

Stranger Things

Chapters 1 and 2

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This novel is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or used fictitiously. All characters are fictional, and any similarity to people living or dead is purely coincidental.

The house appears to be a tragedy.

It's an abandoned structure that sits far off the road, a ruined place gutted by fire and battered by weather. Stone walls hold up a metal roof. Where the two meet, fat spiders lie in wait for their next meal. The trees that surround the place are indifferent, and someday the weeds will swallow it completely.

That's one way of seeing it.

Close your eyes. Spin around. Drink the air. Then look again:

The house appears to be a triumph.

It's a peaceful home nestled under sheltering trees, its stone walls a fortress against harsh weather and unwelcome visitors. The metal roof catches sunshine and sends water sliding into a rain barrel at the bottom of a gutter, where white birds have come to bathe. On the shady porch, strong with new boards and fresh paint, a graceful swing waits for its occupant to return. A glass topped off with lemonade and ice sweats on the rail.

Darkness sweeps in. A cloud passing over the sun brings the tragedy back to life. A chill creeps up the path leading from the grove. The glass of lemonade falls to the rocks and shatters.

Then wind shoves darkness out of the way. Sunshine raises the triumphant house from the dead. Orange poppies spring out of the ground. A woman in an ocean-blue dress emerges from the house to pluck some for her table.

A black scorpion lies in wait among the flowers.

Here, light and darkness jostle for attention. Both visions are real, but which one is more true?

Listen: there are footsteps on the path. People are coming. People who will give an answer to this question. There will be an argument. Expect worse than a civil dispute.

But keep an eye on the woman picking poppies.

Chapter 1

The closet where Becca was trapped held every nightmare she'd ever had, plus one that had never violated the borders of her imagination until now.

Outside of the closet, a gas lamp burned in an empty room. The lamp's unnatural white light and dizzying stink came into the tight space through a crack in the locked door. Sawdust from the unfinished floor stuck to Becca's sweaty palms and formed a gritty paste. Her breath was noisy and her heart was a frightened cat trying to claw its way out of her throat. If she wanted to avoid a split lip, she should follow orders: shut up, sit down, stay put.

Becca got to her feet and pressed her cheek against the wood, looking through the gap for her opportunity to disobey. To survive. Better to live with a split lip than die without one.

Outside the closet, only fresh floorboards made the burnt-out carcass of a room suitable for humans. It seemed there was no electricity here. There was definitely no heat. For the most part there was fear, and something else that Becca couldn't name: a sensation that the place was unstable, that the floor might open up and swallow her.

She wrapped herself up in her arms. If she could keep her head, she might be able to see her way out.

Jett, the boyfriend who turned out to be a liar, was gone now. He'd promised her a

candlelight picnic and privacy, when what really awaited was a crumbling house and a man who looked her over as if she were something to eat.

That man, who had an unfortunate resemblance to her stepdad, had forced her into the closet. She raked at his grip with her free hand; she kicked at his knees, at his groin, and screamed. But he hefted her in as if she weighed no more than a pair of shoes and he was just tidying up the house. She beat on the door with her fists, and though it rattled, it held firm.

At first she had feared for Jett. Would the man kill him if he didn't get away? Her eye found the crack for the first time and she looked out—shouting, questioning, pleading—and saw something more terrifying than a murder. Cash exchanging hands. The man gave Jett a thick bundle of bills. Jett caressed those bills, kissed the stack, and left the house without her.

His betrayal silenced her. She pressed her hands to the door, which was now a shield separating her from worse horrors, and wondered if there was a handle she could grip from the inside. Something to prevent the man from opening it. No. The panel was smooth and flat.

But he seemed uninterested. He stood in the shadows of the opposite corner of the room, where the glare couldn't reach, and studied the illuminated panel of his phone. He tapped, he scrolled.

He said, "You're not as strong as you think. Accept that as quick as you can."

She wasn't sure he was talking to her. The crack in the door put him in a tight frame. He had Hollywood looks equally fit for an unwitting hero or suave bad boy.

He continued, "Things'll go better for you when you do."

Slowly she lowered herself to her knees and moved her fingertips over the surface of the ground, searching for something besides sawdust and spiders, something useful for self-defense or escape. A nail, for example, that she might slip between the door and the wall to dislodge the

latch.

“What’s your name?”

She didn’t answer. Dust clung to her hands.

“Jett said your name is Becca.”

“Then you don’t need me to tell you,” she snapped. She remembered the fake ID—Jett’s idea, so she could get into his favorite club. The card was still in her jeans pocket. She fished it out, thinking new thoughts about the things he had often talked her into doing there after just a couple of beers.

Today the manager had asked her if she wanted a job.

In the closet, Becca rose from the floor and leveled her eye with the crack.

The man’s eyeball was there, staring into her black hole. She flinched and knocked her head against the underside of a stair. The ID card dropped from her fingers and lightly slapped the floor.

“You’re right,” he said. “I don’t need you to tell me anything.” His words were thick against the wood, for her ears only though as far as she knew they were alone. “In fact, don’t speak at all. Or I’ll shut you up myself.”

She believed he would.

“What are you doing here?” he demanded of someone else. An unexpected visitor? He moved and the crack filled with light.

“Hey, Uncle Phil.” The voice was thin with undertones of whine, like Becca’s little brother’s. But a kid her age stepped into the skinny view, an athletic boy, all-American clean. She recognized him at once. Brock Anderson. They’d gone to high school together before she dropped out, but she knew him by reputation: star pupil, king of the wrestling mats, and when the

adults weren't looking, the Tom Sawyer of troublemaking.

Uncle Phil? Brock would be no ally of hers. Would he?

Brock took in the run-down room. "When I told you about this place I didn't think you'd actually be interested. It's a dump."

"I'm waiting for someone, and you don't want to be here when he comes."

"Was that Jett I saw leaving?"

"As you should be."

"I need to talk to you," Brock said.

"We both have phones."

"I wanted to see you."

The pair stood on the other side of the gas lamp and faced off like bright halves of the moon. Behind them, the ceiling bent their dark shadows at an aggressive angle.

"You here to ask for money?"

Brock sniffed and looked embarrassed.

"Get out. And don't ever follow me again."

"Look, I'm freaking out. I lost my scholarship!"

"Not my fault," Phil said.

"It wasn't my fault either. And you know Mom can't pay for Cornell."

"No, after her latest incompetence she probably can't afford a Happy Meal."

"But you're rolling in cash. Mom says—"

"Do you think she can say anything that would matter to me?"

"Why do you think I'm the one talking?" Brock spread his hands wide. "Help me out here!"

Taking advantage of their argument, Becca lowered herself to her knees and patted the floor for the ID card. Now was the time to tinker with the latch if it could be done at all.

“I don’t give handouts,” Phil growled.

“Then make it a loan.”

“I’m not a bank either.”

“Then . . . then . . .” Shadows shifted across the crack in the closet door. Becca found the card, slipped it under the latch, looked out through the crack at the two men who faced off, one desperate, one indifferent. The plastic met resistance.

Brock was saying, “Let me work for you, just one year. Now through next summer. Give me something to do. Anything.”

At this Phil’s expression changed from irritated to amused. His eyes darted to Becca’s closet. She snatched the card back to her racing heart.

“You think you can earn enough for Cornell that fast? Just what is it that you think I do?”

“Mom says something criminal.” Brock’s laugh was a snort. “Not that you care what Mom thinks.”

“Anything successful must be criminal. It’s how she excuses her résumé of failures.”

“That’s what I said.”

“I doubt it.”

Brock gestured to the ruins. “I think you flip houses. You’ve got enough of them.”

Phil watched him, tapping his phone against his chin.

“I can work, Uncle Phil. I’m good with a hammer and paintbrush.” Brock crossed his arms.

“Tell me how you lost your scholarship.”

“Wasn’t my fault.”

“Do you have a story or not?”

Brock rolled his eyes. “Teacher gave me a D at the end of the term, a totally subjective grade. She was completely unfair.”

“Old hag with an ax to grind? Teacher for fifty years, angry about today’s slacker youths?”

“Not exactly. She’s the one who brought us up here on a biology field trip that one time.”

“So I have her to thank for the house.”

“I guess. It’s when I first saw it.”

Phil looked at his watch. “Contest the grade.”

“Tried. But Ms. Diaz is some kind of darling, won a bunch of teaching awards. Everyone’s all gaga over her. Hot, too. Probably sleeping with the principal.”

“Oh, that type,” Phil said.

Type. Becca knew Ms. Diaz, and it took no special brains to guess that Brock had finally met a teacher who wouldn’t be charmed by his flashy intelligence into letting a few assignments slide.

“You mean *your* type,” Brock challenged, and his uncle laughed agreeably.

“Unattainable,” Phil said. “Until she learns she’s not.” He put away his phone, his thin tolerance of Brock replaced by some kind of fresh interest.

In her closet, Becca believed she had glimpsed her imminent future with Phil and felt sick. It would take more than silence to save her skin; she knew it the way she knew when her stepdad was about to throw a plate at her head. She worked the card back into the door, and it went in far enough to tap the latch before snagging in some unseen joint of the hardware and

refusing to dislodge.

Brock was saying, “So about a job?” when the gas lantern popped and Becca jumped, bumping the door. The latch jangled and the card remained pinched. She held her breath. Brock’s head turned toward the closet.

“What was that?”

“I think I could come up with something for you to do,” Phil said as if he hadn’t heard Brock’s question. But he was moving toward Becca. She pressed herself against the back wall, then thought there might be a better way. She had just enough room in the short storage space to throw herself at the door if he opened it.

“So you’re offering me a job?”

“I’m offering you an opportunity.”

“Why? I mean, to do what?”

“Now you sound like you’re not sure. Get your head square, Brock. Once you tell me yes, I won’t take no for an answer.”

Phil was so close now that the crack in the door turned opaque.

“No, no. Just tell me what you want me to do.”

“Take your revenge,” Phil said.

“Revenge—? What? Against who?”

“The teacher.”

“Diaz? What do you care about her?”

“I care about you, Brock.”

Becca couldn’t see anything beyond her prison now, but Brock spoke with a frown in his voice. “I’m really not interested in her. I mean, I’m mad, yeah, but she can’t give me money for

Cornell any more than Mom can. I only want some money.”

“You’ll get plenty of that too.”

“How?”

“A little harmless fun. You like a good laugh, so what’s the problem?”

“Uh, you said revenge.”

Phil’s voice spun away from Becca as he said, “Okay, forget it.”

“No, no! Okay. Sorry. Doesn’t matter what. I’ll do it. Just say when.”

Phil cursed.

“I mean it,” Brock whined. “I’m sorry.”

Phil made his nephew wait an agonizing time before saying, “Then we’ll start now.”

He released the door latch, and as soon as the panel began to swing outward, Becca punched it with the full force of her weight. The door should have caught him in the face. The shoulder at least. It might have broken a few of his fingers.

Instead it flew free. She saw the shadowy form of him standing aside as she burst out. She heard the door strain its hinges before snapping back. But she was in the clear.

The problem was she couldn’t see which way to go. The white light of the lamp stunned her eyes and made duplicates of everything in the room—floating black silhouettes that wouldn’t hold their position.

But the biggest black hole seemed to be the front door so she leaped toward it on feet that were far more certain than her eyes.

An unseen obstacle cut off her escape at her ankle and she sprawled. Splinters entered her hands when they took the fall. The crown of her head met a sharp corner and the black spots in her vision came apart like dandelions in the wind. She was shrieking and hugging her leg to her

chest. She rolled to her side. The pain in her shin had teeth.

“Hold this,” Phil said to Brock, handing something over as he knelt beside Becca. She kicked at him and the pain stole her breath. She clutched her knee and feared she might pass out.

Then what would they do to her?

Sawdust bit into Becca’s cheeks and lined her lips. She forced her eyes open, willing them to stay alert. If she couldn’t see, if she didn’t pay attention, their advantage over her would only grow.

In front of her eyes, the wide plane of the fresh wood subfloor reflected the bright glare of the gas lamp. Gradually it came into focus, and as her sight adjusted, the light seemed to change. The white light behind her gave way to gold rays that seemed to surround her. Liquid sun poured over the floor like paint, drowning woodchips in a creamy yellow puddle as it spread.

Then the paint turned into a carpet of softness, silky as chick feathers, rich as melted butter, warm as a window in the sun. She smelled fresh lemon cake and felt safe, even hopeful.

The promise came and went in the space of a breath.

A needle stabbed Becca’s arm and everything golden turned ashy. The carpet vanished. Becca lifted her eyes to Brock. A baseball bat hung from his fingertips as if he’d never seen one in his life and didn’t know what to do with it.

“Help me,” she gasped.

He took a step back, looking as if he’d just walked into a pit of venomous snakes. Because he had, of course. They both had.

“What are you doing?” Brock whispered.

“Starting your training,” Phil said. “We’re going to put her in your car.”

The words had no effect on her. The pain eased and she could hear herself breathing.

Brock swayed. Or that might have been a trick of her mind. She closed her eyes even though she knew she shouldn't.

“Brock! You're working for me now, whether you sprout a conscience or not.”

Brock cleared his throat.

“You said yes, Brock.” Phil swore again. “It's too late now to say no. You can have money or you can have trouble. Are we clear?”

They both sounded so far away.

“Yeah. Yeah, we're clear.”

Then the unstable floor beneath her back did open up and swallow her. And Becca fell out of this world and into a realm where nothing bad ever happened, so long as she wasn't looking.

Chapter 2

Three months later

Serena Diaz's high school teaching career ended while it was still technically beginning, before she had finished paying off her college debts and while tenure was still a distant goal. It ended at the beginning of the week, near the beginning of the school year, on a fair Southern California morning.

The principal of Mission Acres High School in North Hills intercepted her that morning

before she reached the teachers' lounge. He invited her to his office without looking at her.. The half pout, half squint balanced atop his teeped fingers was directed at his desk, as if Serena had caused such deep personal offense that he couldn't bear to lift his eyes.

Serena held a paper cup of coffee and a six-inch stack of graded papers, which she held on to as she lowered herself onto the chrome-and-vinyl seat. She slipped her tote off her shoulder and let it rest against her ankle. The window beside Mr. Walter's desk had a soft-focus dampness in the lower corners that the morning sun hadn't yet erased. The first wave of students had begun to arrive, and they collected themselves in small groups on the grass outside and around the lockers in the exterior halls. The daylight wasn't warm yet. Some clutched sweatshirts across their narrow bodies, others held on tightly to summertime, refusing to give up their flip-flops and tank tops until the fashion became physically unbearable. For some it never did.

"Ms. Diaz," her boss began, and she wondered why he didn't call her Serena as he usually did. "Brock Anderson is in your science class."

Serena's defenses went up. "Fifth period, yes. The AP environmental science." She took a sip of her coffee.

Brock was a sharp student but a bit of a troublemaker—not the reckless kind but the smart kind, the type who knew how to do the barest of minimums to achieve his desired results, though on occasion this practice failed him.

"He got a bad grade on his first big test of the year last week. You can imagine his reaction. Is it about that?"

Mr. Walter all but impaled the fleshy pouch under his chin on those steepled fingers of his. Still he would not look at her. "Yesterday evening I received a phone call from CPS."

"Child Protective Services?"

“Yes.”

Serena tried to imagine what kind of harm might have come to the trophy-winning athlete. Brock had seemed fine when she last saw him—which, come to think of it, was the previous Thursday.

“He was absent Friday,” she said. “Is he all right?”

“He’s made some disturbing allegations.”

“About whom?”

“About you, Ms. Diaz. About you.”

She set her coffee on the lip of Mr. Walter’s desk, then leaned back in the seat and straightened the papers on her lap, wondering what kind of crooked lines connected the dots that were CPS, Brock, and her.

Mr. Walter finally lifted his eyes to the window. A bit of rising sunlight that caught his glasses caused his piercing blue eyes to seem faded and watery.

“Thursday evening, Brock told a friend he was planning to take his own life.”

Serena caught her breath. Surely not because of one test? The news brought her forward again in the chair.

Mr. Walter continued. “The friend told his parents, the parents contacted the Andersons, the Andersons took their son to their family doctor to be evaluated. He was admitted to a behavioral health center for the weekend.”

“That’s terrible!”

Serena reached out to touch Mr. Walter’s desk, as if she might find the right thing to say among the pen cup and stapler and glass apple paperweight. This was a new experience for her, a heartbreaking one. But she couldn’t see Brock’s thinking and wondered if she should feel guilty

about the effects of that grade.

“I knew he was angry about the grade, but I had no idea. Brock’s entirely capable of getting an A before the semester’s end, if he would just—”

“Brock told the social worker assigned to his case that he wanted to die because you had . . . you engaged him in an inappropriate sexual relationship in exchange for the promise of an A on his transcript.”

It took Serena several seconds to personalize the entire meaning of what he had said, identifying each phrase and part of speech as being spoken about *her*. She couldn’t speak.

At some point she’d received training in what to do should the unthinkable happen, should an angry student concoct a potentially devastating lie and drag it out into the public. There were precedents in the district. A history of teachers accused, both truthfully and falsely. But at that moment Serena couldn’t remember a bit of what she had been taught. All that came to mind were the latest guidelines for how to do CPR.

“That’s ridiculous,” she said. “Mr. Walter.”

And in the formality of her boss’s name, Serena got a fresh picture of her unfortunate position. It wasn’t Serena Diaz and Mac Walter having a conversation here, colleagues Serena and Mac having a tête-à-tête regarding a difficult student. It was supervisor Mr. Walter and relative newcomer Ms. Diaz, still so new that the principal, who tough-loved all students as if they were his biological children, probably knew more about Brock Anderson than he did about her. She was in her second year of teaching at Mission Acres. Brock was in his fourth year of ingratiating himself to authority figures with his fingers crossed behind his back. He was a talented graffiti artist, a low-key rebel who didn’t lack any intelligence, only self-discipline.

“He also alleges that when he finally got the courage to oppose you, you retaliated by

giving him an unfair low grade that sabotaged his Cornell scholarship.”

“I did not do any such thing,” Serena insisted.

She gathered up her papers again, this time like a shield over her heart.

“I’ll talk to him.” Serena stooped to grab the straps of her tote bag. “We’ll work out whatever it is that has made him so angry.”

“You’ll do nothing of the sort.”

“Why not?” She stood. Her heart was already trying to flee the scene. Apprehension stiffened her joints and turned her bones into heavy lead rods. “There’s no reason for him to make up that kind of story. I’ll just find out why he—”

“Stop. Please, I need to finish.” Mr. Walter’s A-frame fingers parted and he placed his hands on the desk. He stood, leaning forward slightly, braced on his fingertips as if his legs might give way at any second. She sensed what was coming before he said it.

“You know I have to suspend you immediately, pending an investigation. You’ll still be paid of course.”

“Students can do that? Just say the word and send their teachers home?”

Her tone was all wrong. Embarrassment shut her mouth. She *did* know suspensions were routine in these situations, if the suspicions were at all credible. And sometimes even if they weren’t.

“It’s for everyone’s safety. After what happened at Miramonte . . .”

He didn’t say more; he didn’t need to. Mr. Walter referenced the case that had recently devastated a Los Angeles elementary school, in which a delayed investigation into one teacher’s lewd acts resulted in the entire school staff being replaced and relocated.

“I’m sorry. Yes, of course. I know.”

“You understand that it’s my highest priority to protect the school and all the students here.”

“I feel the same way.”

“There will be an investigation.”

Serena’s shock morphed into fear then. What exactly did Brock have that made his story credible? She pressed her lips together and nodded, then found the courage to meet his eyes, which had finally turned to her when she least wanted them to.

Mr. Walter straightened and sighed, and she saw in the deep lines of his brow something that she had never noticed before, a hint that the distaste in his frown wasn’t for her after all. Maybe it was distress, like a chronic pain that undergirded every day of his existence, that things like this even happened at all. Really, which was worse: Brock’s story as a horrific reality, or as a perverse fantasy aimed to take down a promising teacher?

Somewhere beneath the suffocating shock, she found her professionalism. “You can expect my full cooperation. I don’t have anything to hide.”

Mr. Walter removed his glasses. “Serena.”

The lead in her bones softened. A quiver had overtaken her, a low vibration like a predictable California earthquake. She didn’t notice it until he spoke her given name, and then she thought she might crumble. She managed not to.

“Don’t speak to anyone,” he advised. “Most of all Brock. Take his accusations very seriously, even if they’re false. Call the teachers’ union. Please tell me your dues are current?”

She nodded weakly and recognized these instructions as the ones given to her in the training session that she couldn’t retrieve from her memory.

“They’ll refer you to an attorney,” Mr. Walter continued. “They’ll even pay for it, if you

are in fact not guilty and you file a not-guilty plea, should this go as far as court.”

That one word, *court*, took Serena’s breath away. Lance. She had to call Lance.

“Is there somewhere you can stay besides your home?” He asked the question with the gentleness of a worried father—someone like her own father, who had asked this question of hundreds of women over the years before offering them the safety they so desperately needed.

“Because the press is going to hound you.”

The press. A reality far, far worse than court. She couldn’t think. She didn’t know where she should go. Not to her family, if the press would make their lives miserable too. So many women counted on her family for safety, for shelter, for a place to heal quietly.

“I’m never going to get to teach again, am I?” Serena murmured. “Public opinion will see to that, no matter what the truth is.”

Mac Walter averted his eyes again, powerless to disarm the bomb Brock Anderson had just dropped in her lap.

“Please let me know how I can help.”