



THE DAYMARE

Haley loosened the laces on her sneakers, and her toes sighed with relief. Three pairs of socks might stop her Something Awfuls—those gut feelings that something terrible was about to happen—but they hadn't stopped the bad dreams she'd been having all week. And they were nothing compared to the wickedest of all nightmares she had last night. It could have won a world record in freaky-scary.

Too risky, she thought, glancing at her feet. She kicked off her sneakers and grabbed another pair of socks from the top drawer of her dresser, causing her bonsai bodhi tree—her favorite house plant—to shake on top of it.

Haley tugged on a fourth pair of socks. Four was in the medium good luck territory. Seven was her luckiest number, but she couldn't possibly wear seven pairs of socks without suffocating her feet.

She grabbed her backpack and headed down the paneled

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staircase. The aroma of coffee and burned toast wafted up to the high ceilings cracked with age and cobwebs. The smell always lingered there for days.

“Don’t forget your homework,” Mom said in her I’m-not-going-to-be-late-this-morning voice from somewhere in the kitchen.

Her teacher, Mrs. Wright, would make her sit on a chair full of spikes if she didn’t hand it in today. She was already on probation for the last homework-not-done school detention. With only a week left of school, she still wasn’t sure if she would pass the sixth grade.

She headed back upstairs. The bare wooden treads were worn and sagging in the middle from years of foot traffic. She tried to imagine all of the feet that had stomped up and down the stairs of this old Victorian house, the same one that she’d lived in all her life.

Willing herself to forget about the dream that had scorched itself across her brain, Haley slapped her arms seven times. But she couldn’t stop thinking about it. Every last detail, down to the look of terror on the face of her twin brother, Arthur, replayed in her mind like a looping horror flick.

“It’s time to go,” a swan had said to her in the dream.

The swan’s eyes had looked right through her, as if she were ninety percent transparent. She could feel the wind blowing across her bones. The swan carried Haley on her back and flapped her giant wings, soaring through the clouds and past the stars. They entered a tunnel and flew upward at enormous speeds until they reached a place filled with a blinding light. Haley squeezed her eyes shut, afraid that she would die if she stared at it for too long.

“The time has come for you to see the future,” the swan said. “Open your eyes.”

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A tall woman hurried across an open landscape devoid of trees. Where there should have been grass, weeds grew between the rocks and gravel. Dark mountains towered above the woman as the howling wind tore at her long, hooded cape, revealing a sharp face, white hair, and pale blue skin. She moved through a giant doorway carved into the side of a mountain with a limp child in her arms. Haley caught a glimpse of the child's tortured face—it was Arthur.

Haley stopped on the seventh step and waited seven seconds before continuing to the top of the stairs and heading down the narrow hallway covered in obnoxious wallpaper with big stripes and happy flowers that seemed to mock her sour mood.

She slid into Arthur's room, her third favorite place to be; her own bedroom was second. Her fraternal twin and best friend cocked his head sideways, causing his dirty blonde bangs to fall away from his green eyes, which were like hers except darker, which fit him since he often had darker moods.

"Did you forget something?" Arthur grabbed the essay sitting on his desk. He had helped her with it last night.

She took the paper and shoved it inside her backpack. "Thanks."

"What's wrong?"

"I had a nightmare." Haley climbed into his bed and grabbed Squishy, Arthur's favorite pillow.

"I knew something was wrong. I couldn't eat breakfast this morning," he said. "More swans?"

Haley nodded. "Yeah, there was a swan. It wanted to show me something." She hesitated. "It was about the future, I think."

She glanced at the wall behind him, filled with stars, galaxies, and planets he had painted himself. An overstuffed chair sat next

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to a bookshelf that took up most of the adjacent wall, crammed with books on famous magicians, artists, planets, and wild animals, especially bears and snakes. The books were from Mom's bookstore, and some of them were rare. Between the books were statues of wizards. On his wall hung a picture of Harry Houdini, the greatest magician in the world, according to Arthur.

Arthur sat down next to her, causing the bed to creak. A blue quilt lay balled up in the corner. He hadn't made his bed yet and wouldn't unless Mom forced him to. "What did you see?" he asked.

"Someone wicked stole you...she took you into a mountain." Haley hugged Squishy tighter.

"It was just a dream."

"But this dream was different—it was real," she insisted. "I was awake the whole time I was dreaming. That's never happened before."

"That sounds exactly like a nightmare."

"What's a nightmare?"

"It's sort of like a hallucination where you think that you're dreaming but it's really just chemical signals in your brain that make you think something is real." Arthur stood up, limped a few steps to his desk, and slipped his cell phone into one of his pockets. He wore long pants twenty-four seven, even on hot days like today. They hid his leg, which had been severely injured in an accident more than two years ago when a car had hit him. Even after five surgeries, he still had a limp. His leg was badly scarred now, too, from knee to ankle, and one of the scars looked just like a spider and matched the birthmark on his neck perfectly.

"It wasn't a nightmare," Haley said, breaking the silence. "I didn't *think* I was dreaming—I knew I was dreaming. It was like I was awake."

Arthur shrugged. "Dreams can do some pretty amazing things,

but they're still just dreams." He licked the corner of his mouth, catching a stray crumb of toast. "Though the way that you dream, anything is possible." He smiled, letting her know that he was kidding.

It was true. No one dreamed as much as she did. Some nights she and Arthur even had the same dream, but that hadn't happened since last Christmas.

Haley rubbed her arm and hit something embedded in her elbow. She pulled out a tiny white feather. The downy barbs at the base of the quill swayed from her breath, which was now as rapid as her pulse.

"Hey, this was in my arm!"

"No way."

Haley found another feather growing out of her elbow, smaller than the first one. "Look at this," she said, shoving her elbow right under his face.

Arthur stared at her arm, not blinking.

"Now do you believe me?"

"Where do you think it came from?" Arthur asked.

"From me!" Haley blurted out. She was surprised to hear herself say it, as if something had forced her.

"It can't be from you," he said. "You're not a bird. Maybe you slept on it and it got stuck in your skin."

Haley frowned. "It was inside my skin. It had to belong to me." Nothing was making sense. She felt queasy, suddenly.

"Maybe some fresh air will make you feel better." Arthur struggled to open his window. It always got stuck in humid weather. The powdery scent of lilac came through the screen, and a mourning dove cooed from somewhere outside.

"What happened to your shirt?" Haley frowned. The back of his T-shirt was slashed lengthwise in four places.

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“Huh?” He reached around and felt the shirt, then took it off and held it in front of him. His eyes widened. “Where the heck did that come from?”

Haley gulped. “Look at your back!”

Arthur stood in front of the faded oval mirror fastened on top of his dresser and examined his back. Four shallow scratches caked with dried blood ran from his left shoulder blade down to the middle of his back.

“Holy Toledo, would you look at that!”

“Does it hurt?”

Arthur picked at the longest scratch near his shoulder with his finger, and it started to bleed. “You won’t believe this,” he said, “but I had dream about being chased by a huge bear last night.”

Haley felt sick again. “Dreams can’t come to life, can they?” Seeing her own reflection in the mirror confirmed the worst. Her skin was pale and her normally bright green eyes were dull. She still had ugly dark circles under them despite the makeup she took from Mom. Her waist-length blonde hair fell loosely over her shoulders.

“No, they can’t,” he said solemnly.

The first ray of sunlight broke through the trees and sliced across the side of his face. His skin was ghostly white like hers. He got a new T-shirt from his drawer and slipped it on.

Haley’s eyes swept the dark corners of the room, expecting something to jump out and grab her. “What’s happening to us? Do you think we should tell Mom?” She knew the answer already.

“Absolutely not. She’ll never let us out of the house.”

“But you have scratches. And I have feathers!”

“We’ll figure something out.”

Haley felt like her nerves were being stretched like rubber bands.

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It wasn't just the nightmares or "daymares" she was having—she couldn't shake the Something Awfuls that had been creeping up on her all week and had finally erupted into a heart-racing, can't-catch-your-breath fury at breakfast. Maybe she really was going bonkers this time. They'd take her to a room with no windows and leave her there to grow old with all her bones sticking out, forgotten by everyone.

"Haley, Arthur, it's time to go!" Mom yelled.

Haley raced down the staircase but Arthur gripped the railing and took his time. Steps weren't easy for him, but he refused to wear a brace.

Mom stood by the front door with the car keys dangling from her long, delicate hand. Her dark brown hair fell to just above her waist and shone in the morning light that filtered through the front parlor window. Long dark lashes framed her seafoam-blue eyes.

The Owl's Tale, the bookstore Mom had inherited and ran alone, had to be opened in thirty minutes. It was across town, and Mom had to get them to school in five minutes flat if she were going to make it in time.

"Oh, before I forget, let me see your homework." Her long peasant skirt brushed against the floor, revealing feet with painted toes and strappy sandals. The big heart necklace hung over her short-sleeved top.

Haley unzipped her backpack, and the brand-new under-eye makeup stick she had taken from Mom's makeup drawer fell onto the floor. Mom snatched it up before Haley could recover the stolen goods. Mom's brow furrowed.

Before Haley had a chance to think of a good response, Mom lifted Haley's chin and scanned her face like a detective. "You're supposed to tell me when you're having nightmares."

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“They’re just bad dreams, nothing like before,” Haley lied.

“Good dreams or bad dreams, you have to tell me, sweetheart, or you’re not going to get well.”

“I just told you now.”

Mom stuck her tongue out and tried to pretend to be playful, but Haley could feel Mom’s anxiety like a strong underwater current.

“I think it’s time to make another appointment to see Dr. Harrison,” Mom said.

Haley cringed. Dr. Harrison repeated the same words over and over, and he smelled like newspapers and old socks. He made all sorts of notes about her nightmares, but he wouldn’t tell her his opinions. After three months of examinations, the nightmares had only gotten worse.

“I’m fine,” she said.

“I’ll make that decision.”

“Can I keep the makeup?” Haley didn’t want the kids at school to start calling her voodoo head or worm face again. “Please? I promise to keep my room clean and do my all my homework.”

Mom hesitated, then handed it back to her. “Only until you see Dr. Harrison. You’re too young to be wearing makeup.”

Mom’s rose-scented perfume filled the air. She let Haley wear it on special days, like her birthday, which was tomorrow. This should have made her happy, but this year she was dreading her birthday and didn’t know why.

“Come on, Mom, let’s go.” Arthur tugged on the front door. The heavy oak door was stuck just like his window. He hated being late for anything, especially school. They stepped outside and onto the wraparound porch.

Arthur gasped. “Holy Houdini—it’s a zoo on our front lawn!”

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Perched on the wicker furniture and railing were about fifty crows, but that wasn't all. The yard was full of squirrels, raccoons, rabbits, turkeys, and even box turtles. A family of foxes stood by the front gate stared at them. And they all looked as if they'd been hypnotized or put under a spell.

It was true that birds landed on Haley's shoulder and that rabbits, squirrels, and deer would follow her home, especially if they were sick, but they did that with Arthur, too. It was normal everyday stuff to them. Mom said they had special abilities with animals and the trait ran in their family.

The worst part was that most people in town didn't like their special abilities and sometimes sent them anonymous hate mail. Last week someone had put a sign on the front lawn that read, GO BACK TO WHERE YOU CAME FROM. *Where was that?*

Lately, more animals had been showing up at their house, and Haley wished they'd stay at someone else's house for a change. She had enough problems at school and dreaded the gossip that would start.

"Why are they staring at us like that? It's creepy." *Should've counted to seven, seven times frontward and backward, before leaving the house,* Haley chided herself.

Mom stepped back inside and grabbed some tennis rackets in the hall closet. "Use this if anything comes near you."

They slipped out the back door and piled into the SUV as a group of deer ran across the driveway. *At least there aren't any swans in the yard.* Haley wished she had brought another pair of socks with her.

Mom parked at the front entrance of the Crystal Springs Elementary School. She shifted her sunglasses to the top of her head and turned around to face them. "Did you remember to wear your pendants?"

Arthur tugged on the black leather cord around his neck and

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held it up. On the end of it dangled a large round disc made of wood with a rune carved in it. The twins had each worn one since they were old enough to walk. Every winter, Mom made new pendants to hang around their necks after they'd performed a ceremony of blessing outside under a full moon. The pendants were for their protection against the dark forces in the world.

Mom stared at Haley.

"I forgot mine." She had left it on her dresser.

"Put it back on when you get home, then," Mom said.

"We're not babies anymore," Haley retorted.

"We know how to protect ourselves," Arthur chimed in.

Mom sighed and lifted the big silver heart pendant hanging around her neck. Coiled up inside of the locket were snippets of hair of all three of them woven into a single tight braid. "This is how we stay connected as a family. Nothing can harm us if we wear them, don't ever forget that."

The school bell rang.

"I'm going to be late," Arthur said, as he slid out of the car and limped his way to the front entrance of the three-story brick building.

Haley hurried to catch up to her twin. Her sweaty feet pounded on the wide pavement. She passed the giant sycamores that stood on either side of her, with their huge leaves wilting in the hot sun. Right before she entered the building, the hair on the back of her neck stood up. She felt like someone was watching her.