

ONE

Nature is painting for us, day after day, pictures of infinite beauty if only we have the eyes to see them.

—John Ruskin

Everyone's had those special dreams—dreams so vivid and so real that they draw you in completely. You see, hear, smell, and taste your dream world with such clarity that when you awaken you can feel the power of your dream tugging you back.

Then the continuity of waking life seeps in and takes hold, and you shrug it all off—heck, it was only a dream—and get on with your life.

Not me. I'm different.

The thing is, I don't want to be different.

"Yo, Max."

"Hi, Wayne."

Wayne Hunter separates himself from a crowd standing around our town's landmark, a majestic oak in the center of our college campus's quadrangle. In early autumn, the oak's leaves are brilliant scarlet.

Wayne high-fives several of his football teammates, gently pulls loose from two girls playfully holding him back, and lopes in my direction.

"Max, you running some laps?"

"Yeah," I reply.

"I'm with you, bro."

I love running. When my dreams seem more and more real, and my waking life has morphed into a waking nightmare, running channels my stress toward clearer thinking.

We walk to the track. Amber's sitting there, legs crossed, eyes closed, deep in meditation. Sunlight reflects silver off a Star of David hanging around her neck. College kids, including other freshmen, are walking and talking, hustling or strolling about in every direction. We approach quietly.

Amber, with her eyes still closed, calls out, "Hi, guys."

Wayne scratches his head. "How does she always do that?"

I shrug. Having known Amber for fourteen years, I've come to accept her uniqueness. "Hi, Amber. Ready to run?"

While slowly opening her eyes and smiling at me, Amber uncoils from her lotus position and levitates to her feet. "I'm there."

For me, the great part of running is settling into my stride. My pounding blood and deep breathing level out, enabling me to progressively unwind.

Most people relax by vegetating in front of a TV, reading a book, or napping. I've got to be in motion. I tie back my hair, and we begin.

"Hey, Max," Wayne calls.

While running, I daydream, temporarily forgetting my night dreaming.

"Yo, Max," Wayne interrupts again.

People experience continuity while awake. I experience continuity in my dreams. I didn't ask for this. I don't seem to have a choice any more than I can choose my ancestral heritage or destiny, as my dad puts it. The dreams started shortly after my mom died.

"Yo, Max! Wake up!" Wayne shouts.

I stumble, almost losing my balance. "Take it easy, Wayne."

"It was only a tap. I've been calling your name, trying to catch your attention for the past two laps."

Wayne, Amber, and I pass a stand of maples ablaze in fiery autumn hues of red, orange, and gold.

"Sorry, Wayne. I guess I was daydreaming," I say.

"Bro, you can't spend your whole life, sleeping and awake, always dreaming."

"I hear you, Wayne," I reply. And a tap from you is like being swiped at by a grizzly bear, you big lug."

When Amber laughs, I think of wind chimes stirred by a warm spring breeze.

Wayne bellows. Squirrels dart across the grass toward the shelter of a nearby oak. Sparrows and finches take flight into a fleecy white cloud-covered sky. My best friends are so totally different. Yet, I don't know how I'd ever get by without them.

"Amber, how far did we run while I was spacing out?"

"A little over four miles."

My tread's slightly heavier, but I decide I'm good for another four miles. Amber's stride is light and quick as if she's gliding on an unseen current of air. I can't even hear her breathing.

Wayne's pounding feet kick up brown clouds of dirt. He runs with me to improve his stamina for football. He's huffing and puffing. I turn to him, shaking my head. "You need to cut back on your late-night partying."

"Sure," Wayne gasps, sucking in deep lungfuls of air. "Right after I take that vow of celibacy."

Amber's fingertips lightly graze my shoulder. "You're more distracted than usual. Did you have another of those dreams?"

I take her hand, gently squeezing it. Amber smiles; her cheeks flush a rosy pink. She quickly looks away, seeming flustered. That seems strange to me.

"Yeah," I answer. "Last night was my third dream in a continuing series, each dream more vivid than the last. How bizarre is that?"

"Mondo bizarro, bro," says Wayne.

"It's not so strange, Max," Amber says. "There must be a reason you're having these dreams. Are the Indians in your dreams also Cherokee like you?"

"Not sure. Why?"

"It may be important."

Is Amber teasing me? No. Her brown eyes are warm and sincere, without a trace of mirth or disbelief. We race past the gym, completing another lap.

Wayne groans. "Come on, guys. That's five miles. Let's call it a day and chill."

Amber's eyes are still fixed on me. I ignore Wayne's plea and continue. "The Indian teenager I've been dreaming about has two close friends, similar to the two of you. The girl's name is Golden Fawn. She has a gentle, spiritual nature."

"That's sweet, Max." Amber's cheeks flush red again. Maybe the run is starting to tire her.

"Yo, Tonto, what about me?" asks Wayne.

Just because my mom and I are descended from the Cherokee, Wayne thinks his Tonto cracks are hilarious. I'll get him back. I wink at Amber, and we pick up the pace. Wayne groans, kicking up huge chunks of dirt trying to keep up.

I smile and say, "Your dream counterpart is a powerful hunter called Lunging Bear."

"Yeah! All right!" Wayne smacks his huge hands together. Crows flee from Dean Glom's apple orchard.

I slap Wayne's broad back. "Lunging Bear's strong, loud and obnoxious. The resemblance is uncanny."

"Funny, Max." Wayne swipes at me again.

I dodge his blow, again notching up the pace.

Wayne wipes sweat from his eyes. The deep scar across his left palm is a livid red. "Bro, you're killing me."

Amber's wavy, tawny brown hair flows behind her as easy as her breathing. "What's your dream counterpart's name? Is he tall, dark, and handsome like you?"

I blush at the second question and answer the first. "He's referred to as Dreamstalker's son. Dreamstalker is the tribe's dream interpreter. He's impatient for his son to fulfill a rite of passage—to achieve a vision—and acquire his own manhood name."

"Whoa! Even your dad, Professor Skyler, has a dream doppler," Wayne teases, gasping for breath. "Gee, Toto, I get the feeling we're not in Kansas anymore."

"That's doppelgänger, not doppler, Wayne." Amber grins. "But doppler is a big word for you. I'm impressed."

Amber winks at me, and we sprint full throttle.

"Come on, guys," Wayne groans. "You make me feel like I'm eighteen going on eighty." He collapses onto his back in the yellow crabgrass bordering the track.

Again, laughter like wind chimes fills the air as we leave Wayne behind. Then Amber's eyes harden, and a frown creases her pretty face.

"What's wrong?" I ask.

"They're dying too. I don't believe it."

I follow Amber's gaze. Dean Glom's apple orchard is bursting with vitality; humongous red apples weigh the lower tree branches to the ground. "I don't understand. Glom's genetically modified orchard is thriving. His apples are the biggest and reddest I've ever seen."

"Not the apples." Amber slows to a walk, leading me to a rose garden bordering the orchard.

I'm slammed by a wave of heat as my blood and breathing abruptly slow to match my shift from running to walking. I take in a deep breath and blow it out. "OK, so a few roses are wilting. I mean, summer's over."

"These are Rosa-rugosas. They're supposed to maintain their bloom through the summer and into autumn." Amber's easy breathing is unchanged, but her tone is solemn. "It's not nearly cold enough for their petals to be brown, wilting, and falling off."

"Don't get me wrong. I'm into nature. I enjoy caring for my mom's garden. But aren't you taking the death of a few roses a bit too hard?"

Amber sighs and looks up into my eyes. "It's more than a few roses. Flowers, plants, and trees are dying all over town."

"How do you know this?"

"I'm writing a term paper on local ecosystems for Dean Glom's botany class. The thesis of my paper is that people aren't separate from nature but rather a part of it. We all need to be more aware of our environment. Our town's in trouble."

I shift from one foot to the other. I know Amber well enough to guess where she's going with this. But I barely have any time to myself as it is.

Amber looks deep into my eyes as if she's trying to read my mind. "I know you've got a full plate, Max. Before you say no, let me grab a quick shower in the

girls' locker room. We'll take the long way home bordering the highway. There's more I need to show you."

Wayne and I take fast showers and then hang around outside the gym.

"Max, there's a party at Corey's place. Want to come?" Wayne says, kicking some dirt with his sneaker.

"No thanks. That guy gives me the creeps. Anyway, I'm waiting on Amber. She wants to point out some problems with the local ecology."

"Ecology...sure," Wayne says, winking. "Did I tell you I'm joining the priesthood, Tonto?"

I want to slug Wayne when he calls me that. But what's the point. He probably wouldn't even feel it. "It's the truth. Amber and I have been friends forever. Why do you always make something out of nothing?"

Wayne claps me on my shoulders, and I imagine my bones bending. "Whatever you say, bro. I'll catch you later. Don't want to cramp your style. Except, after all these years, I'm still trying to figure out exactly what is your style."

Wayne lumbers off, and I sigh. He's a man of many talents, but subtlety's not one of them. Anyway, he's nuts. Amber and I are just friends.

"Hi. Sorry to keep you waiting." Amber shakes out her hair.

Her long hair's still wet, curling in dancing, shiny ringlets. I can't understand why Amber doesn't have a steady boyfriend—she's beautiful.

While walking the path bordering the highway, we kick up dead grass the color of hay.

Amber points to some dull brown plants. "These are rounded evergreen shrubs. They should have glossy silver leaves with silvery white flowers."

A truck's horn blares at a car abruptly shifting lanes.

"They look like bare twigs...no leaves, no flowers."

Amber nods. "Do you know what makes the destruction of the rounded evergreens most disturbing?"

I shrug.

"Roadside plants are exposed to heavier pollution. Rounded evergreens are planted here because they're hardier, more pollution resistant."

"Well, maybe years of pollution have added up, finally taking their toll."

She holds her hands out in front of her, assuming what looks to me like a tai chi fighting stance. "That's just it. Year after year, these plants have thrived. This devastation is new. Something's changed and is rapidly poisoning the flora."

"Can this be harmful to people?"

Amber places her hands on her hips and exhales explosively. For her, this is an emotional outburst. Coldness crawls through me.

We walk to my house in silence. We enter my mom's garden in the backyard.

Amber touches my hand, and I can't turn away. "There's too much for me to investigate on my own. I could really use an able assistant."

"I'd like to help. I really would." I feel so lame. "There's so much going on...school, work, taking care of the house...and of my dad."

"I know this past month's been brutal with your mom gone." Amber hugs me.

I hug her back, and the pain of missing my mom is almost bearable. Amber's wet curls tickle my neck. I shiver; I'm all tingly inside. Amber's only comforting me. What's wrong with me? Reluctantly, I step away from her embrace.

She walks over to a rose trellis and sniffs. "Your mom's Rosa hybrids smell heavenly."

Mom always smelled like a pleasing mix of freshly bloomed roses and her home-baked chocolate chip cookies. "They smell like Mom. Whenever I need to feel closer to her, I come out here."

"She sure had a green thumb."

"Thanks."

"You've done a great job keeping up her garden. It's no easy task."

"Check out Mom's Royal Ruby perennials. They were her favorite."

"Oh, Max."

I freeze in my tracks. Clumps of Mom's deep red perennials have fallen from their stems, leaving a crimson carpet of death strewn across the ground.

"I...I don't understand. Mom planted them where they'd get the right mix of sun and shade. I water and weed regularly."

"I'll do whatever I can to help you restore what's left of them."

My face grows hot. "And I'll do whatever I can to help you."

I snap a dead branch between my fingers. Thorns cut my thumb. I don't care. "My mom's garden is one of my best memories of her. I'm with you on this."

"Thanks, Max."

"Can you use two assistants? I'll ask Wayne to help."

Amber's eyes narrow. "Won't that cut into his partying time?"

"Exactly. Any distraction to distance Wayne from his new crowd of beer-guzzlers and pot heads is a good thing."

"You know I'm fond of Wayne. I mean...after all...you were there...he saved my life when I was ten. But..." Amber shakes her head. "Never mind. You're a good friend."

"Well..." I shrug. "Wayne's always been there for me."

"And you've always been there for me, since I was a little girl."

"You're my best friend."

Amber steps close. "I hope you know I'm always here for you, for anything."

"Amber, I..."

"I mean it. You can't imagine how much your friendship meant to me when I was all alone and frightened."

Amber was four when her parents were killed in a car accident, and she moved here to live with her aunt and uncle. She still misses her parents, but she's amazingly resilient. I would have been a basket case.

"You, frightened? You're the strongest person I know."

Amber stares at me. "Everyone has weaknesses, Max. Even if it's only one."

Not knowing how to respond, I just look at her. Silence stretches, snail-slow.

Amber lowers her eyes and turns away. "Guess I'll be going now."

I stare dumbly at her retreating back. The twilight shadows lengthen. My feet remain rooted in confusion.

I'm not sure why, but I feel like the world's biggest idiot.