

CHAPTER ONE: DREAM THIEF

The Dream Thief taps a curled black nail on the glass of the jar. He can see through his almost translucent hand as the dream twitches in response. Flurries of pale-green sparks dart diagonally out from the dream's core, rebound against its prison and fold back in on it. An ancient label flutters from the jar's surface landing carelessly to the floor. It is illuminated by the colourful magic from the jars. He reads it:

TRUDY DADE

AGE 6: PUPPETEER DANCE IN ICING SUGAR GARDENS

He looks at the yellowed paper but has no memory of making the label or stealing the dream. He wonders for a moment about the warmth it may have given him. Other labels lie with it on the cellar floor. Feeling no need to read them, instead he turns away from the jarred dreams, disappointed by their unfulfilled promises, blind to their beauty.

The Dream Thief shuffles to the hat stand, roughly grabs his black pull-string bag, releasing it from the hook and opens it. He has packed the things he will need: his dry, ashy food, a flask of water, a child sized blanket on which to sleep. It's two days, three at most, so he can afford to travel light, and the going will be easier once he is out of The Grey.

His bag in order, he hoists it onto his back, adjusting the strings over his shoulders. He reaches for his cloak from the hat stand and throws it over his head and hunched shoulders like a shroud. His ears stick up; so pointed and alert they almost poke through the fabric of his hood. He looks around for an empty jar, but all he sees are dancing lights. The shelves are full of jars, none of them empty. It seems unbelievable, yet it's always so far from being over. Taking one of the few remaining empty jars that he spots on one of the bottom shelves he ties it to his belt loop under his cloak.

Before he leaves he looks at the only jar that's half empty and a throaty snort like sound of disgust or perhaps disappointment, escapes his thin lips. It stands at the front, apart from the hundreds of other dreams. He approaches it, but is distracted by his reflection against the glass. The skin on his face is a sickly yellow and it deters him from watching the dream. He looks instead at his deep-set, hooded black eyes, his large, hooked, nose and his pointed chin. His reflection moves eerily across the surface of the jar, like smoke. He decides against watching the first dream and instead he leaves quickly by the coal chute as usual.

It's night, which is usually the best time and he sniffs a little, dog-like, at the damp air. He knows the dream he wants and he steps out onto the endless grey pavements of Stanbridge, into the permanent drizzle, to take it; hoping, as always, that it will feel as good as the first.

That first dream gave him a feeling he can never repeat no matter how many more dreams he steals. Yet he will go on because he's the Dream Thief. To rid the world of dreams is his cause and there is nobody who has the power to stop him.

CHAPTER TWO: SADE

Sade is in the front passenger seat beside her dad as they drive down the motorway. The space between and behind them is packed with all their possessions. They hardly speak; there are lots of things that Sade wants to say, but it's difficult to know how to start. Her dad's hand rests on the gear stick, the gold of his wedding band glinting slightly and Sade thinks about the matching one on her mum Elspeth's hand. She opens her mouth to say something, but shuts it again, turning and looking out of the window instead. She shifts her gaze beyond her reflection of freckled skin, bright, intense looking blue eyes and shock of blonde curls to the outside and watches as they turn off from the stream of fast traffic.

The journey is a familiar one and she knows that it won't be long before she sees Stanbridge Hospital, the strange clunky building that houses her sleeping mum. She likes to think of her as simply sleeping; coma is too much of a scary word. This time is different though. This time they will drive past the hospital and on into the town. Sade has never been into Stanbridge itself, but she's known for a week that they are moving to be nearer her mum.

'I'm sorry Sah,' her dad had said to her, 'sorry that I'm making you grow up more quickly than you should.'

Sade had looked at her dad's broad forehead, noticing the way his eyebrows furrowed when he said something important and she felt a pang for the past when loving her mum and dad was a simple thing to do.

'Twelve is old enough, Dad,' she'd said and she'd meant it. 'It's all good; we can move.'

The sky darkens the further in towards Stanbridge they drive. Sade manages to wriggle an arm free to check her watch. It's only three thirty; she wonders if a storm is on the way.

'I hope it doesn't rain,' she says to her dad. 'That will make shifting the stuff in a right pain.'

'Yeah,' agrees her dad, 'looks like it's just a bit of drizzle though. We can cope with drizzle.'

They drive past the hospital and into the town. She looks out, trying to spot some school kids, but there's nobody about at all. Yesterday, her last day of school, was horrible. She had to leave behind all her friends and she'd cried. She keeps scanning. Surely kids would be coming out of school about now? Then she sees a girl, walking alone. She's wearing a thick, heavy-looking, steel-grey uniform, with a crested blazer and matching satchel worn across her shoulder. She walks straight-backed, almost as if she's marching. Poor girl, thinks Sade, she must be the unpopular one. Sade tries to get a good look at the girl's face so that she can make sure she's nice to her on Monday, but it's hidden, or is it just expressionless? Either way Sade knows she will never remember her again.

Then she sees another school kid, of about her own age, a boy this time, again dressed in the uniform of her new school, Stanbridge High. Like the girl, he walks alone, straight-backed, satchel across his shoulder. Then here's another walking alone, and another.

'Look, there's some kids from your new school. Smart uniform eh?'

'Bit dismal. Like something out of the army. Why aren't they talking? They're all walking on their own.'

'Oh yeah! Don't ask me, kids are weird.'

'Cheers.'

Her dad laughs a little. 'Here we are thirty-one Camberley Street, Stanbridge, our new home,' he says parking the car up next to the kerb.

Sade looks up at the house. It's one of a long line: boxy, non-descript and exactly the same as all the others on the street. She checks her wing-mirror before she opens the door to the car, but there's no sign of any traffic, then she realises that she has not seen a single car since arriving in the town.

She opens the door and swings out her legs; it feels good to stretch them out after having them curled uncomfortably around all the breakables. She manages to rock herself up and carries the box that has been perched on her knee, obscuring her view, over the damp paving slabs that turn from pavement into garden path without any change in definition.

The house is a little cold, with a slight fusty, un-lived in, damp smell. Sade puts the box down on the charcoal carpet in the front room.

'The removers have already been and gone, that's good isn't it?' says her dad, running his hand over the back of the settee that looks lost and out of place in its new home.

Sade says nothing and instead sets to work unpacking the car. As she steps back outside she sees the house opposite. It stands out of the smart, tidy row like a bad tooth. The house is so dark it's almost black, in contrast to the standard grey of all its neighbours. Its upstairs windows are boarded up and there's what looks like scorch marks disfiguring the brick. Sade looks around for her dad to comment on it, but there's nobody about. Even the single-file children seem to have disappeared from sight. She shudders a little, even though it's not cold, opens the boot and starts unloading.

'Shall we go take a look around town?' suggests Sade later. They sit on the sofa, surrounded by labelled boxes, sipping tea.

'We should really visit Mum.'

Sade checks her watch. 'Visiting isn't until six, so we have an hour. Quick walk round town? Find out where school is, say hello to a few locals, that kind of thing?'

Her Dad smiles and sips his tea. 'You've always been brave,' he says, 'impatient, yes, but brave, definitely brave.'

'What do you mean?'

Her dad shrugs. 'Just part of who you are, even when you were tiny, you were never afraid of anything. You must remember that story, the one Mum always tells about when you jumped in the deep end of the pool? You were only two. You saw all the other kids swimming and jumped in, frightened the life out of Elspeth, she had to fish you out.'

Sade has heard her mum tell the story many times. It used to bore her, now she wishes she could hear it again. 'I'm not really that brave, or impatient,' she says at last. 'Besides, what's brave about walking around town?'

'Nothing, I suppose.' He goes back to sipping his tea.

'Well come on then, I've got cabin fever. Let's go out.' Sade stands and puts her tea forcefully down on the carpet, sloshing it slightly. She watches her dad's gaze fall to the dark stain that's beginning to form.

'Sorry, Dad, I'll grab a cloth.'

Searching the kitchen, she is met by a bewildering array of empty grey cupboards and yet more boxes. She gives up and grabs her coat instead.

'No cloth,' she explains to her dad who hasn't moved and still stares at the carpet, 'let's just go out and worry about it later.'

'You go, if you like Sah. There's too much to do here.'

Sade opens her mouth to argue, but when her dad turns to her he looks so tired that she's grateful she can go out and leave him behind, then feels slightly ashamed for thinking it.

'Okay,' she says in her bright, everything is fine voice, 'I'll be back for six in time to visit Mum.'

She opens the door and steps out into the drizzle hoping the walk will help clear her head. She crosses the road and stops outside the strange burnt house, checking up and down the street, but there's still nobody about. She must remember to ask her dad later.

She walks down Camberley Street towards town, taking deep breaths of the air that tastes stale as well as damp. She wants to feel refreshed but it's as if she's still indoors.

She crosses the road at the bottom, and walks on alone through the empty streets. The only sounds she can hear are her own footsteps and the noise of her steady breathing. She stops, tips her head to one side, bird-like, listening for anything; distant traffic, other people chatting, but there's nothing; only a stagnant silence. She looks up into the dark layered sky. It's heavy, ominous: a solid ceiling of cloud that looms above, threatening. She searches for any glimpse of sunlight, but there's none.

Sade walks on, past the rows of faceless breezeblock houses, each identical to the next. She scans for personal touches, house names, unique hanging baskets, garden gnomes, different coloured painted doors, but everything is the same. The place is more than strange; it's creepy.

She comes to a little precinct of shops, consisting of a launderette, a small supermarket, a hardware store, and a fish and chip shop. She pushes the doors into the supermarket. There are a few people inside milling around with their trolleys, looking blankly at the endless packets and tins. It's brighter inside, but the lighting is still low and the produce looks colourless, as if sitting for a long time in the sun has bleached it.

She chooses a packet of crisps, a banana, takes a milkshake from the fridge and a chocolate bar from the counter at the front. She places the items in front of the shop assistant at the checkout. The woman wears a dark nylon uniform. Her badge reads: *Lindsay, Here to Help.*

'Lindsay,' says Sade making the woman jump slightly, 'that's a nice name. I'm Sade. It's spelt S-A-D-E so people often call me Sadie by mistake, but it's pronounced Sah-Day.'

The woman stares at her blankly, her pale eyes colourless in an unhealthy looking face.

'We've just moved here, to Stanbridge,' Sade rushes on. She has no idea why she's gibbering so much. 'So, just wondering, you know where stuff is and that kind of thing. I

start school on Monday, so I was hoping to meet a few kids first, always helps when you're new to know a few faces, gives you a heads up.'

The woman doesn't say anything, and instead she begins to mechanically sweep Sade's items through the checkout till.

'So anyway, I was hoping you might be able to point me in the right direction, tell me where all the kids hang out? At my old town - in Hexworth, do you know it? It's about an hour and a half north of here, easy drive just up the motorway.' Sade can hear her voice vibrating loudly throughout the shop, but she barely slows to take in a breath. 'So in my old town, all the kids used to hang out in the graveyard, but it's not as creepy as it sounds. You see it was the one place none of the grown-ups used to go, so we were safe to, well to...'

Finally she manages to stop herself before she ends up telling this complete stranger, who looks like she might run on batteries, what she and her friends used to get up to. The shop assistant continues to check her items through the machine, creating a little rhythmic bleep.

The items through and packed in a bag Sade looks expectantly at the shop assistant waiting to hear some sort of speech, at least how much she owes, but the woman merely points to the display on the till.

Sade pays and turns to leave. Before she does she tries a direct question. 'Is there a graveyard in Stanbridge?'

The woman nods, so Sade at least knows she's understood and the woman can hear her.

'Where is it?'

The woman points to her left. 'That way, behind the church in the town square.'

Her voice is monotone, one single, flat note.

Sade leaves the shop; she pauses for a moment looking back up the street in the direction she came, then turns and walks towards the centre of Stanbridge. I'll show you brave, she thinks.

