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# 1

Bismarck, North Dakota is known for several things. First of all, you probably already know that Bismarck is the state capitol. You might even know that Bismarck is the home of the Dakota Zoo, which is a lot of fun. Bismarck is North Dakota's 2<sup>nd</sup> largest city, named after Otto von Bismarck, who was Chancellor of Germany in the late 1800s.

Bismarck, however, is now known for something else:

Night Dragons.

That's right . . . Night Dragons. Oh, some people

don't believe they're real, just because they haven't seen them.

But if you ever come to Bismarck, and you go out at night, be warned:

Night Dragons are real.

They are as real as anything else . . . and just because some people haven't seen them doesn't mean they don't exist.

My name is Damon Richards, and I live on North 23<sup>rd</sup> Street in Bismarck. I've lived here only for a couple of years, because my dad gets transferred a lot, and we have to move. We've lived in a lot of cool places, but I really like Bismarck. I've made a lot of good friends.

The first time I saw a Night Dragon, I didn't think it was real. I thought I was dreaming. After all, if you saw a giant, winged creature slipping through the night sky, you'd probably think you were dreaming, too.

Now, however, I know better.

I remember that night very well. My friends and I had been outside playing a game called 'Kick the Can'. It's kind of a hide-and-seek game, and we play it a lot in the summer, usually around night time.

Well, we'd just finished our game, and everyone had gone home. The sun had set and it was dark.

I was on my way home. The place where we play is at the end of our street, so I was only a few blocks from where I live. At the end of our street is Lions Hillside Skate Park, which is a lot of fun. On the other side of the skate park, however, is St. Mary's cemetery. At night, it looks pretty spooky.

Streetlights lit up the pavement and the yards. I could see lights glowing in houses as I walked. Windows were open. I could hear a few television sets, their broken fragments of sound drifting through the warm evening. Crickets chirped. The air was damp and heavy, with the thick odor of recently mowed grass.

That's when I heard it.

A noise from above.

Oh, it wasn't a plane, that's for sure. And it didn't sound like a bat or a bird.

It was a whooshing sound: slow, and heavy, deliberate, like—

Wings.

I stopped and stared into the night sky. With all of the streetlights glowing like they were, it was hard to see, because the lights created a glare that clouded my vision.

Then, I heard it again: a heavy, whooshing sound, like air being pushed. I stared up into the sky, searching for whatever it was. After all, I was certain

that the sound had come from above.

But I didn't hear anything more, and I didn't see anything out of the ordinary. Beneath a streetlight, a bat flitted and dove in silence, chasing a bug.

I was just about to start walking again . . . when I *did* see something.

Something in the sky.

Something *big*.

All I could see was its silhouette, a dark shadow. It swooped directly over me, turned, and sailed across the street and over a house.

And I couldn't be certain, but it looked like—

*It landed!*

Whatever it was, it landed in the yard behind the Kurtzner's house. Mr. and Mrs. Kurtzner are really nice. They're like my grandparents. Sometimes, Mrs. Kurtzner makes lemonade for all us kids on hot, summer days.

I looked behind me. The street was empty.

I looked all around. In a few homes, lights clicked off. People were settling in for the night. If I wasn't home in a few minutes, I would hear my mom calling out for me.

*But I've still got a few minutes*, I thought, looking into the dark yard where I'd watched the shadow go. *I could take a minute and see what the thing was.*

And so, I turned and walked across the lawn. I knew the Kurtzners wouldn't mind if I went into their back yard after dark. After all . . . I wasn't doing anything wrong. I just wanted to see what had landed in their yard.

Oh, I'd find out, all right . . . and I was just moments from being scared out of my mind.

# 2

As I approached the side of the house, darkness grew. Here, the streetlights faded. I looked up, and I could see stars sparkling across a black canopy. Several bushes grew tightly against the Kurtzner's house, and there were a few hidden crickets chirping.

I stopped where the back yard began and gazed into the murky darkness. I could see the silhouette of a large oak tree, and I could make out the faint form of a picnic table. However, I couldn't see anything else. It was just too dark.

*Maybe if I get a little closer,* I thought.

I have to admit, I was a little nervous. I wasn't sure what had made the strange whooshing sound. I wasn't sure what I'd seen. Yet, I was positive that, whatever it was, it had landed somewhere in the yard. In the tree, perhaps.

I took a step. The grass was squishy and soft beneath my feet. Somewhere, a dog barked. In the distance, a car horn honked.

I took another step. Then another, and another. Soon I was standing beneath the enormous tree. Here, beneath limbs thick with leaves, it was darkest of all. I looked up, but I couldn't see a thing.

*This is silly, I thought. I must be imagining things.*

I turned to walk home. It was only going to be a matter of minutes before Mom called for me, anyway. I looked forward to going to bed and reading my book. I was reading this really crazy story about fog phantoms in Florida. It wasn't true, but it was pretty freaky.

That's when I heard the noise. It was close by, but in the darkness, I couldn't tell where it came from. It was just a thin shuffling sound.

I looked up into the dark limbs. Even though my eyes had adjusted to the low light, I still couldn't make anything out. All I could see was darkness.



I listened . . . .

Nothing.

*This is silly*, I thought again. I was just about to walk away—

Suddenly, a long claw came from around the tree. Oh, I couldn't see it . . . but I sure could feel it! Sharp talons latched onto my shoulder, and I knew right then that I'd made a big mistake going into the Kurtzner's back yard.

# 3

You're probably thinking that I screamed.

Wrong.

I *howled*. I didn't know what had hold of me, but I howled as loud and long as I could . . . which didn't last, because the creature pushed me to the ground and tackled me!

"Wait a minute! Wait a minute!" I heard a girl's voice say. I stopped struggling as she drew away. "Who *are* you?" she asked in a huff.

"I could ask you the same thing!" I panted, trying to catch my breath. My heart was clanging in

my chest, and I was gasping. The scare had really shaken me.

“No, who are *you*?” she repeated. “You’re not Jason!”

“No, I’m not,” I said. “I’m Damon Richards. Who are you?”

The girl stood, but it was still too dark to see anything but her shadowy figure. I, too, got to my feet, thankful it had been a girl . . . and not some weird creature.

“I’m Kamryn Kurtzner,” she replied. “I thought you were my cousin, Jason.”

“No,” I said. “I live a few houses down.”

“I’m really sorry,” Kamryn said. “I thought you were my cousin, and I was trying to scare him. He’s always trying to scare me like that, and I was just trying to get back at him. Man . . . you yelled really loud. Are you okay?”

“Yeah,” I said. Then I laughed. “But you sure scared me. For a minute, anyway.”

“What are you doing in my grandparents’ back yard?” she asked.

“I . . . um . . . I thought I saw something,” I replied.

“Like what?” Kamryn asked.

“I don’t know,” I said, gazing up into the star-

filled sky. "I . . . I thought I saw something flying. Something big."

"You saw it, too?!?" Kamryn asked. "I was standing on the back porch, looking for Jason, when I saw something swoop through the sky. It was too dark to see what it was. It was big, though. That's why I came out into the yard. I wanted to see what it was . . . and to scare my cousin."

"I thought I saw it land here in the yard," I said.

"No," Kamryn replied. "It swooped down low, but it didn't land. I think it—"

Suddenly, my mom's voice echoed from far down the street. "*Daaaaamon?!?!?*" she called out.

I cupped my hands around my mouth. "*On my way, Mom!*" I shouted back. Then, I turned to Kamryn. I still couldn't see her in the darkness, so I had no idea what she looked like.

"I've got to go," I said. "Maybe I'll see you around."

"I'll be here for two weeks," Kamryn replied. "I'm from Michigan, but I'm staying with my grandparents. My cousin, Jason, is here, too."

"Have a good night," I said, and I turned.

"Sorry I scared you," Kamryn said again.

"No problem," I replied. I walked away, shaking my head.

*Scared by a girl*, I thought. *Sheesh*.

Of course, I had no way of knowing that I had something else in Bismarck to worry about.

Something that would scare me far worse than I'd already been.

Something that wasn't a girl.

Something that wasn't even *human*.

Something that was watching me at that very moment.

Watching me . . . and waiting.

# 4

I walked across the Kurtzner's yard and onto the sidewalk, comforted by the glowing streetlights. I've never really been afraid of the dark, but for some reason, I was glad I was on my way home. I was glad the claws that had grabbed me hadn't been claws at all . . . only Kamryn's hands.

*But what had been in the sky?* I wondered. I was certain I'd seen something fly over me. Something big. And I was sure it had flown over the Kurtzner's back yard. Maybe it hadn't landed, like I'd thought. I was sure I had seen something, though.

But, then again, maybe not. After all, it was very dark. With the streetlights on, it was difficult to see because of the glare. Maybe I hadn't seen anything at all.

But Kamryn had. She said she'd seen *something*, and she went into the back yard to see what it was.

What had she seen?

*Probably nothing*, I thought.

Up ahead, I could see our porch light glowing. Mom always left it on until I got home.

Suddenly, I noticed something.

I stopped walking.

My skin felt tingly all over, and I had a very strange feeling . . . like I was being watched.

I looked behind me, but there was nothing to see except houses, yards, and the ribbon of sidewalk as it snaked along the street. I heard a dog bark again, a long way off.

Then I heard the sound again. That heavy, deep whooshing sound, like wings.

Only this time, it was louder.

Closer.

Above me, not far above the streetlights.

I could almost see the dark shadow of something in the sky, circling.

Something big.

Wa-whoosh . . .

Something huge . . . .

Wa-whoosh . . . .

All of a sudden, an enormous dark figure dipped down and swooped beneath the streetlight. It was so big that it blocked out the light, and a shadow fell over me.

The fact that it was so big was frightening enough . . . but when I saw what it was, I knew my world was never going to be the same again . . . .



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