

# STRANGER WORLD

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P r o l o g u e

## The Lamppost Man

*What's my name? That seems important somehow.*

The loud, painful ringing in her ears finally subsided and was slowly replaced with the sound of a gentle, steadily blowing wind. Her body trembled slightly—and for a moment, it was all she could do to just breathe.

Even before her eyes fluttered open, she felt the blistering ice crystals stinging her cheeks. Every bone, joint, and muscle ached, yet somehow, she managed to prop herself up on her elbows.

Surrounded by long blades of bristly prairie grass, she soon realized, if she was going to see anything, she'd have to stand. Rising to her feet, she found herself in the middle of an endless sea of grasslands shrouded by a thin layer of fresh snow as light as a funeral veil.

Shielding her eyes from the departing sun, she stared out over the gently rocking grasses and could almost make out a

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chain of snowcapped mountains on the horizon. As she stared at them, willing her eyes to focus, she heard a long, ominous howl of a wolf. She would have been more nervous, were it not so far away.

For the life of her, she couldn't remember how she came to be in this place, and as she regained more of her senses, she realized she couldn't even recall her own name. A chill passed through her body. And, as she hugged her shoulders tighter for warmth, she discovered she was wearing a white lab coat, dress pants, and black high-heels.

*Hardly the best outfit for hiking through the grasslands,* she thought. A harsh wind whipped the scrub brush at her feet and tore at her clothes, forcing her to shield her eyes with her arm and turn to face the other direction.

She wasn't alone.

A short distance away, a bright yellow VW bug was parked haphazardly next to a single-lane of asphalt road. Failing to see any other options she set out for the tiny car.

Drawing closer, she could see the driver's side door had been left open, and the right rear turn indicator was blinking madly at her. *Is this my car?* If so, the New York plate on the rear bumper was her first clue to her possible origins. Peering inside through the open window she found a clean but heavily used interior.

Sliding behind the wheel she thought; *I don't remember ever living in New York. Did I hit my head? And how did I get out in the middle of the grasslands?* She lifted her blond-ish bangs and using the rearview mirror, checked for trauma. *Seems okay.* Finding no obvious signs of damage, she gazed at her reflection further. An attractive blonde woman wearing thick horn-rimmed glasses and a confused look gazed back at her.

*Who are you?*

She found the keys in the ignition and was slightly amused by the pinkish lucky rabbit's foot dangling from the chain.

*Charming.* She figured the tiny car was probably out of gas, but to her pleasant surprise, when she turned the key halfway, the needle of the fuel indicator rose to nearly a quarter of a tank. Turning the key the rest of the way she was rewarded with a gentle roar from the teeny-tiny engine that modestly sprung to life.

Checking her surroundings one last time for any other options and finding none, she put the car in gear and drove the VW bug back onto the road.

The petite engine hummed happily along as she kept her speed at a safe and steady forty-five miles per hour. *Was I headed this way in the first place?*

To pass the time, and desperate for some normalcy, she turned the knobby switch on the radio to the on position, but

was rewarded with only static. It was the same with all the other stations. She was about to check the glovebox when she saw a distant and unusual shape moving amongst the clouds. It wasn't a plane, helicopter, or balloon. It almost seemed as though it were made of gold and metal, like something Jules Verne might've crafted.

*How could something like that even stay afloat?*

When it vanished behind some puffy white and pink clouds, she lowered her gaze from the heavens and glimpsed a crossroads directly ahead. At the intersection, on one corner was an oversized solitary lamppost, which made absolutely no sense in the middle of nowhere.

If that wasn't peculiar enough, a strangely-clad man leaned off it. He wore heavy stage makeup, a black top hat, and a circus ringmaster's bright red tailcoat. Presently, he held himself perfectly still, one hand shielding his eyes from the setting sun.

Against her better judgment, she brought the beetle to a stop. She'd decided to keep the motor running for fear it wouldn't start back up again; plus, she didn't want to be stranded with the strange man perched on the lamppost.

Using her open door as a shield, she got out of the car, raised her voice, and said to the Lamppost Man, "Excuse me, uh, *monsieur?*"

*Monsieur? Am I French?* Her accent certainly sounded French. Whether she came from France, Quebec, or even New Orleans, she hadn't the foggiest.

The Lamppost Man didn't answer. Instead, he continued to remain perfectly still. So still that she actually considered he wasn't a man at all, but rather a very life-like mannequin.

Regardless, she still decided to give it one more try, "Excuse me, *monsieur*, err... sir, hallo?"

*This is ridiculous. I'm talking to a signpost.*

She moved to climb back into the bug, when she could have sworn the Lamppost Man blinked.

*Wait.*

Her eyes narrowed as she stared at him for several moments, trying to decide if he had blinked, or if she had simply imagined it. Giving her head a quick shake, she placed one foot back into the VW. At the same time, he slowly turned his head toward her and a giant Cheshire Cat smile spread across his face.

"Oh. Hello there... greetings and salutations!"

"Hello, *monsieur*. I'm sorry, but I seem to have hit my head or something. I woke up beside the road next to this car. I don't even think it is mine."

"That's quite alright, my dear. Quite alright indeed." Still staring down at her from his perch, he asked, "What is your appellation, young lady?"

Her mind still foggy, she had to think about this for a second, and as she did, she asked reflexively, “My what?”

“Your appellation. It means your name.”

“I know what it means,” she grumped irritably, and then gazing down, she realized she wore a blue lanyard draped around her neck. Attached to the end hung some kind of laminated identification badge.

Studying it, she saw an unflattering picture of herself, and next to the photo was the name: DR. SOPHIA DAVENPORT. *So, my name is Sophia.* She studied the badge a bit further in the hopes of finding another clue to her identity. Unfortunately, all she found was one word in another little box under the category of division, which read: MICROBIOLOGY.

Fighting down the urge to panic, she squared her shoulders back and held up the tag like a small shield toward him. “According to this, my name is Dr. Sophia Davenport, and I am a Microbiologist. Whether this is true or not, I do not know.”

The Lamppost Man didn’t reply and remained unmoving with that perpetual grin of his, studying her like a bird might take in a worm.

*This is getting nowhere.* “Where am I? Do you know how I got here?”

“Yes. Yes. I can answer all! But, alas! Where are my manners?” With a mighty leap, he jumped down from his perch,

the soles of his shoes smacking the asphalt, and the noise echoing through the air. Bounding over to her, and in a very gleeful voice, he said, "Allow me to introduce myself. My name is..." and using his booming baritone voice here, "THE LAMPOST MAN... Ta-Da!" When she didn't respond immediately, he asked, "Really? Nothing? Na-da? Zip? No cowering in fear? Ohhhh... right. You're newwww around here. You can do all that nonsense of running away in fear later. Besides, I don't know why everyone does that. I mean, to look upon me is to love me. I said... to l-o-o-vvv-eee me! Still nothing? Wow. Tough crowd."

He clasped her small hand in both of his white-gloved hands and began shaking it profusely. "We are so glad to have you. Welcome, welcome. You'll have to forgive me. It's been quite some time since I've been able to greet any guests."

Thinking out loud to himself, he asked, "How long have I been up there anyway? Five days, a month, a year? Oh, that's right. So silly of me--seventy years." He brushed the nonexistent dust off his golden epaulets. "Why, you've certainly picked a most wonderful time to visit. You see, Lady Wellington has captured the Dauntless and to celebrate, she is planning the most fantastic party. A most-marvelous party indeed."



Sophia, nearly hand-shaken out of her gourd, pulled her hand out of his firm grasp. “Where am I, where is this place?”

“Where are you?” he asked. “Oh, my, my, my.” He outstretched both arms to his sides and answered, “Why, silly, you are at the crossroads, of course. Where did you think you were?”

Sophia sighed, fought down her frustration and asked, “Well, can you at least tell me which way to go?”

“Which way to go?” She noticed he had the annoying habit of repeating her questions back to her before answering.

“Why, that’s entirely up to you, my dear.” Without warning he jumped up onto the bumper and pin-wheeled his arms before pointing out the road to her right and said, “If you go that way, you will certainly meet something large with teeth that is sure to eat you.” Pin-wheeling his arms a second time and landing his fingers toward the opposite direction, he then informed, “And this way, many chills, spills, and nightmares await you.”

Sophia scanned both directions and didn’t see any of those things, only a barren, narrow road leading to the horizon. Staring in the fourth direction she caught sight of a small town in the distance. “What about over there?”

In a move that Sophia would not have thought him capable of the Lamppost Man bounced up off her front bumper,

did a back somersault in the air, and landed in front of her. He abruptly put his face next to her cheek and stared off at the town in the distance. When she tried to pull away, he calmly but firmly, pulled her back and explained, "Oh, that is a very satisfying choice indeed. I see many adventures waiting for you there, but..." he checked to see if anyone was listening, and added as though it were a secret, "Beware the butler."

The Lamppost Man then froze and remained perfectly still. Standing that way, with his head cocked to one side, it almost appeared as though he were listening to someone whisper something in his ear.

"Okay," Sophia said in as pacifying tone as she could muster, all the while backing away from him until she stood safely back beside her open door. She was about to climb back in, but feeling a chilly wind, and perhaps feeling a bit sorry for the strange man, she asked, "It's pretty cold out here, and we are in the middle of nowhere. Can I give you a lift somewhere?"

This seemed to snap the Lamppost Man out of his trance. "My, what a lovely invitation," he said, parading over to where she was standing next to her open door. "But there's just one teensy-tiny-little problem."

"What are you doing?" she asked as he pulled her forcefully away from the idling VW. With a great deal of effort

Sophia yanked her arm free, but in an impossible fit of speed and strength the Lamppost Man lunged forward, grabbed her again, and flung her roughly to the ground.

Pinning her arms and legs with his own body, and leering down at her he said, "You see, I'm afraid you've arrived a tad bit early. Why, Colonel Stapleton and his daughter haven't even arrived yet." Studying her limbs carefully, he then muttered to himself, "Now, I do hope this goes better than the last time. You bags of flesh can be so fragile." Lifting his eyes back to hers he scoffed, "Why, the arms and legs just came right off the last one. And all that screaming. My goodness. So loud."

"Let me go. That hurts!"

"That's because I'm breaking your arm." He then paused for a moment, deciding which limb to grab next. "Now I know this hurts, but you can trust me when I say this is all for the greater good."

As he systematically continued to break every bone in her body, Sophia screamed long... loud... and full of anguish.



## CHAPTER 1

# George Stapleton

MISSION TIME 0415hrs

June 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2012

Afghanistan

“Mayday-Mayday-Mayday!”

Air Force Search and Rescue Helicopter Pilot Lt. Col. George Stapleton had to shout to be heard over the whine of the twin-turboshaft engine, the CHUG-CHUG-CHUG of the door gunner’s fifty-caliber, and every klaxon alarm screaming for his attention.

His co-pilot (a fresh-faced kid out of Utah) had a gaping hole where his chest used to be--the round that had killed him had come right up through the floor in front of him.

In the cabin area, flight engineer Dwayne Harkins, and left door gunner, Mike Farro, were more stains on the fuselage than dead human beings. Seated by the chopper's right-side door was the only remaining crew member, twenty-three-old, para-rescue hoist operator, Donald Ozechowski.

To put it mildly, things were not going well.

George clicked the microphone switch mounted on the cyclic control column. "Forward Base, Forward Base, do you read? This is Air Force Search and Rescue, Pedro One. We are inbound with heavy casualties."

The voice of Forward Base came back over the headset built into his helmet. "We read you, Pedro One. We lost you in the canyon but you're Lima-Charlie now."

Ground fire ping-ping-pinged the fuselage again, so George banked hard to get out of the line of fire. "L.Z. was a trap. Everything went south. We are taking on heavy fire!" When he no longer heard the chug-chug of the fifty-caliber machine gun, he knew 'Ozzie,' was gone, most likely hanging lifeless in his sling.

George was alone.

That is, except for the Pavehawk flying ahead of him, overloaded with two pilots, two medics, and exactly seventeen wounded patients.

As if reading his thoughts Forward Base radioed, "Colonel. We can't raise Pedro Two. Do you have a visual?"

*Yeah, I do, they're right in front of me.*

Staring through the night-vision goggles George had always felt like he was staring through two toilet paper rolls mounted in front of his eyes. But he never argued with the results. Even on the blackest of nights (like this one) he could see perfectly. At the moment, the Pavehawk (a diminutive form of the Blackhawk helicopter modified for search-and-rescue) was hugging the green phosphorous landscape as fast as its badly-smoking engines would allow.

Once George had realized how badly Pedro Two had been hit, he dropped his own helicopter back behind them to draw away the enemy fire. Getting those boys home was all that mattered. If for nothing else, so his entire crew hadn't died for nothing. He clicked his mic again and radioed back, "Be advised, Pedro Two's comm.'s are down. Engines badly damaged. I'm flying rear guard, drawing heavy enemy fire."

"Copy Pedro One. Stand by. We're going to try and get you some support."

When the distress call had first come in, George and his crews were right in the middle of conducting routine training exercises. At the time, he'd been preoccupied with a travel itinerary that would deliver him back stateside in a scant three days. He and the rest of his unit were only reservists, guys with normal jobs back home. For the last decade, eleven months out of the year, he was a college history

professor. It was hard to believe that last month his biggest dilemma was writing a new syllabus for the next semester.

But then the distress call came in--the boys on the front-line had been shot down in a CH-47 Chinook troop transport and hostile ground forces were closing in. He and his trainees had diverted from their training exercises without hesitation, landed under the worst possible conditions, and made off with over a dozen survivors.

But, the enemy wasn't about to let them slip away so easily.

"Colonel Stapleton, this is eye in the sky," radioed Captain Marco Phillips, the commander of the AC-130U Specter gun ship currently flying air support twenty thousand feet overhead. "We just picked you up on our radar."

"Glad to have you with us, Spooky," George radioed back with forced cool, using the call sign for the specter gun ship.

But the AC-130 pilot cut him off abruptly. "Colonel be advised, ground forces have locked onto you with a long-range missile launcher. Recommend you launch counter measures."

The cyclic steering column began vibrating even more uncontrollably than before, and he now had to hold on with both hands just to keep his bird on course. *That last volley must've damaged one of the hydraulic lines.* He managed to click his mic anyway.



“All counter measures exhausted.”

As the pilot overhead processed the grim news George knew he could peel off and attempt evasive maneuvers, but with Pedro 2 as badly damaged and overloaded as they were, it was all the pilot in front of him could do to keep his bird afloat, let alone maneuver. In the end, it was simple math. He was only one guy left with a plenty of good years under his belt. In the chopper ahead of him were twenty-one young men and women with their whole lives ahead of them.

The AC-130's pilot voice crackled over his headset once more. “Colonel, be advised they have launched missile.”

George knew there was nothing else to do. All counter measures had been deployed.

The literal motto of Para Rescue was *SO THAT OTHERS MAY LIVE*.

*Darn, so close to retirement. Tessa is going to be so mad.*

He clicked his mic one last time. “Understood. I’m holding position.” George knew this would be his final transmission--the last anyone would ever hear from him.

The AC-130 pilot circled overhead, struggling to keep the tears from his voice. “Copy that, Colonel. Missile locked and closing.” He counted down the time until impact. “Missile impact in TEN... NINE... EIGHT...”

To increase Pedro Two's chances of survival George throttled up the engines to maximum power knowing the additional heat he created would draw the attention of the IR missile's seeker.

Approximately seven thousand miles away, on a beach in Pensacola, Florida, sat a small picturesque house with a wraparound porch and a white picket fence separating it from the Gulf coast. Inside, his lovely wife, Tessa, waited for his return by baking a themed birthday cake. Maddie's ninth birthday party was next weekend, and George planned to attend.

"SEVEN... SIX... FIVE..."

George's gloved hand removed the picture of his adorable daughter taped to the dash. Most other pilots displayed photos of their wives or girlfriends, but George had a special connection to his baby-girl, since the day she was born.

Lifting his eyes to stare through the cracked forward window, George saw the first light of day appearing on the horizon, marking the dawn. He yanked the night-vision goggles off his head and tossed them to the cabin floor. It was a beautiful sunrise, pink and fiery orange, with a splash of purple.

"FOUR-THREE-TWO..."

George smiled. *Not a bad last view.* He tore his gaze from the stunning view and stared at Maddie's picture again. She

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was a great kid and a real spitfire. His last thought was how sad she was going to be when she found out Daddy wasn't coming home.

Tears in his eyes he said, "Goodbye, baby-girl. I..."

ONE.

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