

# NIGHTMARE

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## CHAPTER 1

# HASTY WORDS

Midnight – and Todd awoke in a sweat again. A cold sweat, making the sheets stick to his clammy skin, making his heart thump. Sleep was rare these nights, since...

He swung his legs out of bed and sat, head in hands. Of course he couldn't sleep. He couldn't sleep because he was riddled with guilt.

He hadn't meant to be so spiteful. When weirdo Elspeth from his class asked him out, he didn't mean to humiliate her – destroy her. Only all his mates were watching and he'd felt embarrassed.

So he'd looked down his nose like she was a bit of dirt on his shoe. He'd laughed – loudly – and then mocked her. His words ran through his mind...

*Go out with you! Have you looked in the mirror lately?*

And then came the crunch. The killer blow that sent tears flooding down her scarlet cheeks. The words that sent her scuttling away out of sight...

*I'd have to be blind to date you!*

She'd stayed off school for ages afterwards. Too humiliated to face anyone.

Now she was back but she hadn't spoken to him. She'd looked though. She hadn't stopped looking – from the corner of her eye. Sharp, mean, hateful glances. Like she wanted him dead.

Todd stared at his reflection in the mirror. His face was pale, gaunt. His eyes red and baggy. His appetite had deserted him since the nightmares started, so he'd lost weight. He looked a right mess.

His chances of dating Lexie were diminishing rapidly. Unless she fancied guys who looked like zombies. Somehow he didn't think she did. But that was how his sleepless nights were making him look – like a zombie.

It was the same nightmare night after night. A face looming up at him. A hideous, grey-white face. Just a face, no body. A head. A decapitated head, growing in vileness until it filled his mind. Its mouth was open in a silent scream. Eyes were black hollow sockets – soulless. It swayed there, in his dreams, like a lantern on a tree.

Every night he awoke sweating, heart slamming against his ribcage. It was a relief when morning came. Now another long day at school stretched before him.

“Hey, Todd!” Webby yelled as Todd shuffled into class. “You look knackered. Late night?”

“Yeah, went to a party,” he lied. He could hardly say bad dreams had kept him awake all night. He'd be labelled a wuss!

Lexie – gorgeous Lexie – was at her desk. She glanced up, smiled shyly at him. Then she frowned. “You OK?” she murmured.

“Yeah, good thanks.”

“You don’t look it.”

Webby jabbed him in the ribs and winked.

Despite feeling a wreck, Lexie’s concern cheered Todd up. Until he spotted Elspeth’s narrow eyes fixed on him. She didn’t look away even though he’d caught her staring. She just squeezed her eyes even tighter until they were slits. Like a snake’s. And probably as venomous.

At break time Lexie met him in the playground. His heart began to race – but in a good way. She was so pretty. She had the softest fair hair, the brightest green eyes. She was really smart too. Top in most subjects.

“Todd, I’m worried about you,” she said, sitting beside him on a bench. “You look ill. Are you sick?”

He couldn’t lie to Lexie. She’d see through him and wouldn’t be impressed. And he really wanted her to like him. For weeks he’d been trying to pluck up the courage to ask her out. It would serve him right if she turned him down. Made a fool out of him. Like he’d done to Elspeth.

He glanced across the playground. Elspeth was standing there. Staring at him. Glaring at him. Weird, skinny Elspeth with her straight, mousy hair and cold eyes. He wished he’d turned her down gently, though.

“I’m not sleeping,” he told Lexie.

“Why?” she asked.

He took a deep breath. “Nightmares. Well, the same recurring nightmare. It wakes me up. Then I can’t get back to sleep. And if I do, it comes back. Every night. Every single night for weeks.”

His voice had risen. He sounded desperate even to his own ears.

Lexie didn't laugh. She rested her hand on his and looked into his eyes. "That's awful. Have you seen a doctor?"

"No, only a severed head," he joked. He was glad he could still make jokes. He wasn't a complete zombie yet.

She looked horrified. "A what?"

"That's my nightmare. Same thing every time. A decapitated head with gaping holes where its eyes ought to be. It looms up at me like it's going to swallow me. It gets closer and closer till it's right here." He put his hand a centimetre from his face. "That's when I wake up sweating and shaking."

"You need to see someone," Lexie said anxiously. "A sleep therapist, or a... er... psychiatrist. Sorry!"

Todd lowered his head, guilt swamping him again. “Actually, Lexie, I think I know what’s causing the nightmares.”

“You do? What?”

He pulled a face. “Er... my guilty conscience.”

She moved a little away from him. “Oh! What have you got to feel guilty about?”

Heat scorched his neck. “Er... Elspeth asked me out...”

She looked sad suddenly. “Oh! Did you go?”

“No, ’course not. Only the way I turned her down wasn’t nice.” He lowered his voice. “I made her look a fool. Made her cry.”

“Oh poor Elspeth,” Lexie said, horrified. “That girl has no friends. It must have taken so much courage to ask you out.”

“Yeah, I know. I didn’t mean to be so horrible. Only Webby and the others were watching, smirking, muttering stuff. So I just said all sorts of stupid things.” Lexie was still looking horrified. She probably hated him. Panicking now he ranted on, “I shouldn’t have. I’m not normally like that...”

To his amazement, she took his hand. “I know you’re not like that. You’re sweet – normally.”

His mouth dropped open. “Am I?”

She smiled and the dimples deepened in her cheeks. “Of course you’re sweet or I wouldn’t like you, would I?”

Todd felt his insides turn to goo. His words tumbled over each other as they tried to get out of his mouth. “You... er... you like me? Really?”

She leaned towards him. Her scent made him dizzy. And then she kissed his cheek and his

world turned upside-down.

If only Elspeth hadn't been standing watching, glowering at him, life would have been perfect. But those daggers in her eyes felt like they were being hurtled his way, each one thudding into his chest.