as cold and stiff as any cadaver. He instinctively knew what he would find even



before he turned the body over and stared down at the familiar face that had once been his own. Still, the sight of that face and its deathly pallor rocked him like a heavy blow to the midsection. He doubled over and couldn't breathe. What appeared before him was an impossibility. He was somehow dead but yet alive as someone else. His mind couldn't wrap around the inconsistency.

The dead female had a completely different affect on him. Her pallor looked glacial rather than deathly. Her frozen tits begged to be manhandled and bitten. The cold cavern between her legs beckoned him. Suddenly he no longer worried about identity. His ego no longer controlled his thought process. Instead, depraved urges immediately took command. Between his legs turned to stone. A low growl loped up from his bowels, into his throat, and leapt from his mouth as a beastly bellow. Suddenly and irrationally, he became nothing more than an animal in heat. He ripped his pants down, mounted the glacier, and rutted with death.

\*\*\*

Charlie planted himself in the driveway. Pat remained rooted in the car. They resigned themselves to frightened spectators, looking morbidly on as two policemen quietly made their way up to the house.

“Charlie, get in the car,” Pat insisted. She couldn't understand why her husband insisted on putting himself in harm's way. She couldn't do it. She couldn't budge from what little safety the Mercedes offered no matter what happened. And she wanted her husband with her, not only for his own safety but to ease her conscience. “Charlie!”

Her pleas, again, fell on deaf ears.

Shame burned her face and ears. Terror squeezed her heart.

The large, older policeman went around back. The young, good-looking officer slowly stepped up onto the porch.

\*\*\*

The monster finished with the dead female. He spat upon her as he zipped his pants. Sex didn't quell the beast within him. Another animalistic need loped to the surface. He heard the call to hunt, to kill. As if answering that call, a floorboard creaked. His ears pricked at the sound. Instinct told him that someone was on the porch. Someone was going to be kind enough to offer them self up as a sacrifice.

He looked for a weapon and found a fireplace poker. Perfect. He snarled, grasping the poker with violent expectation. Another outside floorboard creaked as he positioned himself next to the front door and waited for his prey.

\*\*\*

David's heart flopped and thrashed inside his chest like a fish struggling to breathe out of water. Stomach acids churned nervously in his belly, threatening a volcanic eruption of disgorged matter. Somehow he kept from purging as he stopped just outside the front door. He had already drawn his gun, and his hand quavered with expectation of its use.

Even so, Sarah and guilt over his thoughtlessness plagued him. He knew that behind the joking and kidding, she had really been hurt. He could never forgive himself.

With his head full of conflicting emotions and fears, he charged through the door and into danger. On the other side of the threshold,

something hard greeted him at the base of his skull. His gun escaped and skidded across the floor. He made a mewling sound, like a hurt animal, and dropped to his knees. The room blurred and consciousness teased him. His skull took another hit. Blackness overtook him.

\*\*\*

The fireplace poker dropped from the monster's hand and clunked to the floor. Hitting the cop had felt good but only served as an appetizer, succeeding in wetting his appetite. He retrieved the cop's gun. He caressed it as a normal man would a lover's breast. He longed for a chance to use it. He needed more, a main course of violence.

Another cop charged into the room from the kitchen. He had drawn his weapon but didn't immediately fire. Instead he yelled, "Police! Freeze!"

It only took that split second of hesitation for the monster to get two shots off. Both rounds punctured the cop's chest, sending him flying back where he had come from.

\*\*\*

Two gunshots from inside the house took Pat's breath away and sent Charlie hightailing it back to the Mercedes. He didn't get in, however. Instead, he froze solid with one hand gripping the door handle. They both waited for further sounds of war, but a ceasefire suddenly existed. *Frank's* unexpected appearance on the front porch seemed to support the theory that all was now well.

Charlie's grip on the door handle thawed. "Frank?" he said. He made a move up the driveway to meet his brother.

*Frank* descended the porch steps.

“Frank, you okay?” Charlie asked as he approached his brother. “I thought I heard—”

Pat spotted the gun. She also glimpsed madness in her brother-in-law’s eyes. But she had no time to scream a warning. An instant later, the weapon’s report resonated throughout the neighborhood. Charlie soared backwards and crashed to the pavement.

Death walked steadily toward her, weapon aimed. Her own terror kept her shackled, ready for slaughter. The second report sounded as if it called her name—*Pat!*

\*\*\*

The bullet punctured the windshield and planted itself in the woman’s forehead. The windshield became a spider-web of cracks that spun from the bullet hole outward. Blood, tissue, and brain matter splattered the interior. It was an unfortunate mess, but he needed the car. He opened the passenger’s door and ejected the dead woman as he would a spent shell casing. Then he quickly headed for the driver’s side and climbed in. Rubber protested loudly as he backed onto the street and fled the scene.

Continued in *STRANGE DAYS*

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