

STRANGER DREAM

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stranger dream

P r o l o g u e

Pensacola

“...love you.”

George opened his eyes and found himself sitting on the front steps of a colonial-style porch.

His left hand held a smoldering cup of coffee; its precious contents spilling black gold onto the concrete paver pathway laid out before him like a landing strip in a grassy jungle.

From his spot on the front step, he could see a white picket fence separating the well-manicured lawn from the neighborhood sidewalk. In the lush-green grass stood an antique bird bath, a tasteful contrary to the tacky pink plastic flamingo lording over it.

Of course, he recognized the street immediately. It was the neighborhood side of his beachfront house in Pensacola.

I'm back?

The sun shined bright in a cloudless sky, but the brisk air blowing in from the Gulf cooled his warming skin.

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He found himself dressed in an old pair of blue jeans, a maroon t-shirt, tan work boots and his trusty, dark blue overshirt. That meant two things: It was his day off, and Tessa had him working something off her *Honey-Do* list.

It was all so perfect.

If only it were real.

The house, the neighborhood, the front yard, it was a good likeness, but he knew better. This was merely Corporate just having a laugh and trying to fool him again.

But why? Why go to the trouble of duplicating my neighborhood so perfectly? It made no sense. Corporate never did anything without a reason.

Willing his body to respond, he righted the coffee cup in his left hand and set it down beside him. The ceramic mug (his personal favorite, the one Maddie custom made for him that read, *Best Dad Ever!!!*), softly clinked the moment it contacted the concrete stoop.

His brain still clawing toward the surface of consciousness, he found a newspaper in his right hand.

The Pensacola Press. The date listed was Tuesday, October 14th, 2014.

2014? Sorry guys, but you got the date wrong. That's two-and-a-half years after my last mission in Afghanistan.

Corporate may have gotten the house and neighborhood spot on, but they sure missed the mark on that one.

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It was a small victory, if not a bittersweet one, but he'd take it.

Okay, I've been through this a million times before. What's the last thing I remember?

He reflexively lifted the cup of coffee to his lips and was about to take a sip of the steaming contents, but then thought better of it and set the mug back down.

I was standing on the wing of this crazy-sized commercial airliner.

An image of a man dressed as a rebel soldier standing on a wooden plank beside him filled his head. A vast ocean swelled far below them and stretched off to every horizon. The sound of several rifles all firing at once, then ... the vision ended abruptly.

He began to wonder again why Corporate would go to all the trouble of recreating his house and neighborhood so perfectly when a guttural bark drew his gaze to a hideous bulldog trotting across the street on stubby legs. The ugly dog then proceeded down the sidewalk in front of his house and up the paver path to greet him.

Arriving in front of him, it sat on his haunches and looked at him, as if to say, 'Hey. You gonna pet me or what?'

Despite his brain still emerging from the fog, George cupped his hand and petted the oversized pup on top of its misshapen head.

This immediately elicited a big, slobbery smile and heavy panting.

A distant female voice cried out.

“Cheeves!”

The dog’s owner (a tall, beautiful, blond-haired woman wearing a white robe and fuzzy pink slippers) exited the house on the other side of the street.

“Cheeves...” she yelled out again, only this time her British accent became more evident. “Cheeves, you cheeky-little monkey, you come back here right now.”

Seeing him staring at her, she lifted her hand in a slight wave, and offered a light, “Oh hello, George.”

Operating solely on autopilot, George’s hand lifted and waved back.

After making sure there were no oncoming cars, she clutched her robe a bit tighter, then crossed over to him. Her slippers made light scuffing sounds as they scraped the pavement and came up the paver pathway. As soon as she reached them, she snatched the bulldog by his collar and blew an errant strand of blond hair out of her face.

Spotting his spilled coffee, and assuming the worst, she said, “Oh, sorry about that, George. I swear, Cheeves spends more time over here playing with you than he does at home.” Raising a quizzical eyebrow at him, she asked, “You’re not feeding him treats again, are you?”

George wanted to speak, maybe ask where he was or how he got here, but he didn't even know where to begin.

The pretty blond woman didn't wait for an answer and said, "Let's go, Cheeves. It's time for your breaky," and hauled the pup away.

This got a gurgled complaint from the canine, but he complied ... for the most part.

As she escorted him back across the street, a handsome fellow with longish, sandy-colored hair exited the house. He wore a white dress shirt and black tie, and as he walked down the driveway to greet the woman still in her nightwear, he stumbled over Cheeves and dropped an armload of cardboard tubes (similar to the kind that carry architectural drawings).

"Stupid mutt," the young man complained, but there was no heat behind his words. Collecting his dropped drawings, he added, "You've got the whole backyard to play in and every morning you roam around underfoot." The tempo of the man's southern accent seemed oddly familiar and even lifted George's spirits slightly, but he wasn't sure yet as to *the why*.

Before getting escorted all the way back into the house, Cheeves turned back in the doorway one last time to admire his handiwork, then bounded inside.

After picking up his last cardboard tube off the driveway, the southern gentleman kissed his wife good-bye, and offered George a quick, "Morning, George."

Not waiting for a response, the handsome fellow climbed into his modest compact car and switched it on. It must have been one of those new electric jobs because George didn't even hear the engine start and barely detected the slight hum of the engine as it backed out of the driveway and took off.

No sooner had it departed, when an extremely fit, even younger man suddenly jogged into view. As he jogged past the front of the house, he gave him a cheerful, "Morning neighbor."

George watched as the young jogger completed his run at the edge of the driveway in front of the house next door. Rather than go inside, the fit guy launched into a series of post-run stretches. While stretching, he talked loud enough for George to hear, and said, "Man, that was some birthday party you had last night, huh?"

Before George could answer, another woman, this one with an American accent, shouted from the doorway of the house next door, "Billy Colter!"

Turning his head toward the source, George saw a beautiful raven-haired woman exit the house. While rubbing her perfectly shaped baby-bump, she continued to yell with

equal fervor, “The doctor told you to stay off that leg for at least two more weeks, and I come out here and find you running laps around the neighborhood.”

Still staring at the extremely attractive couple, George wondered, *Did a bunch of models move into the neighborhood while I was overseas?*

The fit, young jogger (now identified as his neighbor, Billy Colter) flashed him an ‘Uh-oh, I’m in trouble look,’ then moved over to his pregnant wife and kissed her on the forehead. “It’s okay, sweetie. I was just doing some light jogging. My leg’s a little stiff, but I swear to you, I’m fine.”

“Then why are you limping?”

“Just working out the kinks, babe.”

As neighbor Billy continued to get berated by his wife, George saw a little boy (about six) playing in the Colter’s front yard. He was sitting under the shade of a tree while flying a steampunk Airship over a pile of toys scattered around him. There was a pirate ship lying on its side (crewed by zombie action figures), a beat-up jungle-safari truck, and a stuffed woolly-mammoth, to name a few.

Billy’s voice came back to the forefront of his mind when he shouted to his wife, “Just let me just take out the garbage and I’ll be right in. I promise.”

Mrs. Colter must have become aware he was watching because after her husband limped toward the garage, her

face immediately softened. “Oh, hi George.” She really was a lovely girl. “Don’t forget, game night this Friday is at our house.”

George wanted to tell her that he had no idea who she was, but still functioning on autopilot, he offered her a lopsided grin, waved his rolled-up newspaper and said, “Okay, see you then.”

“Honey?”

The disembodied voice had called out to him from behind. He froze immediately.

“Honey, come back inside, your breakfast is getting cold.”

Tessa?

Daring beyond all hope, he turned and saw his beautiful wife standing on the porch behind him.

“Tessa?”

Could this apparition standing by the screen door of their vintage beach house really be her?

No. That’s impossible. This has to be another trick.

Eight years ago, in Stranger World, Tessa had flung her body into the void seconds before the bomb inside her detonated ... saving Maddie ... saving everyone on board the Dauntless.

The apparition grabbed a post on the porch as she circled around to face him.

Even wearing only a pair of tan capri pants, a striped shirt and white deck shoes, she was still the most beautiful woman he had ever seen.

He wanted to leap from his seat on the porch and embrace her in the mother of all hugs, but his body still didn't seem quite ready to respond.

Oblivious to his stupor, Tessa began, "Was that Vicky next door? Are we still on for game night this Friday?" but then she must have seen the confusion in his eyes.

Slowly at first, but picking up speed like a train leaving the station, Tessa put down her own simmering cup of coffee and studied his face.

"George?" she asked, "George, did you have another episode?"

Quickly descending the steps and standing before him now, she placed both palms on either side of his face. With a worrisome look in her eyes, she said firmly (as if she had done this hundreds of times before), George, listen to me. You were shot down in Afghanistan. You were in a coma for two years, but you survived. About six months ago, you woke up."

He stared at her. He couldn't think of what to say. It was a lot to take in and required a fair amount of contemplation.

"You're safe now, George. You're okay."

The pressure tightening his windpipe began to relax a little and he eventually found he was able to ask, "I'm back? I'm in Florida?"

Still holding his face in her palms. "Look at me, George. Do you know who I am?" She was patient, but her forced smile said that she was still genuinely concerned.

Not wishing to worry her any further, he smiled back at her and said, "Of course I remember you," he began, then opting for her pet name he added, "You're Mookie-Saurus-Rex."

Tessa wrapped her arms around his neck and hugged him like her life depended on it, as if to do any less, she would lose him forever.

With a sheer act of will, he commanded his arms to work, and hugged her back.

Real or not, he was going to make this moment ... this positively perfect moment ... last as long as possible.

Corporate, why do you have to be so cruelly accurate?

Tessa held onto to him for a few seconds more, then squeezed a bit harder before letting go. Still close to him, eyes holding back tears, she explained, "Doctor Bob said you might have relapses, that you might not remember some things, but you've been awake for nearly half a year, and you haven't had a relapse in over a month."

Stalling for time, and refusing to tip his hand just yet, he gestured to the next-door neighbors' house and asked, "I don't remember them, who are they?"

Tessa pursed her lips before answering. When she spoke, it was like a teacher talking to a small child. "They're Billy and Vicky Colter, they moved in two years ago. Right after the Schneider's moved out."

Gesturing with his chin across the street, "And them?"

"That's Lisa and her husband, Joshua Dawson. They're practically our best friends. I swear, you talk to Joshua more than you do me."

Tessa turned back toward him. Her eyes narrowed as she scrutinized his face a bit more closely. Clearly, she wasn't buying the whole *everything's fine* act but left it alone for now.

Without warning, the automatic garage door opened as if Aladdin himself had commanded it to.

An eleven-year-old girl with mounds of black curly hair rode out of the garage on her bicycle. She was wearing a rustic backpack as she pedaled past them. She rang the little silver bell on the handlebars, and shouted, "Bye dad! Bye mom! I'm off to school."

Ring-ring.

“Honey, wait,” George heard himself say, but she continued riding her little pink bicycle down a street that split the rows of neighborhood houses like an asphalt river.

He wanted to get up and follow her, but before he could even try, Tessa laid a hand gently on his forearm. “It’s okay, George. Maddie’s just heading off to school. She’ll be back home around three-thirty. You’ll see.”

So, she does know I can’t remember.

His attire, the house, the neighborhood, Tessa and Maddie, it was all so incredibly detailed and accurate. Even the backstory they had given him was totally plausible.

Wouldn’t it be great if it were true? That everything that had happened in Stranger World was nothing more than one, great big, coma-induced dream? I mean, it makes sense. You must have died over a dozen times.

He had never wanted anything more in his life than for this all to be real.

The sound of *squeaky* brakes caused him to lift his gaze to the curb. An unusually thin man leaned out of a postal truck and delivered the morning mail with practiced ease. As the postman closed the lid to his mailbox, their eyes met briefly. With a knowing smile, the postman sank back into his driver’s seat and drove off in the same direction his daughter had just ridden off to school.

“Honey,” Tessa said, gently tugging on his arm and pulling him back toward the front door. “Honey, why don’t we make an appointment with Dr. Bob?”

George didn’t remember standing up, or dropping his newspaper on the lawn, but both must have happened.

“Did you hear me, sweetheart?”

He didn’t.

Her voice was fading away as his growing sense of unease began to grow into full-blown panic.

Even before his mind told them to do it, his legs were already propelling him down the paver path and toward the sidewalk. He must have moved too quickly, for his head swam and he nearly went down to one knee.

“Honey,” Tessa called after him. But her voice now sounded like it was miles away and not on the porch of their beach house behind him.

Muscles working a bit better now, George managed to stagger down the sidewalk, make a right, and start out after the mail truck. Shifting gears, his jogging became a full-on sprint as he ran down the street.

“George!” Tessa called after him again, her voice fading out almost completely now.

“George, come back!”

Chapter 1

The Mailman

George sprinted after the mail truck as fast as his worn-out knees would carry him.

His newfound neighbor, Billy Colter, must have seen the concern on his face when he passed him because he effortlessly caught up to him and easily kept pace alongside. “What’s going on, neighbor?”

Gasping for breath, he managed, “The mailman,” huff-huff, “The mailman ... he kidnapped ... Maddie.”

Billy’s eyes went wide with alarm and with almost super-human speed he sprinted ahead. In seconds, he caught up with the mail truck right as it was about to execute a lazy turn at the stop sign.

By the time George arrived, Billy was already leaning into the stopped mail truck and shouting at the driver.

The truck's brake lights shone bright for a second while the driver put it in park. The second he did, Billy yanked the postal worker so hard out of the truck, they both went tumbling to the grassy easement between the sidewalk and street.

Seeing how Billy was more than a match for Lampy the Postman, George dove headfirst into the truck and frantically searched for his kidnapped daughter.

And found ... nothing. Nothing but mail and packages.

After only a frantic few seconds of searching the box truck, it soon became apparent Maddie wasn't inside.

George stuck his head outside the opposite side of the truck and shouted for his daughter again, "Maddie!"

"Dad?"

The voice was coming from the street corner, near the stop sign. It was far away, but he would know it anywhere.

Emerging from the mail truck, he saw Maddie sitting on her bicycle, unharmed, with one sneakered foot propped up on the peddle.

George ran over to her, pulled her off her bike and up into his arms. After hugging her tight for a moment longer, he set her feet back down on the sidewalk and, while holding her by the shoulders, he asked, "Maddie, are you okay? Did he hurt you?"

The look on eleven-year-old Maddie's face was one of horror. "Stop it, Dad. You're scaring me." Wiping tears from her cheeks, she choked out the words, "And what are you talking about? Did who hurt me?"

George, refusing to let go of her shoulders, turned his head toward the post office worker on the grass at Billy's feet. "Him! The Lamppost Man."

But that's when George realized his mistake. The poor postal worker laid out on the lawn wasn't thin anymore. If anything, he was kind of chubby. He also sported thinning hair and a walrus mustache.

"Who?" Maddie asked. "Barnaby?" Then in a tone beyond her years, she explained, "Dad, that's Barnaby, our mailman. Is that what this is all about?"

Billy's face went from straight up rage to being downright appalled. He immediately began helping the pudgy postman up off the grass he had thrown him into.

"Are you crazy?" the postman yelled, allowing Billy to help him to his feet. "You could have killed me, Billy."

"I'm so sorry," Billy began, brushing the man off. "We thought that ..."

"You thought, what?" the postal worker asked, obviously still angry about getting torn out of his vehicle.

Billy cast his eyes to George.

George let go of his daughter and faced the man. "I'm sorry. I thought you ..."

"What?" Barnaby asked, still angry, then cast a quick glance at Maddie. "You thought that I kidnapped your daughter?"

Then the mail carrier surprised him when he said, "George, it's me. Barnaby. Barnaby Peterson." He took out a white handkerchief and despite the slight chill in the morning air, mopped his sweaty brow with it. "I've been delivering your mail since before Maddie was born. You guys leave me a big bag of Peanut Butter M&Ms every Christmas. How could you ever think I could possibly ..." he paused, as though realizing something. He shared a knowing look with Billy. "It's okay, George. I think I understand now. Listen, I know all about the crash. Ya know, overseas, and what happened to you."

George shook his head. "I'm sorry, Barnaby. It's just that I thought," he began, but he realized if he said anything further, he would only seem crazier.

Barnaby patted him on the shoulder. "No, no. It's okay, buddy. Just please know, I would never do anything to hurt your little girl. Okay? I think the world of you and your family."

Billy stepped forward and started brushing grass off Barnaby's back, "Dude, again, I am totally sorry."

“It’s okay, Billy, but I think I better head home and clean out my shorts before finishing my route. You really scared the heck out of me.”

As Billy continued to apologize to Barnaby and helped the man back into his truck, George turned back toward Maddie and found she was already back on her bike.

She wasn’t nine years old anymore. If anything, she had to be at least eleven, maybe even twelve.

Tessa’s words echoed in his mind. *You were in a coma for two years and woke up about six months ago.*

Tears streamed down Maddie’s face.

“Hey baby girl, it’s okay. Daddy’s okay now. Uh, are you all right?”

Maddie stared back at him, unsure as to how to reply. After all, it was a curiously difficult question, that required an extra amount of introspection for someone so young.

Eventually, she found her voice and was able to talk again. “I thought you were better. You promised. You promised me nothing like this was ever going to happen again.”

The moment he took a step in her direction she turned her bike around, stomped on her bicycle pedal, and pedaled away as fast as she was able.

All George could do now was watch her go.

Barely above a whisper, he breathed, “I’m sorry, baby girl.”