

NIGHTMARE KING

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This book is dedicated to anyone who as ever felt like they were not enough, or questioned their worth.

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Darkness closes in, chasing me. My muscles clench so tight, pain pulsates through my trembling body. My racing heart slows, hammering my chest with delayed, erratic thumps. A piercing beeping noise blares in my ear. *Beep . . . beep . . . beep . . .* My heart stutters to a stop. I hear a high-pitched *BEEEEEP!*

“Run faster!” someone yells.

The loud voice jolts me out of my troubling thoughts. My eyes pop open and I take in my surroundings. I’m standing in the corner of my middle school gym. I release a shaky breath. I’m safe.

The nightmare memory slowly fades away, leaving behind an icky residue that sticks to my skin. *Breathe, Shane.* Inhale. Exhale. The tightness in my chest eases with each breath I take. With a rueful laugh, I shake my head, sweeping away the creepy cobwebs. *Be present, Shane,* I tell myself. Let all the bad stuff go. I survived. I made it back.

I take in this moment. Sweat. The squeak of sneakers across the

hardwood floor. Leather balls creating music as they rhythmically bounce with every dribble. Grunts, shouts, laughter . . . There's nothing like the sounds of basketball. The action, the energy . . . Man, do I love this game.

Peace and excitement race through me as I watch my teammates run drills up and down the court, weaving around cones, practicing layups, taking shots from various spots around the arc. My hands twitch at my sides, craving the feel of the ball in my hands.

“Yo, Shane!”

“What up, dude?!”

“Welcome back!”

I wave and give a little nod to my teammates. My friend Doc spots me and jogs over with a big crooked smile on his face. His thick black-rimmed glasses are fogged up and slightly tilted on the bridge of his nose.

“You're here,” he says, out of breath.

He likes to state the obvious.

“Yep. I'm here.”

“I thought you weren't for sure, sure you were coming to practice today,” he says, holding out his hand for a fist bump.

“My doctor just cleared me this morning. I'm officially back.”

“Hoop dreams really do come true!” He bounces from foot to foot, his round stomach jiggling slightly.

Doc has more energy than anyone I know. I'm sometimes worried he might explode, he's always so hype.

“Now that our star player and leader is back, I don’t have to play as hard,” he says with a snorting laugh.

I smile. He doesn’t love the game like I do. He only joined the team so we could play together, but he’s pretty good when he wants to be.

“Leader?” I ask. “Coach picked—”

I’m shoved on the shoulder from behind and stumble forward. Once I’m steady, I spin around and come face-to-face with Travis Clark.

He smirks. “Oops.”

“That wasn’t an accident,” Doc says, glaring at him.

I inwardly groan. Travis is the one person I have *not* missed dealing with on the court; it’s bad enough he’s in half my classes. We were never close friends, but we weren’t enemies, either. Well, not until recently. Something changed after I was hurt, and it’s like he has a grudge against me. He took over my starting position on the team, so I don’t know what his deal is.

The thing is, Travis has skills on the floor. He’s tall and quick, but his attitude sucks. He really does think there’s an “I” in “team.” It’s all about his stats, but it’s not like the dude’s going pro right after middle school.

“What’s up, Travis?” I will not let him ruin my first day back on the team. I’ve waited so long for this moment.

“Shane,” he says with disdain.

I pretend not to notice how his big brown eyes linger on the puckered scar that runs from the corner of my right eye to my

temple. He stares at my scar on purpose to bother me. My hands curl into fists to keep from reaching up to cover it.

“I can’t believe they’re really letting you play again,” Travis says, sweat glistening on his dark skin.

“Believe it.” Doc shoves his glasses up his wide nose, but they slip right back down. “Shane is all healed now and better than ever. Right?” He glances at me.

All healed? Better than ever? “Uh . . . yeah. Better. Healed.” I stumble over my words and don’t sound convincing at all.

Travis chuckles and runs a finger under his nose like he smells a lie. “Yeah, okay. Whatever. Just stay out of my way, Frankenstein, and we won’t have any problems.”

I try to keep my expression blank so I don’t give him the satisfaction of knowing he gets to me. He jogs over to join some players practicing layups. He snatches the ball and shows off by bouncing it between his legs and behind his back before taking a shot. Swish. Nothing but net.

“Read the book!” Doc yells at Travis. “Frankenstein was the doctor, not the monster with the scars.” He turns to me. “I hate when he calls you that. It’s rude and not cool.”

I’d be lying if I said Travis’s insults don’t bother me. They do. A lot. I can hide the other scars on my body, but there’s nothing I can do about the one on my face. Sometimes I do feel like a monster.

“Ignore him. He’s just mad he’s gonna lose his starting spot now,”

Doc says. “Coach only picked him because you were out. Everybody knows you’re the best player on the team.”

I *was* the best player. A lot has changed in a year. I need to prove to everyone that I’m all the way back and ready to play again. No injuries. No weakness. I can’t mess up this chance.

“Madoc, aren’t you supposed to be working on your free throws?” Coach says, walking in our direction.

Doc winces. His full name is Madoc Hernandez, but he prefers to go by “Doc.”

He stands up straighter. “I was just welcoming Shane back to practice.”

Coach stops next to us. He’s almost seven feet tall. He used to play professional ball before he blew out a knee. I’ve always thought it was cool he came back to his old middle school to coach when he could be working with a college or pro team.

“Well, you’ve welcomed him back, now get to work before I make you run laps,” Coach says.

Doc grimaces and hurries toward a ball rack before turning back to us. “Coach, I’ve been wanting to ask you something for, like, forever.”

Oh boy. This could be interesting.

“You ever wonder why they’re called ‘free throws’ when you have to work for them?” Doc asks. “I mean, we’re shooting the ball. That takes effort, coordination . . . If they just gave us the points for doing nothing, *then* they would be free, right?”

I frown. What? My mind tries to follow his logic, and it kinda makes sense. Weird. How does he think this stuff up?

Coach stares at him, his expression blank.

“I know that look,” Doc says. “I get it all the time from my parents. You want me to stop talking and do what you said to do, right?”

“Yes,” Coach says, hands on hips.

“Okay, yeah, I’m just gonna . . .” He backs away, bumping into another player. He winces, then grabs a ball and shoots it at the basket. It’s not even close. “Who moved the basket?!” he asks, looking around like he’s convinced someone is guilty.

I bite my lip to hold back a laugh. Classic.

“Shane.”

The smile drops from my face as my gaze swings back to Coach. I clear my throat. “Yes, sir?”

“I thought you were here to practice, not shoot the breeze with your friend,” he says. His dark eyes are serious but kind, too.

My shoulders pop back. “I am, Coach. Just waiting for you to tell me what to do first.”

He crosses his muscular arms and stares down at me intensely. “You solid? Ready to go?”

Coach visited me in the hospital. He knows how bad it was. He probably wondered, like everyone else, if I would ever play again. I didn’t rebound from my injuries as fast as I wanted to. My doctors thought I’d never completely heal, but they were wrong.

I'm fine . . . mostly.

I hold his gaze and hope he doesn't notice the faint shadows under my eyes. I didn't get much sleep last night. I was so anxious, wondering if my doctor would clear me to play, and then there was the nightmare . . . I can't remember exactly what it was about, but I woke up in a cold sweat, trembling. Random images sometimes pop into my head, but they don't make sense. They just leave me feeling confused and uneasy.

"Coach, I'm all good. Ready to play hard for you and the team," I say.

He nods, then points to the orange traffic cones set up in a zig-zag pattern across the court. "Then let's get to work. For now I want you to focus on your physical fitness and shooting."

I glance at the scrimmage on the court. I want to be out there mixing it up with the other players. "I thought—"

"It's your first day back after a year of not playing competitively. You need to ease back into it, okay? Baby steps."

I hate that term "baby steps." Maybe it's because I heard it so many times during my recovery. My dad says slow and steady wins the race. I guess that's good advice, but I'm tired of being patient.

My hands clench at my sides as I exhale a deep, calming breath. No complaining. I'm here, allowed to practice, to be a part of the team again. That's a win, I guess. "Okay, Coach. I understand."

He lifts his hand as if to place it on my shoulder. I flinch and

groan at my reaction. Since the accident, I sometimes don't like to be touched. Not sure why.

Coach lowers his hand, his eyes reflecting my inner turmoil. "Shane, you're lights out from three-point range. We're gonna need that this season if we hope to win another title."

He waits until I look back at him before adding, "But more importantly, I want you healthy. That means more than the game."

I nod, even though I don't agree. Nothing is more important than the game.

"Now, get moving. Go run the drills," he says.

"I'm on it!" I jog over to the cones.

"Doc, time him," Coach calls out.

"Okay." Doc grabs a stopwatch off a bleacher and joins me. He drops down on the floor and leans against the wall with a happy sigh. "This is my kind of practicing."

"You're not moving," I say with an eye roll.

"Exactly. Sometimes moving is overrated."

I laugh. He always manages to cheer me up.

After stretching, I nod at Doc to start clocking me. I sprint around the obstacles as fast as I can, first forward, then backward. My movements initially are a little uncoordinated, but the more I run, the better I feel.

"Dude, you're moving fast!" Doc glances down at the stopwatch.

Sweat streams down my face, and my chest is on fire. I run through the obstacles with a single goal—be better, faster than before, faster than anyone else.

“Time!” Doc says. “Shane, you can stop now.”

Panting, I stagger to a stop. I collapse forward, my hands clutching my shaky knees.

“How was that? What’s my time?” I ask through gasping breaths.

“Good. You’re way faster than me,” Doc says.

I love Doc, but that doesn’t exactly boost my confidence.

I hate to ask, but . . . “Am I faster than Travis?”

Doc’s nose scrunches. “Uh, no, but it’s your first day back and—”

“I’ll go again.” I start to walk back to the cones and the room tilts. My knees buckle, but I catch myself before I go down. Doc jumps up and extends his arms as if to catch me. I wave him off.

“You okay, Shane?” Coach calls out from across the court.

Dang it. Why’d he have to see that? “Uh, yeah. I . . . yeah. Just lost my balance for a second.”

“Looked like more than that to me,” Travis mutters loud enough for everyone to hear.

I glare at him. He’s determined to make my return to the team as difficult as possible.

“Shane, why don’t you work on your shooting, then hit the showers? We don’t want you to overdo it today,” Coach says with a concerned frown.

Great. Now it looks like something is wrong with me. This is not how I wanted my first practice to go.

“Okay, Coach,” I say reluctantly. If I’m honest, I am tired and a little dizzy. I knew it might take a while to get into game-shape, but I didn’t expect to feel so . . . off. Though I’ve worked out and had lots of physical therapy, practice is more intense. I’m pushing myself hard, and the lack of sleep doesn’t help.

Ignoring Travis’s smirk, I grab a ball off the rack and line up on the free throw line. I palm the ball, loving the feel of the rough leather texture. I stare at the hoop and go through my motions a few times. BEEF—Balance. Eyes. Elbow. Follow-through.

I shift on my feet, finding a comfortable stance. My eyes are locked on my target. There’s a slight bend in my shooting arm, elbow pointed to the rim and aligned with my shoulder. Inhale. Exhale. I bounce the ball three times and shoot. My motion is smooth. The ball arcs high in the air, hits the rim, rolls around it, before falling out and hitting the court.

My shoulders slump as I swallow bitter frustration. I’m better than this.

Doc retrieves the ball and tosses it to me. “You okay?”

“Yep. Just need to keep shooting.” I take a few more shots from the free throw line, missing more than I make. It’s annoying, but I do feel my body loosening up the more I shoot. I’m getting my rhythm back. I move to other spots on the court, expanding my range. The long jumper and three pointers were my sweet spots.

I know eyes are on me, probably judging me, comparing how I'm playing now to before the accident. I silently cheer when I make a shot and fight off embarrassment when others are way off the mark. I don't stop. I'm no quitter. Instead, I concentrate harder and shoot ball after ball until my shoulders burn and my arms are weak; I embrace the pain. It's worth it. Must be better. Must prove that I deserve to play this game.

Coach blows his whistle and I wince. It reminds me of the piercing sound from my nightmare memory.

"That's enough for the day," he says. "Good practice and hustle, everybody. We're gonna need to be on our game if we're gonna beat Brainard next week."

Brainard is the middle school across town. Our rivals. We beat them last year, just a week before my accident.

"We got this, Coach," Travis says smugly as he runs a hand through his short locs.

Behind him several players roll their eyes. I hold back a grin.

"I'll be finalizing the roster soon," Coach says. "I know you all want to start, but the choices I make will be based on how I think the team can best succeed." Coach looks squarely at each player. "It's not personal. Got it?"

"Yes, Coach!" we respond loudly.

I was shaky today, but that's because it's my first day back. My nerves got the best of me, but tomorrow I'll kill it. I'll work even

harder to earn my spot—a starting spot. I side-eye Travis. He’s staring at me. It’s on.

“Hit the showers. I’ll see you tomorrow,” Coach calls out as he gathers up some equipment. “Be ready to go all out. I want maximum effort. We don’t have any time to waste.”

I slowly walk off the court, my eyes traveling around the gym. I imagine the bleachers full of our supporters as we take the floor for the first game. The energy is electric. It’s so loud I can’t hear myself think. Everything else fades away. It’s me and the ball, making magic happen. Next week can’t come soon enough.

Doc and I enter the locker room to grab our stuff. Some of the guys change out of their sweaty clothes. I still feel weird about undressing in front of everyone because of all my scars.

It’s enough they see the one on my face. They’d really freak out if they saw the ones on my chest and back. I don’t even like looking at them.

As I wait for Doc to change, I flop down on a bench and stretch out my weak legs. “Is your mom picking you up today?”

“No, gotta walk home,” he says with a shrug. “Mom says the extra exercise is good for me.”

Doc and I don’t live too far from the school, but today I wouldn’t have minded a ride to give my legs a little break.

“I’m hungry. Is anyone else hungry?” he randomly asks the teammates around us. “I’m gonna talk to Coach about having snacks after practice. We need fuel to play hard.”

“You hardly play,” a kid named Griffin responds good-naturedly.

“Ha. Ha.” Doc grabs a clean shirt and tugs it over his head. It gets caught on his glasses, and for some reason his head is now stuck. “Did my shirt shrink, or did my head get bigger?” He begins to struggle, and I realize we might be here awhile.

I half listen while my teammates joke and tease one another as they get dressed. Their loud voices echo off the lockers around me and become a buzz of white noise. Now that the adrenaline rush of playing the game is gone, my body is shutting down.

As I sink back against a locker, the troubling memories from last night’s nightmare nudge me again, grabbing my attention. There’s something swirling in my mind, something . . . It’s right there on the edge, something calling to me, forcing its way slowly forward. I squeeze my eyes shut and struggle to grasp the memory. Almost . . .

I grit my teeth from the intense pressure in my head. Suddenly, the mental cage holding the memories unlocks and swings open. Images and emotions escape at a dizzying speed. They taunt me to chase after them, teasing me with brief, confusing glimpses of a building, shimmering lights, fire, a pool of water . . .

I draw in a sharp breath as fear and pain punch me in the chest. A dark shadowy figure stands surrounded by a gold, glittery glow. I’m overwhelmed by the sense that something is not right. My

heart races as an even stronger memory pushes forward.

There was a garbled, raspy voice that emitted a sense of power,
of . . . evil.

It whispered my name.

It said, "*Soon.*"