

DREAMCATCHERS

AFTER DARKNESS LIGHT



TOM SAREGA

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Kind regards,

Tom Sarega

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Thank you for your readership,

Tom Sarega

A SPECIAL THANKS

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A SPECIAL THANKS

PART ONE: STRANGE TIMES

PART TWO: THE STRANGER

HOW TO HELP WITH THE PUBLISHING OF DREAMCATCHERS

PART ONE: STRANGE TIMES

CHAPTER ONE

Monday, 3rd September, 2012

109 Days To Go

Ronnie couldn't remember the exact month he started having his nightmares only that it was after the killing began and before his Dad had gone to war. Nights blurred into days, days into nights and sleep deprivation had muddled his mind. Fuddled his mind. Damn, he couldn't think straight anymore.

He lay down in his bed, staring at the ceiling, like a corpse with its eyes wide open. He wondered if this was how Clifford Montgomery had looked underneath the lid at his funeral service. His mother had told him not to go but he had snuck in anyway, just to get a peek – to see what the fuss was about. He overheard the chatterboxes outside the church telling each other with more and more horror how poor Mr. Montgomery had been walking his dog behind the church cemetery, where it had mauled him to death. They couldn't believe it, they said, as his dog Spike was ever so docile and would never turn on him like that. The news from Tom Davies, the coroner, was the worst of all. The funeral would be a closed casket service because the raging animal had near torn through Clifford's neck; his head was hanging under his armpit when they brought him in. What confused Tom Davies, however, was why the doting pet had then clawed into Mr. Montgomery's chest and ripped out his heart.

The animal was shot immediately.

Ronnie vacantly heard his mother yelling at him to get up this instant or he would be late for school.

CHAPTER TWO

“Come on! Let’s go. Otherwise you’ll be late for school.” Ronnie’s mother cupped her hands around her mouth and yelled up the stairs. Ronnie jumped down two at a time and rubbed his purple-ringed, doe-like eyes. He stretched his arms high above his head and yawned deep and long. A hideous, recurring nightmare had prevented him from sleeping. He had lain rigid on his bed the entire night as a sickening, primeval animal had bayed and roared after him in his mind, its sharp teeth gnashing and its jowls dripping acidic saliva. He had been too petrified even to close his eyes.

Ronnie’s mum buzzed around her kitchen like an agitated fly. Her face was blotchy and stressed and her brow creased as she multi-tasked, buttering Ronnie’s sandwiches and crumpling a pile of his clothes into the washing machine. She jumped, startled, as she heard the metal snap of the letterbox spring back into place and scurried into her hallway. She fingered through the morning mail. One was from her husband. She gingerly placed it at the front of the clutch of letters. She ripped it open and scanned it quickly. Ronnie saw relief flush her face. His dad was ok.

She quickly stuffed the letter into her bag; she would read it in full later, safe in the knowledge her husband had survived another day on duty in Afghanistan. “Put your school clothes on and let’s get going. I’ve got to get to the florists early you know, I’ve got a big order coming in. Just wait till I tell your father!” She wagged a frustrated finger at her son.

Ronnie jumped into his pressed, flannel grey St. Monedel’s school trousers that his mother had hung up for him, slung on his blazer, wrapped his striped navy and maroon tie around his shirt collar and wedged his heels into the backs of his shoes. He shuffled

through the front door and his mother slammed it behind them. Minutes later, they were on their way to school, with Ronnie's mother driving erratically as she threw furtive, worried glances at her son.

Ronnie could guess what she was worried about; another town, another school. He had practically attended one a year due to his father's military deployments. She was fretting the way she always did; had she picked the right school? Would Ronnie fit in? Would constantly moving mean that he wouldn't make any proper friends? And he had been looking awfully tired lately. Ronnie knew he must, he felt shattered. But Ronnie wasn't worried, they had been in Monedel for a year now, his mum had a good job unlike in other towns, and this time everyone at school would be new; it was the first day of the first year of secondary school.

He was to attend St Monedel's, an ancient institution, originally founded as a monastery in 697AD, it had evolved into a church and then, in the last few centuries, a school. It was a tall building, constructed with thousands of dark flint stones and supported by wide, sturdy buttresses. Leaded, latticed windows dotted its walls and its slated roof stretched skywards. It was a large and impressive structure, hinting at its historical importance to the town, but it wasn't without its faults, which his house-proud mother wouldn't fail to notice. A few areas of the school that warranted some upkeep - a faded school sign hanging crooked on its hinges and a schoolyard riddled with potholes and surrounded by crumbling walls.

Floretta Rough's gold Honda Civic weaved through school run traffic and rolled up to the gates. Inside of the car, she corrected her son's mess of a tie and brushed his lank brown fringe into a manner she considered more fitting for a new boy's first day at secondary school, much to Ronnie's embarrassment.

“Oh Ronnie you look awful, you’re half-asleep! Now that’s not going to impress the teachers is it? And on such an important day?” She harped in an anxious, high-pitched tone. “Now go on in there, smarten up and show them how good you are.”

“Sorry mum, I had a nightmare,” Ronnie mumbled sheepishly, exited the car and walked towards the school gates.

CHAPTER THREE

Ronnie's eyeballs throbbed with tiredness. His head down with his long hair flopping around his temples, he scraped his shoes along the ground as he ambled into the schoolyard, stumbling through a pothole. He climbed the steps into the assembly hall next to the main school building. Inside it was chaos, with first-year pupils fidgeting nervously at the periphery while elder, more confident students pushed and shoved in a melee.

A heavily bearded, barrel-chested teacher restored order in a strikingly straightforward manner. "Big 'uns at the back! Littl'uns at the front," his gruff, angry voice growled across the hall. The misbehaving students simmered down without looking at him, as his voice was even more intimidating than his bear-like figure. "I am Mr Smedley, the science teacher," he boomed. "I'll have no misbehaviour, it's time for registration."

"Adams?" Mr. Smedley yelled.

"Yes sir," squeaked a frightened pupil.

"Burton?"

"Yes sir."

"Boxer?"

"Nope." Someone, presumably Boxer, sniggered. Mr. Smedley simply quelled whoever it was with a deadpan stare, never raising his voice. That stare told all what he would like to do with insolent children. There was no further insolence from the crowd.

Ronnie craned his neck forward to see who was causing the trouble and was gladdened, instead, to spot one of his friends, Tommy Bailey.

Ronnie and Tommy knew each other from their primary school in Hickleston, a neighbouring village to Monedel. They had cemented their friendship the previous spring, when Tommy saved Ronnie from serious injury after he crashed into a bike shed chasing a football, and brought the flimsy, rusting structure down. The overweight Tommy wobbled over just in time and was strong enough to hold the collapsing shed, allowing Ronnie to scramble away on his hands and knees. Now they were at Monedel together.

With the morning registration over, Mr. Snowden, the music teacher, led a discordant rendition of “All things bright and beautiful” by teachers and pupils alike. The school bell ended the torture and the new school year had begun.

CHAPTER FOUR

Frederic Fontaine was always thinking two steps ahead. He had a natural ability to be organised and logical. The afternoon before his first day at secondary school, he was kneeling over a neatly unfolded map on the floor of the conservatory at home, a short pencil tucked behind his ear under his wiry hair, plotting a drive-in route to school for his mother the next day.

“You know I don’t know where you get it from.” His mother, Marjorie Fontaine, called cheerily in from the kitchen, wearing pink marigolds and accidentally flicking water at him with a dish brush.

“From ‘is father ‘o course,” Gerald Fontaine’s Sunday newspaper rustled as he chuckled heartily. Freddie smiled over in his dad’s direction.

Bald, ruddy-faced and lithe, Freddie’s father had risen to Chief Engineer at The Monedel Manufacturing Corporation, the largest employer in Monedel and had been its loyal servant for almost thirty years. With his index finger wagging in front of his nose, he would put his modest success down to “sheer bloody hard work” and would often remind Freddie, the rest of the family, or, in fact, anyone who would listen about how to get on in life.

Gerald Fontaine kept a keen eye on his children’s education. He felt that it was as much his responsibility as a parent to educate his children as the schools to which he sent them. He was delighted, then, when Freddie began to show an interest in engineering and how things worked. Freddie had shown a real gift for numbers and would often follow him into the garden shed to help him out with building things – just to find out how they were made.

Freddie’s older brother and sister, both of whom looked like their mother, with soft, heart-shaped faces, had already left home. His older brother ran his own flying school close

to Monedel while his sister had headed straight for the bright lights of London to pursue a legal career. Freddie, meanwhile, had inherited his father's genes. He was thin, with dark brown eyes and a slightly rouse complexion but his most obvious feature was a full head of black, curly hair as entangled as a birds nest. "You should enjoy it son," Mr. Fontaine would chuckle, "if you're anything like me, you won't keep it for long."

Freddie's parents were a generation older than those of his friends, but they were still young at heart, especially his father, who was fond of practical jokes. Freddie's most vivid infant memory was of his father's return from work one summer lunchtime, unknown to his mother, via a joke shop. He had purchased a large, plastic tarantula with a bulbous abdomen, fat hairy legs and fluorescent green eyes and left it crawling on the kitchen floor. He had split his sides laughing when Marjorie had walked in to make the children some lunch, let out a terrified, shrill scream and burst past her young son through the conservatory, out onto the patio and up the garden. Unfortunately for Freddie, his mother's reaction branded his psyche. Ever since that moment, Freddie had learnt to be intensely afraid of spiders, just like his mother. His memory became the seedbed of his nightmare. On the eve of his first day at secondary school, Freddie was dreaming of a family holiday in Greece....

.....It was early morning in Greece. The sun was already burning hot and yellow in a cloudless blue sky, not that Freddie would have known, as he was snug and comfortable in his soft bed. His mother loved the relaxed Mediterranean lifestyle and would book a getaway to the heat every summer.

He had heard his mother and father skip down to the poolside earlier that morning, his father telling him to make it to breakfast. They were early risers, but Freddie was on holiday and was going to enjoy the lie in while he could. He was left alone.

Freddie woke bleary eyed a while later. He had already missed breakfast. He climbed out of bed, ambled to the bathroom, splashed water over his face and his mass of curly hair, slipped on a clean white t-shirt and pair of red shorts and went to forage for something to eat

in his hotel room. At no point did it seem amiss to him that he would find a box of Weetabix and a single pint of milk – which just happened to be his favourite breakfast cereal. His normally sharp brain did not understand that they should not have been there. His parents had not shopped for food as they were on a package holiday.

Freddie grabbed the yellow cereal box. It was already open. He dipped in his right hand to grab a couple of fibre blocks that he was going to liberally coat with sugar and afterwards slurp the sweetened milk.

Instead, his mind swam.

In his hand was a black, hairy spider whose pulsing abdomen filled his palm. His mouth turned sticky and sour with fear. His legs wobbled beneath him as he stared at the red-striped spider for a fatal second. His lips wrapped tightly around his gums in a pained grimace as its fangs plunged deep into his wrist.

Freddie could only think of needles; hot, venom-laced needles thrusting through his skin and into his bloodstream. He warbled, frightened as he instinctively hurled the arachnid at the wall. He staggered into the living room, bumping into the hotel T.V. along the way. His cells were popping, bubbling, boiling inside of him. The arachnid scratched its hairy legs over the marble floor after him.

Freddie had to get out. He was hallucinating. The poison was coursing through his veins, stripping his insides like acid. With every heartbeat, he felt an explosion of pain. He made for the apartment door. Hundreds of smaller spiders swarmed from under and around the doorframe, their fangs snapping after him in a malicious, clicking chorus.

Freddie twisted, his eyes searching frantically for the hotel balcony. It was the only way out. There were hundreds, thousands of them, spreading like a virus across the room. He limped towards the glass balcony doors. The spider's bite was paralysing his limbs,

interrupting his brain signals to his body. He dragged his dead left leg behind him. He was half-way there, he would have to jump.

Freddie collapsed in the middle of the living room floor, his chest rapidly rising and falling. His breathing shallow, armies of arachnids scuttled from under the living room sofa and chairs towards him. He had lost all motor function. He could not close his eyes. The spiders scurried along his legs, up his shorts and under his T-shirt. The large, hand-sized, red-striped spider danced imperiously through Freddie's mass of wiry, curly hair, its eight feet tapping one by one onto his forehead, down towards the bridge of his nose. It lifted its pulsing body and its quivering fangs up into the air and plunged them deep into the whites of his eyeballs.

Freddie's breathing quickened and stopped.

As only you can be aware of such things in a dream, as if he were still lingering in the room after his death, he saw his mother and father returned from beside the pool. Marjorie Fontaine twisted the handle of the apartment door as they giggled like newlyweds. When he looked into the room, his father dropped his bottle of beer to the ground in shock, its liquid soaking a brown, urine-like stain into the carpet.

Freddie's body was cocooned in spiders' webs. His eyes had been eaten and in their place were black arachnid abdomens. His tongue was black and striped red. Hundreds of spiders were feasting upon his dead, limp body, creeping in and out of his nose, mouth and ears.

Marjorie Fontaine opened her mouth wide and curdled the skin-crawling roar that had been stalking Freddie for months.

CHAPTER FIVE

Freddie's first hour at St. Monedel's was tough. His eyelids were as heavy as ton weights and he struggled to keep them open. His pores were dancing an itchy jitterbug across his pale and clammy skin. All he wanted to do was sleep, but he was far too afraid for that; please, anything but that. He wrestled with his tiredness through assembly and until 10am, when he began to feel a little better. He bumped into a spare desk and sat himself down as the next lesson began.

"Good morning," chirped a young woman as she breezed into the drab, yellow first-year classroom. She was in her early twenties, with a petite figure. She was smartly dressed in a long, mauve, flowing skirt and a pastel pink sweater. Her auburn hair was tied in a neat ponytail.

"Good morning, miss," some of the kids replied.

"I'm Miss Seymour and I'm your maths teacher for the year," she introduced herself as she walked to the front of the classroom and scribbled her name in chalk on the blackboard. "Now I know that it's your first day at St. Monedel's, so I thought I'd let you know that it's also my first day," her soft voice wavered slightly, "and you are my first class, so you'll have to bear with me." She turned to her teacher's desk and scanned her lesson plan to see which item she should cover next. "Right, we've been asked to assess your levels of knowledge at the beginning of the year, so we've got a little maths test for you. If you will please pass these question sheets to each other."

The class groaned. Freddie figured that it might stimulate his stagnant, throbbing brain. "We're going to do a timed test with no calculators," Miss Seymour elaborated as the pupils

passed out the sheets amongst each other, “if you’d like to start, you’ve got five minutes to answer as many questions as you can.”

Freddie removed a small pencil from behind his ear and ploughed through the assignment, but he couldn’t help but notice that his neighbour’s test remained blank of answers. By the end of the five minutes Freddie had completed the test but the boy next to him had only answered half of the questions.

Miss Seymour turned to the blackboard and chalked up the answers to the difficult calculations. “If you’d like to pass your answers to the person next to you to mark, we’ll see how you did.”

“I wasn’t ready for that,” the boy chuckled to Freddie, wondering how he had fared.

“It wasn’t so bad,” replied Freddie, his tired eyes blinking at the chalkboard as he marked the paper. “How did I do?”

“You got them all right,” the boy laughed and whistled in recognition of Freddie’s talent. “That’s pretty impressive. I’m Ronnie by the way, Ronnie Rough.” Ronnie held out a hand. Freddie shook it.

“Thanks. I’m Freddie, Freddie Fontaine.”

CHAPTER SIX

“So what have you two been up to then my dears?” Grace and Kate Goody’s grandmother asked in a creaky voice. It was a Sunday, and the well-to-do Mrs. Goody always took her daughters to visit their grandma, every Sunday, without fail.

Kate opened her mouth to reply but her non-identical twin sister interrupted before she had a chance to speak. That was just like Grace, vying for attention. “And then I went into town to buy some new spikes, and then I went training,” Grace launched a barrage of sentences at her hard-of-hearing grandma.

“Please slow down dearie, my ears aren’t what they used to be.”

“The girls are starting at a new school tomorrow Mum, St. Monedel’s,” said Mrs. Goody, in between chewing one of her mother’s home-baked cakes.

“Oh, that’ll be nice,” replied their grandma, fiddling with her hearing aid. “Your grandfather, bless his soul, went there, left barely a year or two older than you two mind. And what are you doing this evening?”

“Training again, at Cromer’s Corner Athletics Club,” blurted Grace, her eyes lighting up at the thought. Kate relaxed back into her chair; her grandma would have to wait until next week to find out what *she* was up to.

“Oh yes, Grace dear,” the old lady wrinkled a smile at her enthusiasm, “you’re going to be the Olympic sprint champion.”

“I will be one day Grandma.”

Grace was good to her word. She loved sprinting along a track, something about it made her feel alive and free. She returned home from training and went to bed immediately, hoping that she wouldn’t be too tired for lessons the next day. Try as she might, however, she could

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