

Dreamwalker

by

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## Chapter One

Angry rain at my window jars me from the dream of a boy with pale blue eyes. I jerk upright, remembering how his hand feels in mine. As the storm whips tree limbs together and lightning sears the sky, I feel my heart gallop. If I close my eyes, I can still see Ramsey.

But the storm won't let me close my eyes. And when the windows burst open, I jump. Hard drops spew into the room, and I struggle from the tangled covers to get up.

*Misha.* The voice slithers like a snake in my thoughts. My foot catches the edge of the bed, and I stumble. Then I look around. Am I hearing things?

*Misha.* The hiss of my name is more demanding.

Where is it coming from?

The cold floor chills me as I race to the windows. The rain-slicked floor numbs my toes, and I shiver. Grabbing the ancient windows to close them, I feel the deluge of pellets beat my body. Lightning splits the sky into near daylight. That's when I see him standing amid a copse of trees.

His hair appears gold in the flash, and I'd know that face anywhere: Ramsey. But how?

I stand watching him watching me. Then the lightning fails. The lights flicker and die. Darkness. I squint, looking for him. Through the haze of spewing rain, I see only trees.

I close my eyes, listening for the voice, but there is only the storm. And Ramsey is just a dream, nothing more. I'm seeing things. I have to be.

"Misha, you all right?"

My dad, Tim, barges in. Although he's wearing his usual white tee shirt and pajama bottoms to hint he's gone to bed, I know better. He's a night owl like I am--or was before the wreck. Without waiting for an answer, he strides into the room and takes the windows from my hands to shut them. With the wind, even he struggles to close them. He eyes my soaked gown worriedly.

"What were you doing, taking a cold shower? You shouldn't even be up." He glances at the floor. "Go get changed and I'll mop up."

"Kay." I don't have to ask why he's here. He checks on me every night as though he's expecting I'll disappear or something, or that maybe I'll just go to sleep and not wake up. It's been three months since I woke from the coma, but he and Mom can't seem to shake the fear, and it makes them do strange things like come and check on me in the middle of the night.

I grab another nightgown from my drawer and head to the bathroom, suddenly glad that tonight he'd been the

one checking on me. Mom would have gone off the deep end. She really thinks I'm going to break, probably because she'd been driving when the wreck happened, and she considers herself completely responsible for hurting me in the first place.

When I come back, the windows are closed, my dad is gone, and even the storm seems to have settled itself. I walk back to the window and look out through the rain-smearred panes for someone I know doesn't exist. Ramsey has been in my dreams for years, but I've always known he was just a dream. Until tonight.

A chill runs through me. My stomach rumbles loudly, and I realize I'd picked at dinner earlier. I guess I just hate the way Mom and Dad look at me, like maybe I've grown a third head or something. It's unsettling. I fold my arms across my abdomen and shiver. Since the wreck, I've definitely lost some weight, and it makes me feel colder than I used to. It seems like so much has changed, and I just don't know how to make things go back to the way they were.

I eye the bed and know that even if I lie back down, I won't be able to sleep. I figure I'll just go downstairs and get a snack. Perhaps that will let me unwind from all the stress. Grandma used to say that there was no point in trying to sleep in a bed filled with troubled thoughts. Gran may be dead, but I do know she's right about that.

On the way downstairs, I grab my robe and drape it around my body. The fourth step creaks as usual, and for just a second I hang there, wondering if my parents are going to hear it and come to see why I'm up. I glance over my shoulder, waiting, but the hall remains dark and empty. I nervously continue until my bare feet touch the cold tile. I veer left through the dining room and into the kitchen. Pete, my German shepherd, gets up from where he's been lying and follows me.

Surprisingly there are candles lit inside. That's because Dad is fixing ham sandwiches. I slip into the room, and he glances up.

"Welcome to the all-night café, open even during sudden power outages. May I take your order?" He closes the sandwiches and stares at me expectantly.

"Chocolate ice cream, please." I sit on a barstool and brush the hair from my face.

"Coming right up." He opens the freezer, pulls out a small container of Blue Bell ice cream, and picks up a spoon before handing them to me. "Where's my tip?"

I laugh. "You want a tip? Those striped pants make you look old, Dad."

"Really?" He looks down and shakes his head. "I thought they were sexy. Guess I had that coming." He pulls out the gallon of milk and pours himself a glassful.

"Guess you did." I open the ice cream. "Having trouble sleeping these days?" I take a bite. Pete lies at my feet, his big dark eyes staring at me.

"Maybe. Then again, maybe I'm just hungry." He slides the plate over to the stool next to mine and sits. "How's the ice cream?"

"Awesome." I watch him start in on a sandwich. My mom used to give him all kinds of grief, saying one of these days he was gonna get fat. He hasn't yet. He still eats like a horse. And she's the one who now has to diet.

"How are you doing?" Although he really wants an answer, I can tell he's kind of scared to know by the way he keeps looking straight ahead. I used to think my parents weren't afraid of anything. Now I know better.

“I’m okay, Dad. Really.” I take another bite.

“Would you tell me if you weren’t?” He takes a drink of milk.

“You’d be the second to know.”

“Second?” He arches his eyebrows. “Who’s going to be first?”

“Pete.” The dog lifts his head. Both of us look at him, and he lowers his head to go back to sleep.

“Figures.” He laughs and shakes his head. “You and that dog.”

For a second I watch my dad eat. I stare and notice for the first time the fine lines around his eyes and the blond hair graying at his temples. For so long it seemed like my dad would never get old. Now I guess I’m having a hard time believing what I’m seeing.

Of course there’s always the other option, the one I hate. Maybe that grey and those wrinkles really aren’t about him finally showing his age. Maybe they’re because he’s been worrying so much about me—just another thing to feel guilty over.

“So how are you doing?” I try to keep my voice casual, and I, too, stare ahead. I guess I’m afraid if I look him in the eye, he’ll realize how worried I am about everything, and that will only give him more to stress over. Besides, I don’t want to tell him about how I’m seeing people from my dreams. I’d rather keep my madness to myself for a while. It’s so much easier to manage that way.

“What?” He is about to take a bite but stops when he hears my question. “Why are you asking?”

I shrug and skim a layer from the top of the ice cream. “I hear you and Mom argue a lot, and I know she feels guilty about the whole thing—but it wasn’t her fault.”

Although I try never to think about it, the image of the truck barreling at me surges in my mind. It’s a bright red Chevy, and the driver looks as surprised as I am. He’s a teenage boy, and his mouth is parted in a gaping silent scream. His fingers grip the steering wheel, and he has the same disbelief in his eyes as I have in mine.

I force the image away and shiver.

Dad frowns. He’s wearing this painful expression like he’s hurt in a way that’s not physical. Then he speaks in his careful voice. “I know it wasn’t her fault, and I don’t blame her.” Dad puts the sandwich back on his plate. “But your mom blames herself, Misha, and I don’t think there’s anyone who can make her understand how much of an accident this really was. But she’s going to be okay; we all are.” He nods at my ice cream. “You might want to finish that before it melts.”

“You’ve got a point.” I start eating the ice cream and he focuses on his sandwich, and for a while there is this huge silence between us, but I really don’t mind it. I mean my dad has this comforting aura around him. He makes me feel safe, like nothing in the world could ever happen because he’s sitting right there. Maybe it’s because he refuses to panic.

The lights suddenly flicker on and Dad shakes his head. “It’s about time.” He leans over and blows out the candles. “How do you feel about starting school tomorrow? I mean, if it’s too soon, we can always keep you home for a couple more days. The last thing either of us wants to do is rush you.”

I hold up my hand. “I’m fine, Daddy, I promise. I’m ready.”

He nods. “And if you start to feel too tired or sick, you’ll call, right?” He frowns and gently slides his hand

over the top of mine, something Dad never does. I know he loves me, but we're not exactly a touchy-feely kind of family.

"Of course. I'll be okay," I say again, hoping that will be enough to convince him. The last few weeks I've been pretty much going stir crazy staring at four walls with my mom hovering. I keep wishing she'd go back to work so I can get some space to breathe.

He gives my hand a squeeze and retreats to take a drink. "I don't mean to push, Misha. I just want to make sure nothing happens. I almost lost you once, and that was unbearable. I don't think I could get through that again." He nervously toys with his glass, his fingers sliding in the sweat. His eyebrows furrow as he looks down at his plate. Somehow I know that what he's looking at isn't in this kitchen. It's the same expression he wore when I first woke up and he started crying. I want to tell him again I'm okay, but I don't think it will help. I don't think there are any words that will make that sadness go away.

After we finish, I start to feel drowsy and head upstairs. Even as I go to my room, I feel my dad watching me as he leans on the banister.

"Night, Misha."

"Night, Dad."

Although we've had a good talk, his expression is still closer to a frown than a smile. I'd like to say it's because he's tired, but I'm not really sure. At one time I would have felt I knew but not now.

I close my door and pull the robe off to set it over the chair by my desk. Then I flip off the light and walk to the window. The world seems silent and sleeping when I peer outside. A slow steady stream of rain falls in a soft lullaby that's barely noticeable below the hum of the central heat. The glass is starting to fog, and when I lean close to glimpse the trees, I see only the emptiness.

I lean back and lift my hand to write the word *Ramsey* in the mist. Water condenses on my finger and runs down my hand as I move it away. It's strange to think of Ramsey during my waking hours. I've spent so many hours in my dreams exploring his world, Alturna, so that I know parts of it as well as I do my own neighborhood. He was my first kiss, and even though it was a dream, I remember that moment as though that brief flicker had transcended reality. Even now, if I close my eyes, I'll see him. I barely reach his broad shoulders, and I find myself lost in the pale blue of his eyes—eyes the color of a cloudless summer sky. His voice rumbles through me when he speaks my name.

"It's just a stupid dream," I tell myself. I've spent years thinking of Ramsey, wishing he were real, but this is frightening. Even if it is a dream, he feels real. And what about that voice I heard in my head? How do I explain that? Maybe that's what's making me see him. I turn from the window to climb into my bed, hoping my head is at least empty enough for me to fall asleep. Tomorrow is going to be a great day but it's also going to be exhausting.

