

Darkfall

Dean Koontz



BERKLEY BOOKS, NEW YORK

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Winter gripped the city. Terror gripped it, too. They found four corpses in four days, each more hideous than the last.

STRANGE NIGHTS

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Darkfall

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THE VISION
THE FACE OF FEAR

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Because the original door prize was too hard to accomplish, this book is dedicated to some good neighbors—Oliviero and Becky Migneco, Jeff and Bonnie Paymar—with the sincere hope that a mere dedication is an acceptable substitute.

(At least this way, there's much less chance of a lawsuit!)

I owe special thanks to Mr. Owen West for giving me the opportunity to publish this variation on a theme under my by-line.

PROLOGUE

I

Wednesday, December 8, 1:12 A.M.

Penny Dawson woke and heard something moving furtively in the dark bedroom.

At first she thought she was hearing a sound left over from her dream. She had been dreaming about horses and about going for long rides in the country, and it had been the most wonderful, special, thrilling dream she'd ever had in all of her eleven-and-a-half dream-filled years. When she began to wake up, she struggled against consciousness, tried to hold on to sleep and prevent the lovely fantasy from fading. But she heard an odd sound, and it scared her. She told herself it was only a horse sound or just the rustle of straw in the stable in her dream. Nothing to be alarmed about. But she couldn't convince herself; she couldn't tie the strange sound to her dream, and she woke up all the way.

The peculiar noise was coming from the other side of the room, from Davey's bed. But it wasn't ordinary, middle-of-the-night, seven-year-old-boy, pizza-and-ice-cream-for-dinner noise. It was a sneaky sound. Definitely sneaky.

What was he doing? What trick was he planning this time?

Penny sat up in bed. She squinted into the impenetrable shadows, saw nothing, cocked her head, and listened intently.

A rustling, sighing sound disturbed the stillness.

Then silence.

She held her breath and listened even harder.

Hissing. Then a vague, shuffling, scraping noise.

The room was virtually pitch-black. There was one window, and it was beside her bed; however, the drape was drawn shut, and the alleyway outside was especially dark tonight, so the window provided no relief from the gloom.

The door was ajar. They always slept with it open a couple of inches, so Daddy could hear them more easily if they called for him in the night. But there were no lights on in the rest of the apartment, and no light came through the partly open door.

Penny spoke softly: "Davey?"

He didn't answer.

"Davey, is that you?"

Rustle-rustle-rustle.

"Davey, stop it."

No response.

Seven-year-old boys were a trial sometimes. A truly monumental pain.

She said, "If you're playing some stupid game, you're going to be real sorry."

A dry sound. Like an old, withered leaf crunching crisply under someone's foot.

It was nearer now than it had been.

"Davey, don't be weird."

Nearer. Something was coming across the room toward the bed.

It wasn't Davey. He was a giggler; he would have broken up by now and would have given himself away.

Penny's heart began to hammer, and she thought: Maybe this is just another dream, like the horses, only a bad one this time.

But she knew she was wide awake.

Her eyes watered with the effort she was making to peer through the darkness. She reached for the switch on the cone-shaped reading lamp that was fixed to the headboard of her bed. For a terribly long while, she couldn't find it. She fumbled desperately in the dark.

The stealthy sounds now issued from the blackness beside her bed. The thing had reached her.

Suddenly her groping fingers found the metal lampshade, then the switch. A cone of light fell across the bed and onto the floor.

Nothing frightening was crouched nearby. The reading lamp didn't cast enough light to dispel all the shadows, but Penny could see there wasn't anything dangerous, menacing, or even the least bit out of place.

Davey was in his bed, on the other side of the room, Davey tangled in his covers, sleeping beneath large posters of Chewbacca the Wookiee, from *Star Wars*, and E.T.

Penny didn't hear the strange noise any more. She knew she hadn't been imagining it, and she wasn't the kind of girl who could just turn off the lights and pull the covers over her head and forget about the whole thing. Daddy said she had enough curiosity to kill about a thousand cats. She threw back the covers, got out of bed, and stood very still in her pajamas and bare feet, listening.

Not a sound.

Finally she went over to Davey and looked at him more closely. Her lamp's light didn't reach this far; he lay mostly in shadows, but he seemed to be sound asleep. She leaned closer, watching his eyelids, and at last she decided he wasn't faking.

The noise began again. Behind her.

She whirled around.

It was under the bed now. A hissing, scraping, softly rattling sound, not particularly loud, but no longer stealthy, either.

The thing under the bed knew she was aware of it. It was making noise on purpose, teasing her, trying to scare her.

No! she thought. That's silly.

Besides, it wasn't a *thing*, wasn't a boogeyman. She was too old for boogeymen. That was more Davey's speed.

This was just a ... a mouse. Yes! That was it. Just a mouse, more scared than she was.

She felt somewhat relieved. She didn't like mice, didn't want them under her bed, for sure, but at least there was nothing *too* frightening about a lowly mouse. It was grody, creepy, but it wasn't big enough to bite her head off or anything major like that.

She stood with her small hands fisted at her sides, trying to decide what to do next.

She looked up at Scott Baio, who smiled down at her from a poster that hung on the wall behind her bed, and she wished he were here to take charge of the situation. Scott Baio wouldn't be scared of a mouse; not in a million years. Scott Baio would crawl right under the bed and grab that miserable rodent by its tail and carry it outside and release it, unharmed, in the alley behind the apartment building, because Scott Baio wasn't just brave—he was good and sensitive and gentle, too.

But Scott wasn't here. He was out there in Holly-wood, making his TV show.

Which left Daddy.

Penny didn't want to wake her father until she was absolutely, positively, one hundred percent sure there actually was a mouse. If Daddy came looking for a mouse and turned the room upside-down and then didn't find one, he'd treat her as if she were a child, for God's sake. She was only two months short of her twelfth birthday, and there was nothing she loathed more than being treated like a child.

She couldn't see under the bed because it was very dark under there and because the covers had fallen over the side; they were hanging almost to the floor, blocking the view.

The thing under the bed—the *mouse* under the bed! —hissed and made a gurgling-scraping noise. It was almost like a voice. A raspy, cold, nasty little voice that was telling her something in a foreign language.

Could a mouse make a sound like that?

She glanced at Davey. He was still sleeping.

A plastic baseball bat leaned against the wall beside her brother's bed. She grabbed it by the handle.

Under her own bed, the peculiar, unpleasant hissing-scratching-scrabbling continued.

She took a few steps toward her bed and got down on the floor, on her hands and knees. Holding the plastic bat in her right hand, she extended it, pushed the other end under the drooping blankets, lifted them out of the way, and pushed them back onto the bed where they belonged.

She still couldn't see anything under there. That low space was cave-black.

The noises had stopped.

Penny had the spooky feeling that something was peering at her from those oily black shadows... something more than just a mouse... worse than just a

mouse...something that knew she was only a weak little girl... something smart, not just a dumb animal, something at least as smart as she was, something that knew it could rush out and gobble her up alive if it really wanted to.

Cripes. No. Kid stuff. Silliness.

Biting her lip, determined not to behave like a helpless child, she thrust the fat end of the baseball bat under the bed. She probed with it, trying to make the mouse squeal or run out into the open.

The other end of the plastic club was suddenly seized, held. Penny tried to pull it loose. She couldn't. She jerked and twisted it. But the bat was held fast.

Then it was torn out of her grip. The bat vanished under the bed with a thump and a rattle.

Penny exploded backwards across the floor—until she bumped into Davey's bed. She didn't even remember moving. One instant she was on her hands and knees beside her own bed; the next instant she banged her head against the side of Davey's mattress.

Her little brother groaned, snorted, blew out a wet breath, and went right on sleeping.

Nothing moved under Penny's bed.

She was ready to scream for her father now, ready to risk being treated like a child, more than ready, and she did scream, but the word reverberated only in her mind: *Daddy, Daddy, Daddy!* No sound issued from her mouth. She had been stricken temporarily dumb.

The light flickered. The cord trailed down to an electrical outlet in the wall behind the bed. The thing under the bed was trying to unplug the lamp.

"Daddy!"

She made some noise this time, though not much; the word came out as a hoarse whisper.

And the lamp winked off.

In the lightless room she heard movement. Something came out from under the bed and started across the floor.

"Daddy!"

She could still only manage a whisper. She swallowed, found it difficult, swallowed again, trying to regain control of her half-paralyzed throat.

A creaking sound.

Peering into the blackness, Penny shuddered, whimpered.

Then she realized it was a familiar creaking sound. The door to the bedroom. The hinges needed oiling.

In the gloom, she detected the door swinging open, sensed more than saw it: a slab of darkness moving through more darkness. It had been ajar. Now, almost certainly, it was standing wide open. The hinges stopped creaking.

The eerie rasping-hissing sound moved steadily away from her. The thing wasn't

going to attack, after all. It was going away.

Now it was in the doorway, at the threshold.

Now it was in the hall.

Now at least ten feet from the door.

Now...gone.

Seconds ticked by, slow as minutes.

What had it been?

Not a mouse. Not a dream.

Then what?

Eventually, Penny got up. Her legs were rubbery.

She groped blindly, located the lamp on Davey's headboard. The switch clicked, and light poured over the sleeping boy. She quickly turned the cone-shaped shade away from him.

She went to the door, stood on the threshold, listened to the rest of the apartment. Silence. Still shaky, she closed the door. The latch clicked softly.

Her palms were damp. She blotted them on her pajamas.

Now that sufficient light fell on her bed, she returned and looked beneath it. Nothing threatening crouched under there.

She retrieved the plastic baseball bat, which was hollow, very lightweight, meant to be used with a plastic Whiffle Ball. The fat end, seized when she'd shoved it under the bed, was dented in three places where it had been gripped and squeezed. Two of the dents were centered around small holes. The plastic had been punctured. But... by what? Claws?

Penny squirmed under the bed far enough to plug in her lamp. Then she crossed the room and switched off Davey's lamp.

Sitting on the edge of her own bed, she looked at the closed hall door for a while and finally said, "Well."

What had it been?

The longer she thought about it, the less real the encounter seemed. Maybe the baseball bat had merely been caught in the bed frame somehow; maybe the holes in it had been made by bolts or screws protruding from the frame. Maybe the hall door had been opened by nothing more sinister than a draft.

Maybe...

At last, itchy with curiosity, she got up, went into the hall, snapped on the light, saw that she was alone, and carefully closed the bedroom door behind her.

Silence.

The door to her father's room was ajar, as usual. She stood beside it, ear to the crack, listening. He was snoring. She couldn't hear anything else in there, no strange rustling noises.

Again, she considered waking Daddy. He was a police detective. Lieutenant Jack Dawson. He had a gun. If something *was* in the apartment, he could blast it to smithereens. On the other hand, if she woke him and they found nothing, he would tease her and speak to her as if she were a child, Jeez, even worse than that, as if she were an *infant*. She hesitated, then sighed. No. It just wasn't worth the risk of being humiliated.

Heart pounding, she crept along the hall to the front door and tried it. It was still securely locked.

A coat rack was fixed to the wall beside the door. She took a tightly rolled umbrella from one of the hooks. The metal tip was pointed enough to serve as a reasonably good weapon.

With the umbrella thrust out in front of her, she went into the living room, turned on all the lights, looked everywhere. She searched the dining alcove and the small L-shaped kitchen, as well.

Nothing.

Except the window.

Above the sink, the kitchen window was open. Cold December air streamed through the ten-inch gap.

Penny was sure it hadn't been open when she'd gone to bed. And if Daddy had opened it to get a breath of fresh air, he'd have closed it later; he was conscientious about such things because he was always setting an example for Davey, who *needed* an example because he wasn't conscientious about much of anything.

She carried the kitchen stool to the sink, climbed onto it, and pushed the window up farther, far enough to lean out and take a look. She winced as the cold air stung her face and sent icy fingers down the neck of her pajamas. There was very little light. Four stories beneath her, the alleyway was blacker than black at its darkest, ash-gray at its brightest. The only sound was the sighing of the wind in the concrete canyon. It blew a few twisted scraps of paper along the pavement below and made Penny's brown hair flap like a banner; it tore the frosty plumes of her breath into gossamer rags. Otherwise, nothing moved.

Farther along the building, near the bedroom window, an iron fire escape led down to the alley. But here at the kitchen, there was no fire escape, no ledge, no way that a would-be burglar could have reached the window, no place for him to stand or hold on while he pried his way inside.

Anyway, it hadn't been a burglar. Burglars weren't small enough to hide under a young lady's bed.

She closed the window and put the stool back where she'd gotten it. She returned the umbrella to the coat rack in the hall, although she was somewhat reluctant to give up the weapon. Switching off the lights as she went, refusing to glance behind into the darkness that she left in her wake, she returned to her room and got back into bed and pulled up the covers.

Davey was still sleeping soundly.

Night wind pressed at the window.

Far off, across the city, an ambulance or police siren made a mournful song.

For a while, Penny sat up in bed, leaning against the pillows, the reading lamp casting a protective circle of light around her. She was sleepy, and she wanted to sleep, but she was afraid to turn out the light. Her fear made her angry. Wasn't she almost twelve years old? And wasn't twelve too old to fear the dark? Wasn't she the woman of the house now, and hadn't she been the woman of the house for more than a year and a half, ever since her mother had died? After about ten minutes, she managed to shame herself into switching off the lamp and lying down.

She couldn't switch her mind off as easily.

What had it been?

Nothing. A remnant of a dream. Or a vagrant draft. Just that and nothing more.

Darkness.

She listened.

Silence.

She waited.

Nothing.

She slept.

2

Wednesday, 1:34 A.M.

Vince Vastagliano was halfway down the stairs when he heard a shout, then a hoarse scream. It wasn't shrill. It wasn't a piercing scream. It was a startled, guttural cry that he might not even have heard if he'd been upstairs; nevertheless, it managed to convey stark terror. Vince paused with one hand on the stair railing, standing very still, head cocked, listening intently, heart suddenly hammering, momentarily frozen by indecision.

Another scream.

Ross Marrant, Vince's bodyguard, was in the kitchen, making a late-night snack for both of them, and it was Marrant who had screamed. No mistaking the voice.

There were sounds of struggle, too. A crash and clatter as something was knocked over. A hard thump. The brittle, unmelodic music of breaking glass.

Ross Marrant's breathless, fear-twisted voice echoed along the downstairs hallway from the kitchen, and between grunts and gasps and unnerving squeals of pain, there were words: "No... no ... please ... Jesus, no ... help ... someone help me ... oh, my God, my God, please ... *no!*"

Sweat broke out on Vince's face.

Morrant was a big, strong, mean son of a bitch. As a kid he'd been an ardent street fighter. By the time he was eighteen, he was taking contracts, doing murder for hire, having fun and being paid for it. Over the years he gained a reputation for taking any job, regardless of how dangerous or difficult it was, regardless of how well-protected the target was, and he always got his man. For the past fourteen months, he had been working for Vince as an enforcer, collector, and bodyguard; during that time, Vince had never seen him scared. He couldn't imagine Morrant being frightened of anyone or anything. And Morrant begging for mercy... well, that was simply inconceivable; even now, hearing the bodyguard whimper and plead, Vince *still* couldn't conceive of it; it just didn't seem real.

Something screeched. Not Morrant. It was an ungodly, inhuman sound. It was a sharp, penetrating eruption of rage and hatred and alien need that belonged in a science fiction movie, the hideous cry of some creature from another world.

Until this moment, Vince had assumed that Morrant was being beaten and tortured by other people, competitors in the drug business, who had come to waste Vince himself in order to increase their market share. But now, as he listened to the bizarre, ululating wail that came from the kitchen, Vince wondered if he had just stepped into the Twilight Zone. He felt cold all the way to his bones, queasy, disturbingly fragile, and alone.

He quickly descended two more steps and looked along the hall toward the front door. The way was clear. He could probably leap down the last of the stairs, race along the hallway, unlock the front door, and get out of the house before the intruders came out of the kitchen and saw him. Probably. But he harbored a small measure of doubt, and because of that doubt he hesitated a couple of seconds too long.

In the kitchen Morrant shrieked more horribly than ever, a final cry of bleak despair and agony that was abruptly cut off.

Vince knew what Morrant's sudden silence meant. The bodyguard was dead.

Then the lights went out from one end of the house to the other. Apparently someone had thrown the master breaker switch in the fuse box, down in the basement.

Not daring to hesitate any longer, Vince started down the stairs in the dark, but he heard movement in the unlighted hallway, back toward the kitchen, coming in this direction, and he halted again. He wasn't hearing anything as ordinary as approaching footsteps; instead, it was a strange, eerie hissing-rustling-rattling-grumbling that chilled him and made his skin crawl. He sensed that something monstrous, something with pale dead eyes and cold clammy hands was coming toward him. Such a fantastic notion was wildly out of character for Vince Vastagliano, who had the imagination of a tree stump, but he couldn't dispel the superstitious dread that had come over him.

Fear brought a watery looseness to his joints.

His heart, already beating fast, now thundered.

He would never make it to the front door alive.

He turned and clambered up the steps. He stumbled once in the blackness, almost fell, regained his balance. By the time he reached the master bedroom, the noises behind him were more savage, closer, louder—and hungrier.