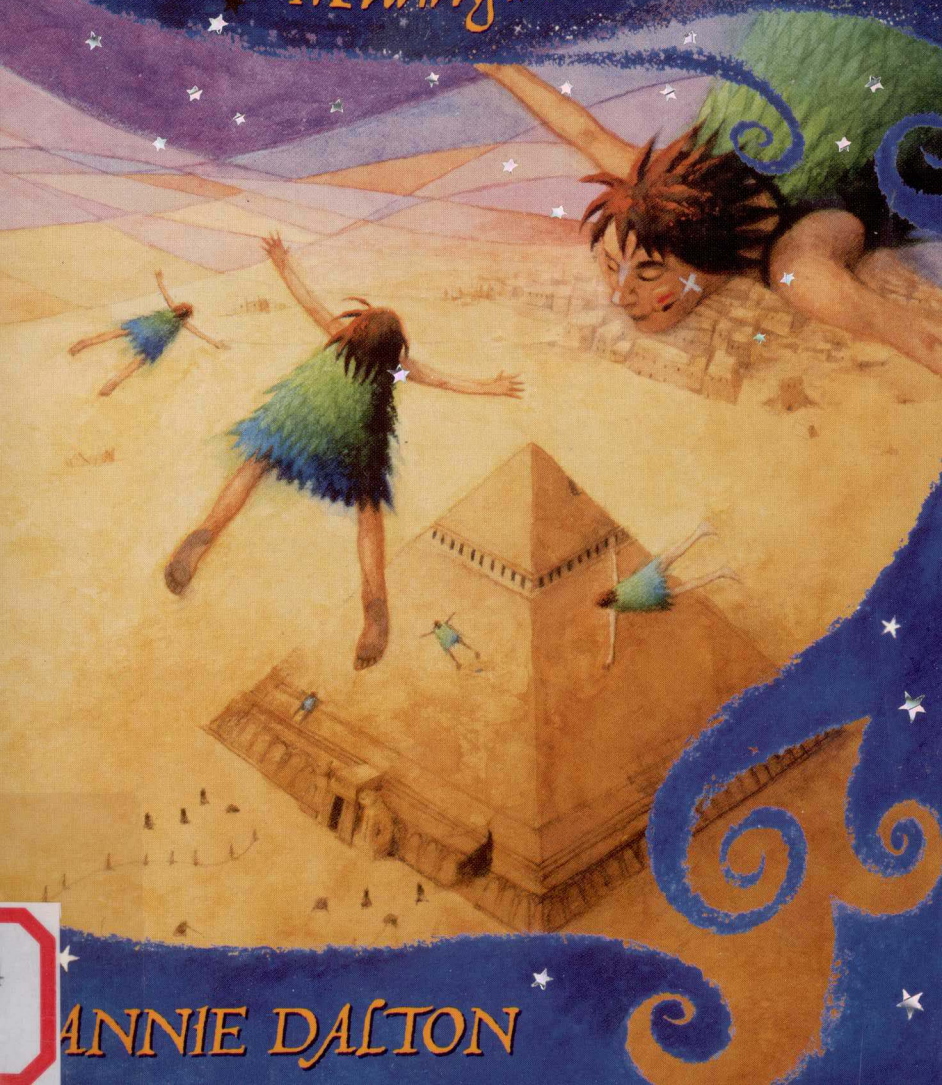


Afterdark

The Midnight Museum



ANNIE DALTON

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江苏工业学院图书馆

藏书章

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Afterdark

The Midnight Museum

ANNIE DALTON



mammoth

for Maria
with heartfelt thanks
A. D.

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1

Joe's warning

As Joe Quail hurtled downstairs on the first day of term, he noticed a strange envelope on the doormat.

He knew it wasn't a regular letter. For one thing, there was no stamp. For another, it had the faintest gleam of moonlight.

Scrawled across the front was an ominous message:

A warning to Joe Quail.

Joe tore open the envelope and slid out a piece of torn crackly paper. The writing was old-fashioned and flowery, making it hard to read.

'And darkness will rule,' he read slowly.

Joe was no stranger to magical happenings, but it was the first time he'd received an ancient curse through his letterbox. The shock made him so wobbly that he had to sit down. To his astonishment, the writing vanished and new words shimmered in their place.

'And light will shine,' he now read, bewildered.

He tipped the sheet of paper experimentally. The first message returned. Relief surged through him. 'Nice try, Kevin,' he grinned.

In this world, Kevin Kitchener was just another tough kid. But in the world of Afterdark, where he and Joe first became friends, Kevin was a warrior and a hero. He was also a wicked practical joker.

Kevin had been away all summer, staying with his sister. Presumably scaring Joe half to death with a curse was Kevin's way of saying he was back in town.

Joe hovered outside the kitchen, plucking up courage to go in. It sounded suspiciously quiet and he needed to figure out if it was a friendly family-type silence, or the stomach-churning kind.

For as long as Joe could remember, there had just been him and his mum. Then over the summer holidays he'd acquired a new dad, two stepsisters and a small black cat called Betty Einstein. Now they lived all cooped up together in one tiny terraced house, and the strain was starting to show.

As it happened, Joe totally approved of his new family. He thought his stepdad, Tom, was really good news, and he secretly adored the cat. He was also quite fond of his sisters. There was just one small complication.

They were not entirely human.

Technically, Flora and Titania (Tat for short), were only half-vampire.

It was their mother who had been a true vampire, though not, as Flora kept reminding Joe, the horror-film kind; so neither sister showed the slightest interest in human blood. Flora fainted at the sight of it, though little Tat could give you a nasty nip if you weren't careful.

But having vampire ancestors wasn't exactly something Flora wanted to get out. Even her own dad didn't know the truth. So after their parents' wedding, she'd made Joe swear a solemn vow to keep their magic lives and their real lives separate.

'Mum said mixing them up just leads to big trouble,' she said sternly.

'I'll feel like a double agent,' Joe complained.

Flora gave him a crooked little smile. 'Join the club.'

Leading a double life turned out to be incredibly hard work. It seemed that once you started acquiring secrets, you couldn't stop. Without intending to, Joe was becoming a kind of secrets magnet. Some of them were fairly tame, like where Joe's mum had hidden his stepdad's birthday present. Others, like the vampire thing, were pure dynamite.

Not only did Joe live in terror of letting something slip, he was also constantly having to make tricky decisions at the drop of a hat.

For instance, should he tell Flora about his joke

warning, or not? Probably not, he decided. She'd been up since dawn, ironing non-existent creases out of her school blouse and double-checking the contents of her shiny new school briefcase. Starting high school was clearly a big deal for Flora. For some reason it hadn't quite sunk in with Joe yet.

He checked his expression in the hall mirror. Drop the guilty grin, he told himself. It's a dead giveaway. Try to look like someone with a totally clear conscience. *That's* more like it!

He took a deep breath and flung open the kitchen door. Wow, he thought.

It looked exactly like a breakfast food commercial! Sunlight was pouring through the window, giving everyone soft sunshiney halos. His family looked so perfect he could have cried.

Ideally, Flora would have been eating her cereal, instead of picking out the freeze-dried raspberries and frowning at her book of Advanced Brainteasers. Also Joe's stepdad would have waited till *after* breakfast before sorting through the bills.

But for those precious sunlit moments, Flora was not an irritable vampire child with bizarre eating habits. She was a quirky girl genius. And little Tat was not planning her next act of evil sabotage, but just humming innocently in her highchair. And then the sun went in.

Joe's dad tossed the bills aside. 'And they all lived happily ever after,' he said grimly. 'In jail.'

Joe's mum didn't seem to hear. She was reading the house ads in the local paper. 'Tom!' she said excitedly. 'This one's got two bathrooms and an attic, which would be ideal for your study.'

'Ideal for a millionaire,' he growled.

'No, listen!' But she'd only read as far as the luxurious master-bathroom, when Tat gave an ear-splitting shriek, and hurled her bowl across the kitchen.

'Ouf!' said Joe, amazed to find himself dripping with porridge.

All at once everybody was yelling at everybody else.

'You were supposed to be watching her!' yelled Joe's mum. 'That child is a demon!'

'You distracted me with your outrageous gold fireplaces and marble taps!' Joe's dad yelled back.

'Stop it, both of you!' screamed Flora. 'I'm going to a scary new high school in exactly ten minutes and twenty-five seconds. I don't need any more STRESS!' And she rushed out.

'Excellent,' Joe muttered. 'I get the porridge and *she's* stressed.'

His mum quickly mopped him down with some kitchen towel. 'Better check if Flora's OK,' she said guiltily.

Once upon a time, Joe was a lonely only. Now, as well as

being a secrets magnet, he was everyone's favourite go-between. He found his sister huddled at the bottom of the stairs, tensely studying her book.

'Erm. I wouldn't read too much into that demon thing,' he said. 'Mum has no idea about your vampire DNA, honestly.'

'GO AWAY,' said Flora stonily.

So much for sympathy, thought Joe. OK, we'll try wacky.

He put on his school blazer. His hands immediately disappeared from view. He flapped his empty sleeves. 'I don't know why you're worried,' he said. 'Your uniform fits. I look like some little elf. Can you believe this was the smallest size they had?'

'Shut UP, Joe,' she growled.

He sat down beside her. 'I've got a maths problem for you.'

His sister rolled her eyes.

'I'm serious. What are the odds of our house being struck by a meteorite in the next eight minutes, putting an end to life as we know it?'

Flora's face crumpled. 'Didn't that just happen!' A tear splashed on her shoe. 'Everything feels so weird, Joe,' she choked. 'Home. School. It's like my whole world changed overnight.'

In Joe's opinion, Flora needed serious cheering up. So just this once, he broke the rules. 'You mean this world,' he

said softly. 'Not Afterdark and not Alice. They'll never ever change.'

Of all Joe's many secrets, the wildest and most wonderful had to be Alice Fazackerly. To adults she was just the perfect teenage babysitter; calm, sensible and perfectly reliable. But her true identity was far more mysterious.

Flora smiled a watery little smile. 'Yeah,' she whispered. 'How many kids have a magic princess for a babysitter?'

Yess! thought Joe. His ruse had worked! 'She's coming tomorrow,' he reminded her. 'I can't wait, can you?'

But the moment had passed. Flora sniffed back her tears. 'Help!' she said in her normal voice. 'What did I do with that stupid compass?'

It had finally arrived, the moment Joe had been dreading. He'd always known he'd go to the high school one day. He'd just hoped to be three inches taller by the time that day came.

As they reached the gates, he froze in panic. 'I can't go in there! Have you seen the size of those boys? They'll murder me.'

Flora pulled a face. 'And all the girls will hate me like poison. They always do.' Her expression softened. 'You'll be OK. The main thing is not to react and eventually they'll get bored. Oh, well, good luck.' She ploughed bravely into the crowd.

Joe wished all these big scary thugs would stop playing football, so he could scout around for Kevin. Then it dawned on him. Kevin was the big scary thug with the ball! Kevin had grown huge since Joe saw him last. He'd also acquired a ferocious new haircut, which made him look practically bald. But apart from his height and his hair, Kevin was exactly the same as ever.

'Joe Quail, my man,' he yelled, delighted. He casually headed the ball to another kid and loped across, grinning his famous shark's grin.

'Nice curse,' said Joe at once. 'Really had me going. The paper looked ancient. Did you use coffee, or just stick it in the gas burner?'

Kevin looked blank. 'Sorry, mate. I have no idea what you're on about.'

Joe felt a twinge of panic. 'I thought you sent it as a joke.'

Kevin shook his head. 'Ancient curses aren't my style. I'm a whoopee cushion kind of guy. Sounds more like Vasco to me.'

'I never thought of him,' said Joe.

Vasco Shine was a distant relation of Flora's. When the children first met him, he was a young, smooth-talking villain. These days, in daylight hours at least, Vasco ran a hot-air balloon business called Dream Catchers. But there was always that tiny whiff of danger about him. Flora said that's why all the girls fancied him.

Just then the school bell went, leaving Joe's question unanswered.

To his relief he'd been put in the same class as Flora and Kevin.

They spent the first lesson copying down the class timetable. In the second lesson, they rubbed the first timetable out again and copied down the correct timetable. 'Yahoo, it's Groundhog Day!' whispered Kevin. 'If they keep this up, we'll never do any lessons at all!'

The boy at the next desk wore a huge hooded coat. He glowered out from under his outsize hood like a gangster and Joe felt a dangerous tension leaking from him like static electricity. This kid couldn't sit still for an instant. Every time the teacher said anything, he rolled his eyes and gave an exasperated sigh. Joe got the impression that his twitchy neighbour was ready to kick over his chair and storm out, if things didn't improve.

The teacher, whose name Joe couldn't seem to catch, handed round exercise books. The boy in the hood immediately scrawled the word 'Spoon' across his, in huge uneven letters. He glanced up and caught Joe looking. 'What's your problem, shorty?' he snarled. Spoon had strange staring eyes, which made him look perpetually furious about something.

'No, nothing,' stuttered Joe.

'Yeah, right,' said the boy contemptuously.

Some of the other boys sniggered.

Kevin gave Joe a nudge. 'Don't mind him. Spoon's a bit of a maniac, but he's a laugh when you get to know him.'

But Joe somehow couldn't quite picture becoming buddies with Spoon.

He was faintly miffed to see Flora chatting to one of the girls. None of the girls at their old school ever had anything to do with her. 'They think I'm weird,' Flora had explained gloomily. 'They just don't know *how* weird.'

At break, she came over, pink with excitement. 'Have you heard? There's this peculiar illness going around.'

'Excellent,' said Kevin at once. 'I can stay at home and watch loads of MTV.'

'You don't want this one,' Flora told him. 'The kids who've got it fall into a sleeping beauty-type sleep and can't wake up.'

Kevin snorted. 'Yeah right, and then rose petals like, gracefully flutter down and cover them.'

'Are you sure it's not just some seniors trying to freak out the first-years?' suggested Joe.

Flora looked embarrassed. 'Now you mention it, it *is* only first-years that are meant to be affected.'

'And you fell for it?' said Kevin.

She shrugged. 'What can I say, Kev? I'm a girl.'

As the children walked home after school, a girl waved to