

Sweet Dreams

By Jessica LaPlaga

I open my eyes and it's happening again. This time I'm at one of our high school football games. Everyone is screaming and cheering around me as Brett Tyler throws the winning touchdown. He's the insanely hot quarterback that every girl in my school drools over because of his long hair and muscular body. To celebrate, he runs up to the gate surrounding the track and kisses a girl on the cheek. Wait. That isn't just some random girl. It's my best friend Katie. This is definitely her dream. She's been telling everyone she's going to marry Brett since middle school, but I think he's a douche. After the announcer says the final score over the megaphone, I start heading down the bleachers to go meet up with her. I catch a glimpse of Brett holding her hand, walking away from me.

"Katie!" I said, calling out to her. She turns, but doesn't see me because of all the people in front of me. She keeps walking. The next thing I know I miss a step and fall down the bleachers, and bang my knee. Ow. That hurt.

Now I'm awake. Katie's dreams never last long. She's such a light sleeper.

"Good morning girls. There's chocolate chip pancakes waiting for you downstairs," calls Katie's mom.

Now, everytime I come over, she spoils me. Ever since the accident and even more now since my family and I just moved. She knows how hard it's been lately.

"Coming mom," Katie shouts and we both climb out of bed.

As I stand, I notice that my knee is burning. I roll up my plaid pajama pants and see a fairly large bruise. Then we hear Katie's mom again.

"Girls! They're going to get cold if you don't hurry up."

I roll my pants back down and we head downstairs.

Later that day I'm at my new home, helping my parents unpack the last of our boxes.

"Mom, do you think I'll be able to start going to volleyball practice again soon?" I ask.

"I don't know, probably not. I know you've been feeling better, but the doctor strongly suggested you don't go back for at least another three weeks."

"I know, but if I don't start going back to practice soon there's no way I'm going to make the varsity team," I plead.

"Okay, Ava. We'll talk about this more later. I have too much on my mind right now," she snaps at me.

It seems like there's always "too much" on her mind lately and it tends to always be my fault. Guilt hasn't left my body because she always seems to be holding the accident against me. It's been over a month. I didn't mean to crash my car on the way home from school with my little brother Kevin. It wasn't my plan to get a concussion and cause Kevin to break his wrist. She acts like the word "accident" means "on purpose" sometimes.

“Tell Kevin to come down and bring that last box of toys up to his room,” she demands. I say nothing and go upstairs to tell him.

He’s taken the move pretty well, but I think that’s because he’s too young to really understand what getting “let go” from your job means. Since my mom is a stay-at-home mom, my dad losing his job was a big deal. Especially since they make me feel like it’s my fault because it happened right after the accident. Bad timing I guess. This meant we had to downgrade to a smaller house right outside the city, in a much smaller neighborhood than our last one, with extremely creepy neighbors. My dad walks in the front door with a non-convincing smile.

“Hey everyone, I brought Chinese home for dinner.”

Yay. Cheap chinese. For the third night in a row. My brother comes running downstairs and we all sit down to eat.

After we’re finished, my brother runs back upstairs and I overhear my parents talking as I clean off the dishes.

“So I’ve been thinking,” Mom says to Dad, “It would probably be a good idea to install security cameras around the house. It’ll help me feel more safe while you’re out.”

“Sure honey,” he says, “But it’ll have to wait until money’s a little less tight. Those things are expensive.”

“Well... alright,” she says with a disappointed look.

“You know I would if I could, but we’re still paying off Ava’s medical bills... and I just can’t afford it right now.”

There he goes again. Dragging me into it and making me feel like the bad guy. I'm still scared to drive and I seem to be the cause of most of the tension in the house. And then there's my dreams... I don't even know how to explain those. They've been getting a lot worse lately. They feel more and more "real" every time and, most of the time, they're not even *my dreams*. I think it has something to do with the accident. That's the only thing that would make sense. I hit my head really hard when we crashed and it doesn't help that I got another concussion last week when my brother threw his football at me. Probably deserved it though.

I open my eyes and I'm in a mall, surrounded by the smell of freshly baked cookies, buttery popcorn, and ice cream. But this isn't just a regular mall. It's a mall made out of candy, filled with every sweet treat a kid could dream of. Kevin grabs my hand and pulls me toward one of the candy stores made out of candy canes. We walk into a room filled with towers and towers of candy. Everything is made out of candy. There's candy stuffed animals, candy money, candy piggy banks, candy chairs, candy pillows. Kevin tells me to hold a candy basket for him. So we go around the store while he fills the basket with all of his favorites: Sweet Tarts, M&Ms, Jolly Ranchers, marshmallows, Sour Patch Kids, Hersheys. Conveniently, everything is free. Of course this is my brother's dream. We walk from store to store and fill our baskets with endless cookies, brownies, cakes, candies, ice creams, and popcorn. After a long hard day of shopping we go and sit on a bench right outside of the ice cream shop. Kevin pulls out a container of Jolly Ranchers from one of our many bags and he thanks me for carrying

all his baskets, and hands me a cherry piece, my favorite. We watch kids run by us, in and out of each store, stuffing their faces and bags with everything they find.

"Kevin." I vaguely hear Mom say through the door. "It's time to get up and get ready for school."

This time I can still smell the chocolate chip cookies as if they were crammed under my pillow. After lying there a few more minutes, I get up and start getting ready. I brush my teeth, straighten my hair, and put my makeup on. After I pull on my jeans, I notice a small bulge in my left pocket. I reach inside and pull out something warm and sticky. A cherry Jolly Rancher. *I used to not have these dreams every night.* After the accident, I would only occasionally go in and out of other people's dreams, but they never felt as real as they do now. Those dreams still felt like... dreams. Now they don't anymore. Now I'm bringing things back with me and it's becoming harder to wake up. I should probably tell someone about this, but the last time I tried, Katie laughed in my face thinking I was just playing a joke on her. So, I'll just have to keep it to myself. Besides, they're just dreams.

"How was school?" Mom asks as Kevin and I walk through the door. Kevin drops his bag and barrels upstairs to go play with his toys.

"Good. Senior year couldn't be any easier. Our teachers are practically handing out free A's," I say. "Is Dad still not home yet?"

"No not yet, he's in an interview right now," she replies.

"Hopefully he gets this one," I say with a slight smile.

“I hope so too.”

A few hours later I hear the phone ring so I lower the TV volume to hear Mom on the phone with Dad in the Kitchen.

“Did you get it?” she asks.

I hear a murmuring on the phone that I can't make out.

“Yay! I'm so proud of you sweetie!” Mom exclaims.

Thank god. I didn't need him coming home with anymore disappointing news. After she talked to him for a few minutes I heard her lower her voice.

“So can we buy some security cameras now? I didn't want to stress you out anymore due to my overthinking, but I saw the neighbor, the one that lives two houses down to our left, walking back and forth in front of our house earlier today. I think I saw him going through our trash last week too, but by the time I could get a closer look he was walking away.”

Then she goes into the garage to avoid me from hearing the rest of the conversation. Our neighbor does seem kind of creepy. The other day when I went out to get the mail he was sitting on his front porch staring at me. I wonder what his dreams are like, but mine don't seem to reach people that far away. I decide to go upstairs and change into my comfy clothes. Dad comes home shortly after and we eat dinner together, then watch a baking show off Netflix in the living room. Before I know it, it's time to go to bed. I end up staying up really late playing on my phone until I finally doze off.

I open my eyes and I'm in my room. Except it seems darker than usual. The fairy lights hanging around my room aren't on like they should be and there isn't any light from the hallway. Maybe I'm not even dreaming this time. Then I hear a strange noise. I get up and quietly walk to the door, opening it slightly to look down the hallway. There's the noise again. It takes me a little while to decide whether or not I should leave my room and investigate. The next thing I know I'm in the hallway, walking toward the stairs. That's when I see Mom at the bottom of the stairs and I feel relieved. "Mom!" I say, "What are you doing up this late?"

"Shhhhhh," she whispers, "Somethings in the house."

Fear takes over my body even though I try and tell myself it's just a dream. Mom starts to walk toward the kitchen and I find myself following her. We tiptoe around the couch and I notice the door leading to the garage is wide open. Mom motions for me to duck down and we crouch down behind the counter.

Then we see him. A tall, muscular man with a knife walks through the door. "That's the neighbor," Mom whispers with a horrified look on her face.

He slowly makes his way around the kitchen as we try our best not to be seen. I can feel my heart pounding and Mom grabs my hand. These dreams keep getting more and more real. What if this guy ends up actually hurting my family. I need to save them. This has to stop. I try to force myself to wake up. Pinching doesn't work. I close my eyes and count to ten, but when I open them, I'm still here. He's heading up the stairs and, right before he reaches my brother's room, Mom lets go of my hand and screams, "Stop!"

He turns to look at her as I continue hiding behind the counter. I don't know what to do. Maybe this isn't a dream. My head is really starting to hurt now. After a few seconds of him staring down at my mom from the top of the stairs, he heads after her, knife in hand. He grabs her by her arms and takes her into the living room, ties her hands and feet with yellow rope, and leaves her on the couch. He begins searching the living room, taking all our valuables. I can't seem to figure out how to escape. Then I remember. My mom. The intruder. The security cameras. This isn't my dream, it's Mom's dream. I need to figure out a way to wake her up. As quietly as I can, I crawl up to her and try to set her free as the man heads to the dining room, but the ropes are too tight.

"Mom, you have to wake up, this is just a dream," I whisper anxiously.

I can't wake up until she does, but she doesn't seem to believe me. She's crying harder now and refuses to listen to me. I don't know what else to do and before I can think of anything he's behind me, tying up my hands with yellow rope. He tells us not to speak or move or else he will kill us both. Mom can't help but cry and he gets so angry he punches her in the face. I scream and start to cry and he goes back into the dining room. When he comes out, he's holding the knife again. He grabs me by the throat. I start to gag. Wake up. Wake up. Wake up. I start to lose consciousness as he brings the knife up to my chest. I try to tell my Mom I love her and that i'm sorry for everything i've done, but I can't get the words out. Right as the blade touches my skin my mom reaches out to me and.....

Beep, beep, beep.

I jolt awake to the sound of an alarm that's nowhere to be seen. Looking down, I find burns across both of my hands. Heart racing, I jump out of bed to make sure everyone's okay. My brother is still asleep and I can hear an alarm coming from my parent's room. I hear Mom talking to Dad from outside the door.

"I had the worst dream last night. An intruder came into our house and tried to kill our whole family. It was the man that lives a few houses down from us," she explains.

"Honey, it was just a dream," he tries to comfort her.

"This dream felt real," she explains, "and besides, that kind of stuff can happen in real life too."

Later that day she starts telling me about her dream as Dad installs our new cameras. It's hard for me to keep my mouth shut like I didn't already know. The cameras might help mom sleep, but they aren't going to stop my dreams. Later that night, I take a shower and get ready to go to sleep. After setting my clothes out for the next day, I slide into bed. That's when I feel something strange against my back. I already know what it is before I scream and throw them on the floor. Two yellow pieces of rope.