

WHAT IF THERE WAS A STRANGER IN YOUR CLOSET?

By Richard R. Cook, Jr.

Twelve-year-old Dantrell Combs, a dark-haired boy who was as thin as a broom, opened his eyes with a gasp and swiftly sat up in bed. Across the darkened room, illuminated only by the dull glow of a street lamp through the curtains, the closet door was slowly squealing closed but then stopped without shutting completely. The boy whispered, “What the...” He reached over and switched on the lamp. With the back of one hand, he mopped away sweat from his forehead, as he darted his eyes about. His focus then returned to the closet door.

He tossed the blanket off of him, landed both feet on the cold tile floor, and stood up. Staring into the blackness inside the closet, he pushed one foot in front of the other toward it. A scratching at the window jerked his head round. Through the white curtains, shadows of tree branches, like long, skeletal fingers, grasped at the glass with the help of the wind. Dantrell turned forward again, quickening his stride.

He halted his steps as the closet door creaked open one inch more. He stood breathing

through his mouth, his throat as dry as a desert, his head feeling like it was on fire. He took one step backward. “Who...” He licked his lips. “Who’s in there?” The hinges squealed as the door opened wider. Dantrell took two long forward strides and slammed the door shut.

He raced across the floor and jumped back into bed. He pulled the blanket up to his chin. With the lamp still glowing, he stared at the closet door, whispering over and over, “It’s just the wind.” Dantrell lay with his legs trembling, the scratching at the window of the jagged fingers of the dead tree clawing into his ears. Who or what stood on the other side of his closet door?

His eyes widened as the knob began to turn. Then the door was slowly pushed into the room. Without waiting to see who or what was about to step out, Dantrell screamed, “Mom! Daddy! Help!” The door then banged shut.

Dantrell sat up, the blanket still up to his chin. “Go away!” he shouted. “This is my room!”

His parents sprung into the room.

“What the hell is the matter?!” shrieked his plump, bearded father.

His mother, black curlers in her hair, sat on the bed and hugged him. “My God, honey,” she said, “you’re shaking like a leaf. What kind of nightmare did you have?”

“The closet,” said Dantrell. “Somebody’s in there.”

His father stepped toward it.

“Careful, Daddy.”

The man opened the door and pulled on a string to light the closet. He shoved aside hanging clothes. “It was just a bad dream, Dantrell,” he said and pulled the string again, switching off the light. He shut the door.

“It wasn’t a dream, I swear.”

“Oh, man. Did they believe you?” asked Freddy, sitting across the table from Dantrell, his voice raised above the chatter and clatter of the school lunchroom. “I bet they didn’t.”

“You’re right,” Dantrell told the fair-haired boy. “They didn’t believe one freaking word.”

“Shoot, I believe you,” said dark-haired Juan, sitting beside Freddy. “Cause the same thing happened to me last night.”

Freddy remarked, “Oh, man. You’re kidding.”

“Nope. This weird-looking guy, real skinny, with a really pasty face was standing next to my bed when I woke up in the middle of the night. When I screamed he touched me on the forehead and ran into the closet. Shoot, my folks didn’t believe me, either.”

“Oh, man, this can’t be happening,” said Freddy. “It happened to me, too, last night.”

Dantrell said, “All right, you two, real freaking funny.”

“No, man, this ain’t no joke,” said Freddy. “Just like Juan said: this real white guy, whiter than chalk, in black clothes was standing at my bed when I woke up. He touched my face. When I screamed he ran into the closet and shut the door. I thought I was dreaming until I got up and looked down at...” He took a bite of his burger without finishing his sentence.

Juan smiled and said, “Shoot, you peed on yourself, didn’t you.”

“Shut up, Juan,” said Freddy.

Juan’s smile was gone. “I ain’t lying, either, Dantrell,” he said. “Shoot, something’s happening that ain’t right.”

Freddy asked, “Oh, man, could it be the same guy?”

“I never saw him, but it probably is,” said Dantrell. “But why? I mean, why us?”

“Yeah,” said Freddy. “And, who the hell was he?”

Juan spoke with his mouth full. “He couldn’t have been a real person, ‘cause he disappeared in the closet.”

Dantrell said, “I don’t know about you two, but I’m putting a chair against my closet door from now on. And I’m sleeping with one eye open.”

“Me, too,” his two friends said in unison.

Then Freddy said, “Oh, man, tomorrow is Saturday. We can play with our helicopters in my backyard.”

Juan again spoke with food in his mouth: “Shoot! I can’t wait.”

Dantrell smacked his lips. “I can’t come.”

“How come?” asked Freddy.

“I gotta go to this stupid thrift shop with my mom in the morning. She hates going anywhere by herself. My daddy works until one o’clock on Saturdays. This is one of those times when I wish I had a brother or sister.”

“Maybe you can come by when you get back,” said Freddy.

“Yeah, maybe.”

Dantrell spoke to his driving mother while staring out the front passenger window the next morning. “Why are you going to this place, Mom?”

She glanced at him through her sunglasses and replied, “Just to see if they have anything I wanna buy. And stop looking like I’m dragging you off to be tortured by the CIA. They sell

some pretty nice stuff at thrift shops. You might just see something you like, yourself.”

Dantrell yawned long and loud.

His mother asked, “You didn’t get much sleep last night, did you? More nightmares?”

“I was scared that a weird man was gonna come out the closet.”

“Oh, that again.”

“Freddy and Juan saw him in their rooms the same night my closet door was moving.

And they were touched by him.”

“Uh-huh. Is that so?”

“Why do parents always think their kids are lying? Why would I make up...” Juan stared up at the white house his mother was parking in front of. A black steeple, like a witch’s pointed hat, towered at one side above the second floor. The two curtainless windows below it stared out dark and dusty. Though the white paint on the rest of the house appeared fresh, the frames around the two windows below the steeple were peeling as if the house’s past was struggling to stay alive. A sign hung above the stairs leading to the front door: Annie’s Thrifts & Things.

“I thought you said this was a new place, Mom.”

“It is.” She unstrapped herself from the seat and raised her sunglasses onto the curls of her black hair. “It just opened a week ago. It used to be somebody’s house, some time ago.”

Stepping out of the car, Dantrell gripped one side of his head with one hand.

“What’s the matter, honey?”

“I don’t know. It’s like somebody just hit me with a freaking baseball bat.”

“Maybe they got some aspirin inside. You should’ve got more sleep last night.”

His mother put an arm round him, and they made their way up the five steps, onto the

porch. The wood creaked with every step they took toward the screen door.

Dantrell clutched his belly as they stepped inside the shop, wondering why he suddenly felt sick. The place was devoid of customers. A lone female clerk stood at the cash register. Items with price tags attached to them were laid out on tables and shelves. They were identifiable things like ancient and new typewriters and ugly lamps in the shapes of cats and dogs. They were also objects that Dantrell could neither make heads nor tails of.

“I’m sorry, ma’am, but we don’t have any aspirin here for your son,” the young woman said.

Dantrell’s mother turned to him. “I’ll only be a minute, honey, then we can get out of here, okay?”

“Okay, Mom.”

Dantrell focused on a closed, black door in a hallway across the room. Suddenly, the cool, musty air of a dirty basement invaded his nostrils. His headache became so intense the room began to spin and become blurred. He collided with a table and held on to it as if to keep from falling to the floor. “Mom!”

“Oh, my God, Dantrell! Your head is bleeding.”

Dantrell grasped his shirt at his sternum, feeling as though creatures were clawing their way up through his esophagus. He was hastily guided out by the shoulders by his mother. Outside, he leaned over the porch railing. Slimy chunks forced their way up and out so violently as to pain Dantrell’s chest and scratch his throat.

His mother put him into the car and started the engine. “I’m taking you to the emergency room,” she said.

“No, Mom.”

“What do you mean no?” she asked, without moving the car.

“I’m okay. My headache is gone, and my stomach feels fine now.”

“But your head,” said his mother, pointing at a certain spot on her own head.

Dantrell fingered the right corner of his forehead and glanced at the blood on his fingertip. “I don’t know where this came from, Mom, but nothing’s wrong with my head.”

His mother took a piece of tissue from the glove compartment. She wiped away the blood and said, “I’ll be damned. You’re right. No sign of a cut or anything.” She stared at him with a tilted head. “What the hell happened? Why did you get so sick in there? And now you’re perfectly fine.”

“Your guess is as good as mine, Mom. But the next time we come here, can I stay in the car? Do I even have to freaking come at all?”

“Don’t worry,” said his mother, as she drove off, “neither of us is ever coming back here again.”

While they rode in silence, the black door inside the thrift shop refused to leave Dantrell’s thoughts, as his mind’s voice rambled: It leads to the basement. I smelled it. But how? Why? What does that place have to do with me? Whatever the connection is, it can’t be good. What horrible thing happened in that freaking basement?

As his mother parked the car in front of their home, Dantrell asked her if he could take his remote controlled helicopter to Freddy’s house. After getting a yes he ran to the front door, unlocked it with his key, raced inside past the ringing telephone, and skipped upstairs to his bedroom.

He grabbed the helicopter and remote controller from atop his dresser. He spoke to the toy as he moved toward the doorway. “You, my friend, are gonna knock Freddy’s and Juan’s helicopters right outta the freaking sky, right?”

When he got back downstairs, his mother was sniffing teary-eyed with the phone to her ear. “I’m so sorry,” she said softly. She glanced at Dantrell and turned away. “It’s so strange,” she muttered into the receiver, “that it would happen to both of them at the same time.”

Dantrell moved round his mother and faced her. “Both of who, Mom? What happened?”

“I’m gonna tell my son now.” She uttered several more words before hanging up.

Her face was older, more wrinkled, as she gazed at Dantrell. In a hushed voice she said, “Sit down, honey.”

Dantrell shook his head. “I don’t wanna sit down. Just tell me what happened.”

“Your friends, honey: Freddy and Juan. They died this morning.”

Dantrell’s mouth hung open. He loosened his hold on the helicopter and remote controller; they crashed to the hardwood floor. He whispered, “They were touched,” as tears swelled in his eyes.

“What was that, honey?”

Dantrell took two steps and collapsed onto the sofa. Lying down with one side of his face against the cushion, he repeated, “They were touched.”

“Who were touched, Dantrell? Freddy and Juan?”

“How did they die, Mom?”

“Freddy’s mother told me they both died in their sleep. Now, what’s this about them being touched?”

Dantrell stared sideways at his mother's pant legs as she stood before the sofa. "He killed them," he said.

"He who, honey? What are you talking about? She didn't mention anything about her house being broken into."

"The skinny man from the closet. Whiter than chalk, Freddy said."

Dantrell's mother sat on the sofa above his head. Stroking his black, short cropped hair, she said, "Are you talking about that dream you had the other night about—"

Dantrell leaped to a sitting position. "I already told you and Daddy it wasn't a dream. The same thing happened to Freddy and Juan that same night that man tried to come out of my closet, only they were touched by him; I wasn't."

"Honey, I don't understand what you're saying."

"Don't you see, Mom? If I had gotten touched, I would've freaking died, too."

His mother wrinkled her face. "Touched? By who? Dantrell, if you're so sure it wasn't a dream, then who is this man you think was in your closet?"

Dantrell leaned forward and buried his face in his hands, his elbows on his knees. "I don't know who he is, Mom. All I know is I'm scared he's gonna get me next."

"Don't talk like that, Dantrell. Nobody's gonna hurt you. I know this is all strange that both your friends—"

"Strange is not the word, Mom."

"Did you know that your grandfather and Freddy's and Juan's grandfathers were best friends in college?"

"So?"

“So your friends’ grandfathers died a couple weeks ago: one in a car accident; one because of a heart attack. And they were both in their fifties and they both died on the same day.”

Dantrell shifted his face in his hands toward his mother.

She continued: “And, as you know, your grandfather is laying in a hospital bed dying of throat cancer. And now those two boys. I believe in coincidences, but...” She left the sentence unfinished, staring thoughtfully away.

Dantrell leaned back against the sofa. “Mom, let’s move. A long freaking way from here.”

She looked at him. “We can’t afford that right now, honey. Besides, it won’t change anything that’s already happened. Your grandfather will still be where he is, and we’ll still be visiting him every Sunday and Wednesday.”

After another of Dantrell’s sleepless nights with a chair propped up against the closet doorknob, he and his parents greeted his grandfather in the hospital with smiles and hugs. Following several minutes of small talk, Dantrell’s grandfather requested that his son and daughter-in-law come back in thirty minutes so that he could speak with his grandson alone. The couple agreed and left the room.

The bald man was sitting up against pillows, his eyes narrow and rheumy, his voice gruff like the screech of a car engine struggling to start.

“Your father called me last night,” he told Dantrell. “I’m sorry about your friends.”

Dantrell pulled his chair closer to the bed. “Did he tell you about the man in the closet, Granddaddy?”

“No, but I think I know what you’re talking about.”

Dantrell's eyes nearly popped out of his head. He asked quickly, "What do you know about the man in the closet?"

"Did you know my two best friends died?"

"They were my friends' grandfathers, yeah, I know."

"I have to tell you a story. Something that happened to me and my two friends well over thirty years ago. Something I wish never would've happened."

Dantrell leaned forward.

His grandfather began his story. "Late one night, well after midnight, after we drink a case of beer together, we wanna buy some marijuana, only we don't have any money. God almighty, how I wish we had just gone back to the college dorms and slept off that beer. But instead, we do something stupid. We know about this old lady who lives alone in an old, white house."

Dantrell gasped. "White house? Is it here in New Bern?"

"Yeah, not far from where you live. It was just made into a thrift shop."

"Me and Mom went there yesterday. I got sick when I went inside."

"You got sick?"

Dantrell told him about the black door inside the thrift shop.

His grandfather's eyes narrowed even more, almost squinting, as he listened.

Dantrell concluded by asking, "Is that a basement door, Granddaddy?"

The man nodded. "It is. Anyways, the three of us get into the old lady's house through an unlocked back window. The plan is to find her purse and get whatever money we can get, and get out. We had seen her from time to time at the Piggly Wiggly. At the checkout counter she would

always have a purse filled with money, especially at the beginning of the month. This night is the second of May.” He licked his lips and cleared his throat. “She had a reputation in the neighborhood for being a real nice lady who sometimes gave out candy bars to kids. But I know now that she was hiding a secret about what she was capable of.” He turned away and gazed at the sun-streaked window, a tear sliding from one eye.

Dantrell said quietly, “Granddaddy. What happened in the house?”

His grandfather looked at him and blinked. With his scratchy voice he resumed his story. “We can’t find the purse anywhere downstairs, so we start up the stairs, thinking it’s probably in the old lady’s bedroom. We stop before we get to the top of the stairs when we hear a toilet flush and then footsteps, like slippers shuffling along the dimly-lit hallway upstairs. She almost walks right past us when she turns and looks down with this shock on her face. I’m behind my two buddies. I turn and head back down, but not my buddies.

“When I get to the bottom of the stairs, I turn to see that the old lady has a shotgun in her hands. She comes down the stairs pointing it at us. ‘What the hell are you doing in my house?!’ she says while she’s backing us down the steps and into the living room.

“She flips a switch for the light and goes, ‘Hey, I seen you three somewhere before. What do you want here?’ She’s got these giant, pink rollers in her gray hair. She can’t be no less than seventy-five years old.

“Anyways, I says to her, ‘We’re sorry, ma’am, we came to the wrong house. So we’ll leave now.’

“The tallest of my two buddies, who drank most of the beer, inches his way closer toward her and says, ‘All we want is fifty dollars, old lady, and we’ll leave you alone.’

“I tell him we should go, but he keeps moving toward her.

“‘I’ll shoot you,’ she tells him. But she’s backing away. And she keeps backing away until she sees over her shoulder the black door behind her. She tells us that if we don’t leave she’ll put a spell on us.

“I don’t remember exactly, but my buddy says something like, ‘First, you’re gonna shoot us, now you wanna put a spell on us. Make up your mind, old Lady.’

“My other buddy, who was as short as the old lady, says, ‘You two can stay here if you want, but I’m leaving,’ only he doesn’t move a muscle.

“Then the old lady says that we’re all cursed and that we will not reach old age. And one grandchild from each of us will also be cursed. ‘The three of them,’ she says, ‘will be touched in the middle of the night by The Stranger and taken away into the darkness, never to be seen again.’ Then she stares at me. ‘You. You got a good heart. You and your grandchild will be last.’

“That’s when my tall buddy tries to get the shotgun from the old lady. In the struggle, she is pushed back against the black door; it opens and she falls backward down the basement stairs.

“‘Oh shit!’ I says. ‘Look what you did, man. All we had to do was leave.’

“I switch on the light at the top of the stairs and go down to check her pulse; she’s as dead as dead can get, laying across the steps with her eyes staring at nothing, and blood coming out one side of her head. We decide to keep the basement light on, to make it look like she was going down into it when she slipped and fell. And we decide to take nothing. We put the shotgun in her bedroom. We don’t have to worry about fingerprints because we’re all wearing gloves. And we leave through that same unlocked kitchen window, as if we were never there.”

“Nobody was arrested, Granddaddy?”

The man shook his head. “The cause of death was deemed an accident. After all, none of the old lady’s money was missing, and neither was anything else. And her house didn’t look like it had been broken into.” He coughed and again cleared his throat. But there was no difference in the hoarseness of his voice. “The three of us vowed never to speak of that night, not to each other or anybody else. I felt the need to break that vow today. We never took what the old lady said about the curse seriously.”

“But it’s coming true, Granddaddy. Your friends and mine are freaking dead. And now look at you.” Dantrell leaned back in the chair. “What’s gonna happen to me, Granddaddy? Is The Stranger gonna—”

“Soon you’ll be the last one alive, my boy. You have to do the best you can to stay alive. Do not let The Stranger touch you.”

“But how long do I have to fight The Stranger? Forever?”

“I don’t know. Your job now is to not let him win, no matter how long it takes, no matter what you have to do.” He sniffled. “I am so sorry, my boy, for helping to bring all this on you.”

Dantrell blew out a breath and said, “It’s done, Granddaddy, and that’s that.”

That night, Dantrell lay in bed beside the glowing lamp. He was staring at the closed closet door, at the bell he had placed above it, his eyelids becoming heavier. Finally, his eyes shut.

He found himself floating in a sea of black nothingness. The distant, constant ringing of a bell reached his ears and grew louder. Was it The Stranger in the closet? He had to get out of that

dark dream and back in his bedroom. He must open his eyes to avoid The Stranger's touch. In an effort to wake himself Dantrell screamed at the top of his lungs, but only silence past his lips.

Suddenly, the bell was blaring, hurting his ears. He sat up in bed. The closet door was open. The chair that had been propped up against the knob was now on its side on the floor.

Dantrell snapped his head round with a gasp. With wide eyes and an opened mouth, he slowly raised his stare at a tall man dressed in a black suit, until his eyes fell upon a face as white as a ghost. Above a fleshy, jutting chin were lips that looked as though they had been drawn with a thin, black pencil. There was not a mark, pimple, or freckle in sight. The nose was long, with the darkness inside the nostrils highlighted by the surrounding white. The black eyes were like a doll's: cold and dead. And the head was bald.

The lips formed a smile as The Stranger lifted a hand and smothered his palm against Dantrell's forehead. Then he whispered, "I will take you tonight."

Dantrell screamed and leaped across the bed, onto the floor. He curled into a ball in the corner between the wall and the bedpost, shutting his eyes, his whole body trembling.

He then opened his eyes with a jerk. He raised his head and peeked over the mattress; The Stranger was gone.

His parents rushed into the room.

"My God, honey, what is it?" asked his mother.

"Another dream, right?" asked his father.

Dantrell crawled back into bed. "He touched me!"

His mother sat beside him. "Who touched you, honey?"

"The Stranger, Mom. Remember I told you about him? He's gonna take me away, like

Juan and Freddy.”

His father’s voice was thunder. “You need to stop this, Dantrell.”

“But, Daddy, it’s true. This weird looking man came out of the…” Dantrell stared at the closet door. It was still closed with the chair against the knob, and the bell remained at the top, positioned to ring if the door was opened. “It was a dream,” he said.

“Finally, he admits it,” said his father. “I’m going back to bed.” He left the room.

Dantrell smiled. “I can’t believe it was only a dream.” His smile dropped. “But it was so real. I was even on the floor.”

“Dreams are like that, honey. They’re real until you wake up.” His mother then pursed her lips and frowned. The flesh between her eyes wrinkled.

“What’s the matter, Mom?”

“We just got a call from the hospital. Your grandfather—”

“He’s dead, ain’t he?”

His mother nodded.

The two embraced.

His mother kissed him on the forehead and stood up. Her speech was near to a whisper. “Now, go back to sleep.” She silently left the room, closing the door behind her.

Dantrell released a throaty sigh. He sank under the blanket, covering everything but his eyes, the lamp remaining aglow beside him.

He kept watch over the closet door, wondering where that dark place was that Juan and Freddy had been taken to and hoping that he would never find out.

His vision clouded, every muscle limp, Dantrell Combs fought to make sure his bobbing

eyelids did not shut. They raised sharply at the jingle of the bell.

WHAT IF THERE WAS A KILLING IN YOUR HOME?

By Richard R. Cook, Jr.

Sixteen-year-old Tyga McKnight jerked his head toward the bang at the window that night. Seated on the edge of the bed, he used a finger to flick aside one of his dreadlocks that had strayed over one eye, while staring open-mouthed at the closed curtains. His imagination ignited with all kinds of explanations for the sound: from wind-swept debris to a creature, having climbed to the second floor with its claws, desperate to break through the glass.

“What was that?” asked Condie sitting beside him.

Tyga rose and crept toward the window as if to catch it by surprise. He snatched the curtains open. The wind moaned like a tortured ghost. Tyga peered down through the reflection of his white T-shirt and blue jeans in the cracked glass at a running figure. He blinked and squinted as the swaying lantern below wildly swung its glow, allowing shadows and light to chase one another across the leaf-littered lawn. Was that really a person running out of the yard? Tyga shook his head and said, “It’s only the wind. Something was blown up here probably.”

He rejoined Condie on the bed. Gazing over her shimmering black bangs, brown skin, and eyes, he said, "So, where were we?" He reached past her for the glowing lamp, but the girl seized his arm before he could switch it off. "What's the matter?" he asked.

"I told you, Tyga. I'm not ready for that."

"It's my locks, ain't it? Or my goatee?"

"Course it's not your hair, Tyga. And it's got nothing to do with that peach fuzz at the bottom of your chin, either. It's like I said: I'm just not ready yet."

Tyga smacked his lips. "People stare at my dreadlocks. I think a lot of people hate them. I don't know why."

"You know nothing's wrong with your hair, Tyga."

"Yeah, right; tell that to Frank."

"Who's Frank?"

"You don't know Frank? Tall guy with a head as big as a watermelon?"

Condie giggled and shook her head. "I don't think so."

"Some people call him Frankenstein. He makes fun of my hair a lot. In swim class last week I swear the guy tried to kill me."

"What?" A crowd of wrinkles erupted between Condie's brows, causing her to squint. "How?"

"He held my head under the water until my best friend, Bo, stopped him."

"My brother Bo, right?"

"Oh, yeah. I don't know why I keep forgetting he's your brother. Maybe it's because you're dark and he's light."

“But, why would he do that?”

“Who? Frankenstein?”

“Yeah.”

“The guy just hates me, for some reason. He said he was just joking. Yeah, right. Some joke.”

Tyga placed a hand on Condie’s shoulder. “What’s the problem, Condie? I mean, everything’s perfect right now. My parents won’t be back ‘til morning, and you don’t have to be back home ‘til after midnight, right?”

“I know, but—”

“And look at you: wearing your favorite pink blouse; and your hair in a ponytail and bangs, just like I told you I like it. You did this just to come by and talk?” He took her hands. “When it’s so perfect for us to do a whole lot more.” He smiled.

Condie withdrew one hand. “Is that all you think about?” She glanced at her watch.

Tyga asked, “You gonna turn into a pumpkin or something at the stroke of midnight?”

“Huh?”

“You keep looking at the time. How come? It’s not even close to midnight. It can’t even be eleven thirty yet.”

Condie took back the other hand from him and blinked over to the window, where Tyga had left the curtains open. “You’re gonna think it’s stupid,” she said.

“No, I won’t.”

“It’s my grandmother.” She dropped her eyes to her wrist watch, fidgeting with it. “She lives in Haiti, where some people still believe in that Voodoo stuff. She likes coming here to

Buzzards Bay at this time of the year. She likes the autumns in Massachusetts. She said the leaves here are—”

“Earth to Condie...”

Condie glanced up at him. “Anyway, at dinner tonight she was telling us about today being one of the...”

Tyga drew his head closer to her. “One of the...”

“You’re gonna laugh.”

Tyga straightened his posture. “Then don’t tell me.”

Tugging at her cross necklace, Condie looked Tyga dead in the eye and said, “Well, here goes: She told us that today is one of the Wicked Cen-Trio.”

Tyga wrinkled his face. “What the hell is that?”

“Today is Friday the thirteenth, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, every century, she told us, has its own set of three Friday the thirteenths that are supposed to be genuine days of bad luck for everybody. These three Fridays are called the Wicked Cen-Trio. There’s a whole lot of Friday the thirteenths in a century, but only three of them are truly unlucky—according to my grandmother, today is one of them.”

Tyga rolled his eyes. “Oh, brother.” He came to his feet and took four steps to the window. He gazed at the whirling leaves and twigs as they collided with the cracked glass, saying, “So, this is why you came by tonight?” He turned from the window. “To tell me this?”

“My grandmother scared me,” said Condie, still tugging at her cross necklace, which she always did when she was lying. But lying about what? “I guess I wanted to be with somebody I

felt safe with.” Was this a mixture of lies and truths?

“Safe?”

“I didn’t wanna be by myself. My parents are in their bedroom.”

“Condie, you make bad luck just by worrying about it.” Tyga leaned his buttocks against the window sill, folding his arms. “Let me see if I got this straight: Every hundred years—”

“No,” said Condie. “Every century, like the nineteenth, twentieth, twenty-first, and so on.”

“That’s what I mean. In every century there are these three wicked Friday the thirteenths, which is when something bad happens to everybody.”

“Yeah, either directly or indirectly. Like if something bad happens to somebody you know or really care about but not to you, that would be indirectly. Believe me, Tyga, it’s really what my grandmother told us.” If that was the truth, then what was the lie?

Tyga took three steps forward. “Condie, I swear if you’re lying—” He jumped at the ringing of the doorbell and stared over at the half-closed bedroom door.

“You gonna answer it?” asked Condie.

“Huh? Yeah. I’m just wondering who it could be this late. I’ll...I’ll be right back.” Tyga bolted out the room.

As he skipped down the stairs, the eyes of his great grandparents in the portrait on the wall followed him as always. Tyga anchored his sneakers to the bottom step. From five feet away, he watched the doorknob jerk back and forth as the bell rang over and over. He pushed one foot forward, over the edge, down to the floor. He did the same with the other.

Pain exploded in his heart at the brief flickering of the light. He looked up at the cluster

of electric candles suspended from the ceiling and wondered if it was a warning for him.

He dropped one sneaker in front of the other toward the door, with the sensation of weights attached to his ankles. Were the groans of the wooden floor boards beneath his feet the house's way of begging him not to go to the door? He stopped, took a step back, licked his lips, swallowed, then moved forward again.

“Who is it?” he shouted. Only the doorbell replied.

He flipped a switch for the outside light. The ringing ceased; the knob hung still.

Tyga peered through a side window. His eyes darted about, expecting to witness a figure dashing away from the house. On the other side of the oak tree, standing tall in the front yard, stretched the narrow, empty road. Beyond the road, lights across the bay twinkled like stars.

Tyga unfastened the deadbolt, leaving the chain in place. He grabbed the knob and twisted it, whispering, “This is not a good idea.” He then pulled on it, but to no avail. Was this another attempt by the house to protect him? With all his strength, he grunted and pulled until the door relented, his feet stumbling backward as he unwittingly let go of the knob. The chain prevented the door from opening further than a crack.

As the wind shoved itself inside, Tyga stepped forward and peeked through the opening. Only trees, whose sparse leaves danced with the breezes, their colors of red, gold, and brown faded in the porch light, were visible to him beyond the house. He yelled, “Frankenstein, you big-headed monster, is that you out there?”

The wind howled.

Tyga gasped as a shadowy figure of his height leaped in front of him. He whipped his head back as the blade of an ax was thrust inside, below the chain. He used his shoulder to bang

the door against the blade. He did so repeatedly until the ax was pulled back, allowing the door to slam shut. Tyga shook in an instant as if struck by lightning. He fastened the deadbolt, leaned his back against the door, and blew out a breath, two dreadlocks hanging over his face.

“Somebody’s playing games,” he muttered.

He faced the door and shouted, “I’m calling the cops.”

Footsteps pattered hastily away.

Tyga turned around and glanced at the floor, remembering its groans earlier, and then up to the portrait on the wall over the stairs. The stern, staring eyes of his sitting great grandmother and standing great grandfather, aimed askance at him, shouted, You were warned!

The candlelight fixture above him flickered again. “Yeah, yeah,” he said gazing up at it. “I should’ve listened to all of you.” Then he whispered, “Shit. I’m talking to the house.”

He then headed for the stairs but spun round at the boom, boom, boom at the door. His mouth opened, eyes bulged, legs wobbled. One foot after the other stepped unsteadily backward. Tyga’s heels hit the first stair and his whole body tumbled backward onto the steps. He got up, massaging his elbow, and raced up the stairway. The booming halted as he reached the second-floor landing.

Tyga stumbled breathlessly into his room.

“Tyga, what happened? I heard some banging,” said Condie, standing beside the bed.

He told her what had happened except for the ax. Then he said, “I stood there and dared him to break through my door. I bet he thinks he scared me.”

“You’re shivering, Tyga.”

“Yeah, it’s kinda cold out there.”

“You’re not gonna call the police?”

Tyga placed his hands on her shoulders. “I will if he does it again. It’s probably just Frankenstein having his fun. In this kinda weather he’s probably on his way home by now.”

“I saw a cat on your ledge a minute ago. I think it wants to get in. And I don’t think it likes me.”

Tyga stepped over to the window. “It’s gone,” he said. “It was a black cat, wasn’t it?”

“Yeah, that’s right. Scared the hell outta me.”

Tyga turned back to Condie. “Whenever the weather is bad, she comes to the ledge begging me to let her in. Sometimes I do. I don’t know why she wouldn’t like you.”

“I got a crazy idea why.” Condie sat on the bed.

Tyga sat facing her, the half-closed bedroom door behind him. “What time is it now?” he asked.

Condie glanced at her watch. “Thirteen minutes ‘til midnight.”

“I don’t believe what your grandmother said about today being an unlucky Friday the thirteenth for everybody. Nothing bad happened to me today unless you wanna count that big-headed asshole out there.” He moved closer to her, breathing her perfume. “Condie, bad things have a bad habit of popping up from time to time by coincidence. I don’t mean no disrespect to your grandmother, but it’s not because of some superstitious crap.” He softened his voice.

“Besides, what could go wrong this close to the end of the day?” He reached across her and switched off the lamp. Then he leaned toward her in the moonlit darkness.

Pressing the tip of her finger against Tyga’s puckered lips, Condie asked, “Which letter was confusing to you, the n or the o?”

“Huh?”

They twitched at a sudden shattering of glass.

“What was that?” asked Condie.

Tyga reached past her and switched on the lamp. “It came from downstairs.”

“Tyga, you gotta call the police.”

“Yeah, I guess so.” Again, he reached past Condie, this time for his cell phone, lying underneath the lamp.

Condie clutched his arm before he could grab it. “Did you hear that?” she asked.

“Hear what?”

“It sounded like...like a footstep.”

“A foot—”

“Shshsh.”

Tyga turned his head and stared through the opening of the door, into the darkness of the hall. The floorboards creaked once. “Who’s out there?”

The door moved inward with a squeal, as it revealed more of the darkness in the hall.

Tyga felt hot sweat breaking through every pore of his body. Everything that had happened downstairs—the jerking of the doorknob, the ax, the pounding of the door—all flashed through his mind. What was going on?

Tyga and Condie jumped as a black, hairy animal raced inside with a scream.

It leaped onto Tyga’s lap. Tyga blew out a breath and, as he stroked the animal’s fur, said, “You found a way to get in again, didn’t you, girl?”

“I don’t like this cat.” Condie glimpsed at her watch.

“There you go looking at your watch again. Are we all safe now on planet Earth? Is it midnight yet?”

“No and no.”

“Condie, I don’t know how you can believe that crap.”

“We got nine minutes before this Friday the thirteenth is over. What do you think made that noise downstairs? I think somebody’s in your house.”

“A couple weeks ago,” said Tyga, “this cat got into the house late one night and broke my mother’s favorite vase.” He gazed at the cat’s green eyes. “What did you break this time, girl?”

“How can you be sure it was the cat and not somebody breaking in your house, Tyga?”

“Cuz I’m not paranoid like some people I know.”

“Paranoid can save your life.”

Tyga placed the cat on the floor and stood up. “All right, you naughty cat, let’s go see what you broke this time.”

Condie, too, stood up. “I’m going with you.”

The two then stood at the top of the stairs, gazing down.

Condie remarked, “It’s cold. A window must be open.”

“What the hell...” muttered Tyga. He skipped down the stairs, Condie at his side.

They halted at the bottom.

“Oh, God, Tyga!”

Tyga stared open-mouthed at the wide open front door, the wind sweeping autumn leaves inside. He ran and hastily shut it, fastening every lock. “It’s gotta be that idiot Frankenstein.”

“And you think he opened your door? Or, you think the cat did that?”

“Very funny,” said Tyga, glancing up at the electric candles as they flickered once more.

“Tyga, somebody is in your house.” Condie yelled as the lights went out.

“Oops,” said Tyga. “Did I just bump into one of your little whatnots?”

“Keep it up, Tyga. You’re asking for it.”

“Finally, she understands.” Tyga peered into the darkness. “You got your phone with you? Mine is still upstairs”

“I left it at home.”

“What? You sick or something?”

“What do you mean?”

“You without that phone is like you without one of your hands. You must’ve been in a real hurry to get out of the house.”

“Where’s your house phone?”

“My father keeps moving the damn thing.” Tyga’s leg collided with a low table, resulting in a crash to the floor. “Shit! Just like he keeps moving the freaking furniture. That’s gotta be my mom’s vase, the one the cat broke before. I don’t think she’ll be able to glue it back this time.”

“Your mom actually glued it back?”

“It was in four pieces then. This sounded more like a thousand. There’s a flashlight in the —Hey,” said Tyga making his way back toward the door. He flipped the switch for the outside light, but nothing happened. “Well, it was worth a try. I’ll get my phone upstairs.”

Condie grabbed his arm. “He might be up there, Tyga. Let’s just get the flashlight and use the phone down here.”

“Yeah, okay. Plus, something else is down here that I want. And the flashlight is in the

kitchen.”

Tyga took Condie by the hand. His wide eyes struggling to make out objects in the darkness, he guided her down a short hall, past his parents’ bedroom. He focused on a dull glow in the kitchen ahead. He knew it was coming from an alley light post, through the window. The back of his hand made contact with the refrigerator door handle.

They spoke in hushed tones:

“You feel that draft?” asked Condie.

“Yeah. I see the window. It’s broken.”

“And it’s raised, too. Somebody is in your house, Tyga.”

“How many times you gonna tell me that, Condie?”

“Until you believe it.”

Tyga guided her deeper inside the kitchen. “I hate to say this,” he said, “but I do believe it.”

He released Condie’s hand and pulled open a drawer at the kitchen sink. He took out a flashlight, switched it on. He aimed the beam of light ahead of him. “Now we can find where my father put the phone last and call the freaking cops.” Making his way out of the kitchen with Condie close behind, Tyga raised his voice: “You better get out of my house, Frankenstein, or whoever you are. I’ll sic my ferocious cat on you.” He then muttered, “Wherever she is.”

“Good God, Tyga, say you have a dog.”

Tyga yelled, “I mean, my ferocious dog.”

Condie smacked her lips. “We’re dead.”

“Don’t say that, Condie. Nothing’s gonna happen to us. I’ll protect you.”

“Like I said.” Condie peered at her wristwatch in the glow of the flashlight. “We got a minute and a half,” she said, “until this day is over.”

Tyga took a left turn into his parents’ bedroom.

“Where are you going, Tyga? Is there a phone in here?”

“My parents only use their cell phones in here, which I’m sure they took with them.”

“So, why are we in their room?”

Without a word, Tyga aimed the beam of light at the closet door, while moving toward it. He swung the door open and gave Condie the flashlight. He reached up to one of the top shelves and brought down a shoe box. He then removed the lid and took out a handgun.

“Oh, no, Tyga. You can’t use that.”

Tyga took the flashlight from Condie. “Why not?”

“Because...”

They jumped at the sudden appearance of a ski-masked figure in the doorway gripping an ax above his head. The figure charged at them with a roar. Tyga aimed the gun.

“No, Tyga, it’s my brother!” cried Condie.

Tyga pulled the trigger.

The figure collapsed in the doorway, as the ax struck the hardwood floor with a thump.

“Oh, shit! What did you just say, Condie?”

Condie rushed over to the sprawled, motionless body. “Bo! Oh, God, Bo!” She lifted the ski mask from his face.

His mouth hanging open, the feeling of a war erupting inside his belly, Tyga stared at blood gushing from the heart region of Bo’s chest.

Condie's words struggled through her weeping. "It was supposed to be a joke. Just a joke"

Tyga McKnight dropped the gun to the floor, while the war inside his belly climbed.

Condie's watch beeped at the stroke of midnight.

WHAT IF YOU HAD A FLAT TIRE ON A DARK, DESOLATE ROAD?

By Richard R. Cook, Jr.

The baritone voice screeched out of the cellphone, which was in speaker mode: “You’re on what road?”

“Clinton road, still here in New Jersey,” said Ty Washington. “Looks like the loneliest road in the world, and I’m the only sucker on it.”

“I heard a lot of weird shit about that ten-mile stretch.”

Ty plucked at his beard and asked, “You’re trying to scare a horror writer, Roman?”

“I’m only your editor, remember? It’s your job to scare me and the rest of the world.”

“Okay, I’ll bite. What weird shit did you hear about this road?”

“People seeing ghosts, red eyes glowing in the woods, dead bodies, you name it. Just in case any of this is true, keep going and don’t stop. If you gotta take a piss, put a knot in it.”

“Damn, Roman, it’s only a ten-mile stretch. Don’t tell me you believe any of this crap.”

“After all the scary shit you’ve written, you don’t believe any of it could be true?”

“What can I say, I’m a horror writer who doesn’t believe in monsters or ghosts.”

“You said you’re the only one on the road? What are you seeing out there?”

Ty bent his head toward the windshield. “Not much, other than the trees are starting to lean over the road like they’re trying to smother it. And no street lights.”

“You know what this sounds like, don’t you?”

“Like one of my stories.”

“Like that story you wrote about the guy who got a flat tire in the middle of nowhere. You know if you were the main character in your own story right now, you wouldn’t get off that road alive. You do realize how you put all your characters through hell, and not just once in a single story, don’t you?”

“Well, since I’m not a character in my story, Roman, I guess I’ll be getting off this road and seeing my wife and daughter again, right?”

“Let’s hope so.”

“You’re gonna have to try harder than that if you’re still trying to scare me.”

“This is my revenge for all those nights my wife woke up in the middle of the night from nightmares after reading your horror...” Roman’s voice was replaced by a dial tone.

Ty reached and pressed a button to hang up the phone. He muttered, “So much for anybody keeping me company until I get the hell off this creepy road. How ‘bout my favorite radio station doing the honors.” He pressed another button.

“...news bulletin for northern New Jersey,” a voice on the radio was announcing. “An ax-wielding psychopath is feared to be in the area of Clinton...” The radio was overcome by static.

“Just my luck, an ax murderer. This night is getting better and better.”

Ty jumped at the sound of a pop. He gripped the steering wheel in his fists as he fought to steer the car to the side of the road. “Oh, shit! Not out here.”

He brought the car to a rest and reached and pulled a lever to unlock the trunk, then switched on the hazard lights.

“Well,” he said, getting out of the car, “nothing to worry about.” He glanced at the front, driver-side tire. “Just a flat. Shit happens.”

Loosening his tie, he stepped to the rear of the car. The hairs on the nape of his neck stood at attention as he gazed down the dark, empty road. He then turned to the woods on one side and then toward the vast, black field on the other side. A speck of light was visible from a house miles away. He turned back to the car and lifted the lid of the trunk. He pulled out the spare tire and tools.

After placing the jack underneath the car, Ty leaped to his feet and swung round, staring into the dark woods. He shouted, “Somebody there?” Then he whispered, “Damn it, I’m hearing things. Or maybe it’s a harmless rabbit. Or a harmless serial killer.”

He again stooped beside the flat tire. After loosening the lug nuts, he cranked the jack until the tire was lifted off the ground. He removed the nuts from the flat tire and pulled the tire out.

“Having fun?”

Ty gasped, dropped the tire, and fell back on his buttocks. He turned and gazed up at a smiling, twenty-something man with dreadlocks and with bloody sores on his face, neck, and arms.

“Where the hell did you come from?” asked Ty.

“Your mind.”

“What?”

“You’re hurting my feelings, bro. How can you not remember me?”

Ty stood up. “I know you, but from where?”

“I already told you, from your mind. Driving drunk; a flat tire in the middle of nowhere; snakes; going round and round; the ax man. Any bells ringing yet?”

“This is a joke, right? You read my book and you’re trying to look like the character in one of my stories.”

The man shook his head. His smile was gone. “No joke, Ty. All the shit you did to me in that story will all happen to you tonight, only not in the same order and not in the same ways. Oh, and there’s one little surprise that will happen to you that you didn’t put in your story, bro.”

Ty audibly forced out a breath and said, “Oh, good, I love surprises. And I’m not your damn bro.”

“You put me through all kinds of hell in that story. And why them damn snakes, bro?”

“Oh, I see. That’s what all those so-called bloody bite marks are from.” Ty grinned. “From the story I wrote.”

“I’m not the only character in your book who’s happy to see you stuck out here in the middle of nowhere.”

Ty got off his buttocks and knelt beside his car. “Go away and let me change my tire in peace.”

“You put twelve stories in your book. But don’t worry, you won’t have to deal with all twelve of your characters tonight. Just one of us should be enough to scare you to death.”

Ty mounted the spare tire. "I hope it's all right if I just ignore you and change my tire."

"Then what?"

"Then I was thinking about running you over."

The man chuckled. "No, bro, you're gonna go through the same shit you put me through. Ah, the poetry of fate."

Ty swung his head round toward the man, who had already turned and was walking back toward the woods. "Oh, hell!" said Ty, staring at a bloody gash on the back of the man's head. "That's a helluva makeup job." He switched his attention back to the tire. "You really went all out for this joke, with your stupid ass." As he tightened the lug nuts of the spare tire, he muttered, "Exactly the way it looks in my story." Then Ty turned back to the man and raised his voice. "How the hell did you know I would be at this place, at this time?"

The man glanced over his shoulder and asked, "You don't really think that this ax hole in the back of my head is really just a good makeup job, do you, bro?" He then continued on and disappeared into the woods.

Having finished, and placed the flat tire into the trunk, Ty leaped back into the car, strapped himself in, and locked all the doors. He dropped a heavy foot onto the gas pedal, the high beams illuminating the road.

Static continued to plague the radio as Ty switched from station to station. He then pressed a button on his cell phone. "No signal," he muttered. "No radio. No nothing. I am officially promising myself that this is the first and most definitely last time I will ever drive on this..."

He sniffled. "Why the hell does it smell like a brewery in here?"

His heart skipped a beat at a burst of rapid rattling coming from inside the car.

“Oh, shit, now what?”

Upon the nape of Ty’s neck came a swift, wet lick, as if from a tiny tongue. He stepped harder on the gas. A snake came from behind and slithered around his throat. He swung the steering wheel to the right, slamming that side of the car against the guardrail of a bridge. With the snake choking him, he clawed at it with one hand while screeching the car to a halt. Other snakes crawled into his lap, biting him. He unlocked the door and pushed it open.

He jumped out of the car, falling onto the pavement of the bridge, gasping for air. He searched himself, finding bloody tears through his clothing, and feeling the pain of the bites.

“Where the hell did they go? Where the hell did they come from?”

Exhaust fumes attacking his nostrils, Ty came to his feet and stared at his car hugging the guardrail, the driver door open, engine humming, and headlights blazing.

Words of the strange man repeated themselves in his mind’s ear. Driving drunk...snakes...going round and round...ax man...surprise.

“What kind of goddamn road is this?”

He stepped toward the car, peering inside. “All in your head, Ty,” he told himself.

“You’re letting that asshole get to you. All just a joke. He read your stories.”

Ty got back in the car and moved it forward, grinding steel against steel until the car was free of the guardrail.

Speeding over the limit, he spoke under his breath. “My beautiful Tina and little Latoya, I intend to make it off this God-awful road and back to you safe and sound. Nothing’s gonna stop me. Why the hell am I not off it by now, anyway?”

Ty stared ahead as the high beams illuminated the black pavement and the double, yellow lines separating the two lanes. He clenched his teeth in response to the birth of a pulsating ache on one side of his head.

“No chance of me getting back out of this car. Doors locked, windows closed, and I got plenty of gas. What are the odds of getting two flats in one night?”

He slowed the car as he approached a bridge. “Hell no, no way.”

He stopped and peered through the passenger side window at the bridge’s dented and scraped guardrail. “Can’t be,” he said. “No way is this the same bridge.”

He pounded his foot on the gas, shrieking the tires across the road. He shouted, “Goddamn it! I’m getting off this road, one way or another.”

As he gripped the steering wheel, Ty again peered through the passenger side window, this time at a vast, black field. He screeched the car to a halt and stared at a speck of light from a house miles away. Then he turned to the other side of the road, as the man with the dreadlocks was stepping out of the woods.

“Lost?” the man yelled. “Remember changing your tire right here?”

Ty sped onward. “This is impossible,” he said, using the back of one hand to mop away moisture from above his brow. “Everything that happened in my story.” He shook his head repeatedly. “Except for the ax man...so far.”

The high beams unveiled an obstruction on the road.

“What the hell’s a couch doing in the middle of—This was not in my story.” Ty licked his lips and swallowed. “The surprise.”

The tattered, soiled couch lay across the road with both ends nearly touching the woods

on each side. A portion of a log, as thick as a tree trunk, protruded on each side from behind the couch. Ty wondered if there were two separate logs or one long one.

“No way am I getting out of this car.”

Ty advanced the car until hitting one end of the couch. He pressed as far down on the gas pedal as he could, the engine groaning non-stop. The obstruction merely moved an inch and no more. “Shit! Why is this happening?”

He moved the car backward several feet and then pounded on the steering wheel with his fists. “Damn it! Damn it! Damn it!” He turned the ignition key, silencing the engine.

He unbuckled the seat belt, then grabbed the door handle without pulling it. A mist was swirling outside. The pulsating ache in Ty’s head had now matured to a hammering. A lone drop of sweat crawled down one side of his face, feeling more like the legs of an insect. He pulled on the lever and inched the door open. As the brisk air massaged his face, he eagerly filled his lungs with it. He dropped his feet onto the pavement, stood up, and glanced round at the thickening mist surrounding him.

He hurried to the part of the couch he had tried to push with his car, finding two logs: one partially lying behind each end. As the other end of the couch was shrouded in the mist, he grabbed the bottom of it, that was at his feet, and lifted it with a grunt. He pushed it toward the unseen woods, on the other side of the road, until there was enough room for his car to pass.

The couch now blocked the opposite lane, and one log lay at the edge of each side of the road. There was now a path for his vehicle.

Ty leaped back into his car, slammed the door, locked it, and pounded a foot onto the gas, laughing out loud.

He shouted, "I'm coming home, baby, I'm coming home."

Then he glanced into the rear view mirror. Two eyes stared back at him, along with a glistening, raised ax.

Ty Washington screamed.