

Afterdark

The Dream Snatcher



NNIE DALTON

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ANNIE DAITON



Pammoth

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After Dark

The Dream Snatcher

Also by Annie Dalton



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1

Beware of the dream snatcher

Joe Quail was climbing a dream stairway. Below him, magical towers poked through a fading sunset. Above him, the stairs swooped and soared dizzily until they reached the stars.

The Princess of Afterdark was calling him. 'Where are you, Joe?'

'I'm coming,' he said sleepily.

At last Joe found her waiting on the highest stair of all, her wild hair blowing in the night sky. 'Who do

you need me to fight this time? Trolls, dragons, evil enchanters?’

‘No, Joe, it’s your world which is in trouble now. And the danger is much closer than you think –’

But before she could explain, the air filled with terrible sighs. The stairway slowly cracked down the middle. As the half of the stair with the princess on it began to drift away, she cried, ‘Wake up, Joe! Wake up, before it’s too late!’

‘No, wait! Take me with you!’ shouted Joe.

There was another desolate sigh. Joe’s stair started to crumble. He clutched at it to save himself, but the tiny shells it was made of broke off in his hand.

‘Take care, Joe,’ the princess cried faintly, as she floated into the night. ‘Beware of the dream snatcher!’

But the stairs shattered into thousands of tiny pieces. Joe tumbled down through the stars, yelling at the top of his voice . . .

. . . And opened his eyes, his heart bumping wildly. Then he heard it again. The eerie sighing. Only this time it was right outside his window. He pulled back the curtain cautiously. Drifting towards him through the foggy dawn was a ghostly crowd of hot-air balloons.

Joe pinched himself in case he was still dreaming. But the balloons were real, floating across the back gardens of Forest Street, and getting nearer every

second. Now and then they gave gusty sighs as the balloonists controlled the flow of helium.

Joe usually loved hot-air balloons. They made him think of summer and circuses. But these balloons looked as if they'd been cut out of the fog. Even their swirling patterns were foggy. And the nearer they came, the darker it grew, until at last one balloon completely filled Joe's window with its shadow.

Joe flattened himself against the wall and tried not to breathe. *It knows I'm here.* For a terrified moment Joe thought the balloon was actually going to come crashing in through his window to get him. But at the last minute it veered sharply, like a driver avoiding broken glass. Then it nosed its way up the back of Joe's house and disappeared over the roof. Joe dived out of bed and tore out on to the landing, his heart hammering.

The balloon hung motionless outside Flora Neate's house. It's after snooty old Flora now, Joe thought, bewildered. From here he could see the balloonists in their fog-coloured clothes. One wore a hood, completely hiding his face. The other only looked to be in his teens, his wrists too lanky for his sleeves. He crouched over some kind of machine, fiddling with a few dials. Joe could see its keys glowing like unfriendly teeth.

'It's either a weird computer,' he muttered, 'or an even weirder musical instrument.'

The youth rippled his fingers along the keys. Joe caught his breath, half-expecting the street to fill with spooky music.

Instead there was silence, thick and cottony as a snowstorm.

The boy's fingers skimmed over the keys, gently smoothing away all the tiny ordinary sounds of the everyday world. First he blotted out the street sounds. Soon the hum of the fridge downstairs was gone, then the gurgle of the pipes in the airing cupboard, until the only sound left in the street was Joe's scared breathing.

The youth twiddled a new dial and began to play a song without words or melody. But it wasn't meant to be listened to. This song was meant to be *felt*, Joe thought, as warm delicious feelings swooped and surged along the street like gypsy violins. It was softer than the softest lullaby, sweeter than lemon pie, irresistible as moonlight. 'Come to me,' it implored. 'I'd never hurt you. Please don't hide. I've waited so long. I'm lonely without you.'

The man in the hood stepped forward and made a caressing movement with his hand. Joe caught his breath as a starry net flew gracefully through the air and stuck itself to Flora Neate's window, like a spider's web. With the skill of a snake-charmer, the hooded figure reeled his glittering net back in,

careful not to spill his mysterious catch.

Joe strained on tiptoe, his heart thudding, desperate to see what was in the net. The man seemed astonished at it, whatever it was. He gave an impatient thumbs-down signal. The balloon moved off again, sighing its way along the street, house by house, until finally it drew level with a small cracked window. Kevin Kitchener's room. With a hiccup, the balloon stopped and hung in the air, wheezing painfully.

Joe swallowed. The balloonists were after his friend, Kevin, and there wasn't a thing he could do.

Then the musician played his lemon-pie lullaby love song, and the sinister figure threw his starry net at the boxroom window and reeled it back. This time Joe saw what he caught in it.

Nothing at all.

Abruptly, the balloon lifted itself high over the narrow houses of Forest Street. And for the first time the pattern decorating the now-speeding balloon came into focus.

And it wasn't a pattern. It was words.

In swirling magician's writing, Joe read:

Dream Snatchers
Grand Opening Saturday Night

A wave of relief washed over him. It was a publicity

stunt all the time! Joe almost danced back to his room.

Dream Snatchers was the new games arcade being built at the end of Forest Street. Joe passed it on his way to school. Kevin's brother Jason worked there. It was enormous inside, Kevin said. Eye-boggling, mind-dazzling rooms of machines and games so new they'd never been played before anywhere in the world.

The owner of Dream Snatchers had a glamorous name, which Joe found hard to keep in his head. Vasco, that was it. Vasco Shine. Mostly everyone called him Vee, as if he was their favourite big brother, not their boss at all.

He drove a sleek pearly car the colour of moonlight. The odd-looking hound which followed him everywhere was pearly too. Vee was a zillionaire already, Kevin said, even though he was hardly any older than Jason. That's why he was so successful, that's how Vee knew what children and teenagers liked, what thrilled them, what their deepest secrets were; because he was still young himself.

But although Vee was young, he never stopped working, never took a holiday, not even one day off. He hardly even slept, Kevin said.

Vee had high standards for his staff too. If you didn't do things right, no matter how sorry you were,

there was no second chance. One mistake and, in the nicest possible way, you were out on your ear.

What Joe had seen was just a secret rehearsal for tomorrow's big opening. Now the whole thing made perfect sense. Dizzy with relief he slid back under his quilt. His room was unexpectedly cold. Joe pulled the quilt right over his head, shivering, and promptly fell asleep again. This time there were no dreams waiting for him.

By morning Joe was sleeping so deeply it took his mum several goes to wake him. 'It's foggy again,' she grumbled, peering out of his window. She'd slept badly too. It was lucky the phone went, or she'd have been late for work. They rushed around frazzled.

Then, just as his mum was doing her mascara, she sprang her surprise. 'Which do you want, Joe? The good news or the bad news? Don't worry,' she added, 'you'll go wild when I tell you the good news. And the bad news isn't really bad.'

'The good news, then,' he said cheerfully.

His mum beamed at him in the mirror. 'Alice Fazackerley is babysitting tonight.'

'Wow!' yelled Joe, spraying toast crumbs. 'Why didn't you say?'

'I didn't know till the phone rang just now. Angela and her husband have both gone down with flu and she's offered me their theatre tickets. We've got to

leave early, so Alice will meet you outside school.'

Joe had stopped listening. The wonderful words were chasing round his head. *Alice Fazackerley's coming tonight*. He'd been longing to hear them for months.

'Oh,' Joe remembered, putting on his coat. 'You never told me the bad news.'

His mum's smile wavered. 'I've invited Flora's dad to come to the theatre with me. But the baby isn't very well. Tom thought it would be best if Alice babysat for the three of you at his house.'

'Are you *crazy*?'

'But their father's such a sweet man,' said his mother helplessly. 'It must be hard bringing up those little girls by himself. It would do him good to go out and relax. And there's two of them and only one of you, Joe. It's much easier for –'

'But Flora's a weirdo, Mum, and Tat's only a baby.'

'What *difference* does it make?'

'What difference?' yelled Joe, working himself into a fury. 'Only that you've ruined everything. That's all.'

He stormed upstairs and flung himself on his bed. Then he hurled his pillow across the room, sending a model troll flying. 'Flora Neate,' he snarled. 'If she was any paler she'd be totally invisible.' Except for her weird eyes, he remembered with a shudder of dislike. They were so dark they were practically navy. It wasn't just Joe who thought she was weird. All his friends

did. When the Neates moved in, his mum had dragged him over to be neighbourly. But Flora just took herself into a corner with a book and munched her way through a bag of lurid raspberry jellies.

‘And she didn’t offer me *one*,’ he muttered. ‘Even I was never as weird as that.’ He sighed. The truth was, Joe had been fairly weird, the kind of boy who was scared of everything. Then one day teenage Alice came to babysit and took him to the kingdom of Afterdark where she was the last princess. And by the time his adventures were over Joe had almost got the hang of being a hero.

‘Alice Fazackerley,’ Joe murmured.

And a shiver of pure happiness went through him.

2

Kevin nicks a cool jacket

On the other side of Forest Street, Kevin Kitchener was hunting for Archie. Thanks to their shared adventures in Afterdark, Kevin's bullying days were over. He and Joe Quail were now the best of friends. But even Joe wasn't as important to Kevin as his scruffy little dachshund.

Kevin couldn't understand it. When he fell asleep in front of the horror film, the little dog had been sprawled comfortably next to him. But just as it was