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## **SNAKEMAN**

THE FIRST TIME I SAW HIS BLACK SCALY TAIL sticking out from under my bed, I was paralyzed with fear. I had no idea how a snake had gotten into my room. I laid still, too afraid to move or even breathe.

A few minutes later I began to wonder if it was just my imagination. It was more likely that I had left a black sock or t-shirt on the floor than it was that a snake had somehow found its way into my apartment. I slowly crawled over to the left side of the bed, looked underneath, and saw it staring back at me, its forked tongue slipping in and out of its mouth. It was at least three feet long—longer than any snake I'd ever seen—and I immediately recoiled to the right side of the bed and closed my eyes, hoping that it would simply go away.

When I woke up a few minutes later my face and neck were glistening with sweat and I was breathing heavily. I looked at the clock and saw that it was 3:30 a.m. It had been a dream, but I had seen the snake so clearly that it felt real. I tried to go back to sleep, but all I could think about was the snake. I slowly pushed the covers back as quietly as I could, crawled to the opposite side of the bed, and looked underneath. There was nothing there.

A couple of nights later I dreamed of the snake again. It was in the same spot under the left side of my bed. It slithered out and crawled up the bed frame and onto the mattress. I knew it was a dream, but it felt just as real as every other part of my day. It felt just as real as taking the bus home from work and picking up eggs and milk from the grocery store. I squeezed my eyes shut tight and prayed that I would wake up soon. When I opened my eyes I saw the snake crawling closer and closer towards me until it was an arm's reach away.

I read somewhere that if you meet a snake in your dreams the best thing to do is to become friends with it, so I gently reached over and ran my hand down its back. Its skin was coarse but smooth, and it nuzzled its head against my arm like a cat that sensed you were sleeping lightly and wanted to wake

you up to play. My heart was pounding, but I no longer felt paralyzed by fear. When I woke up it was 3:30 a.m.

A couple of weeks later I dreamed of the snake again. The dream started the same way. The snake was under the left side of my bed, and then it crawled up the bedpost and slithered across the mattress towards me. It sat beside me, brushed against me, and wrapped itself around my arm. If it tightened its grasp any more, I worried that it would start to hurt, so I laid still.

The next thing I knew the snake was gone and there was a man in my bed. He was tall, lean, and very toned, with dark brown eyes, thick curly black hair, and olive skin. He was inches from my face as he reached over, cupped the back of my head with his palms, and kissed me with more force than I could remember ever being kissed. I couldn't pull away from him, and I didn't want to. I didn't want to do anything but succumb to his touch. When I woke up it was 6:45 a.m., and I felt more rested than I had in a long time.

After that night the man appeared in my dreams regularly. Sometimes a week would go by and I wouldn't dream of him, and then I would dream of him three nights in a row. I even began to look forward to falling asleep and seeing my new lover, whom I decided to call Snakeman. I started thinking of him as I showered in the morning, as I rode the bus to work, and as I cooked dinner in the evening. I didn't have a boyfriend at the time and stopped going on dates. No one I met looked as appealing as Snakeman. No one, I believed, would make me feel the way he did. When my friends offered to introduce me to other men, I always declined. I had Snakeman. Slowly, their interest in my love life began to wane.

A few months later I dreamed that I was at a restaurant. I looked down and saw a thick steak on a white china plate sitting on the table in front of me. I also noticed that I was wearing dark crimson nail polish and a chunky gold bracelet, which was strange because I hardly ever paint my nails or wear large jewellery, but the hands were definitely mine. I even saw the mole on my left hand and the scar from where I accidentally cut myself when I was chopping onions a couple of months before. Then I looked up and saw Snakeman. He smiled at me as he cut into my steak and put a piece in my mouth. I could see that the middle was almost raw and that blood was seeping onto my plate, staining the mashed potatoes. I chewed the meat slowly and watched as the blood oozed out and formed a little puddle on the white

tablecloth. After the first bite I realized that I was starving. I ate bite after bite, and when I was finished another steak appeared in front of me. I kept eating, and steaks kept appearing, but no matter how much I ate my hunger never dissipated.

After dreaming of eating dinner with Snakeman images of him began to pop into my head throughout the day. I saw Snakeman tightening his tie. I saw Snakeman chopping onions. I saw Snakeman brushing hair out of my eyes. The images looped together and played continuously. The more I saw them, the more uncomfortable I felt. I began to wonder if I knew Snakeman from somewhere other than my dreams.

A couple of days later I was meeting a friend for coffee when Snakeman walked into the café wearing a black suit, a white shirt, and a shiny plum tie. I found myself staring at him as he placed his order.

“Don’t you know him?” my friend asked.

I didn’t know what to say, so I said nothing, but I couldn’t take my eyes off of him. I knew every inch of his body, but I didn’t know the sound of his voice, what he did for a living, what his hobbies were, and or even his name. I wanted to go over and talk to him, but I felt paralyzed.

“I saw you with him the other night,” my friend said. “You were at that steak restaurant around the corner. I tried waving at you as I walked by, but you didn’t see me.”

I couldn’t remember the last time I ate steak, but I remembered the last time I dreamed that I had. Maybe she had seen me, but how was that possible?

“Are you going to say hi?” she asked.

Then I realized that Snakeman was looking at me, and I watched as he stood up and approached our table. The room started to spin, and my head began to ache. I looked down at my cup, refusing to meet his gaze, and felt the sudden urge to flee.

“What’s wrong?” my friend asked as I ran out of the café.

The next time I dreamed of Snakeman I tried to ask if he was real or just a figment of my imagination, but no words came out of my mouth. When he reached for me, I recoiled and tried to get out of bed, but he grabbed my wrist, pulled me back towards him, and pinned me down. I tried to push him away, but he gripped my throat and started to choke me. I couldn’t breathe. I tried hitting and kicking him—doing whatever I could to make him stop. While I was trying to fight him off he suddenly turned into a snake again.

The snake wrapped itself tightly around my arm and sunk its teeth into my hand between my thumb and forefinger. I tried to fling it across the room, but it bit me even harder. Blood dribbled down my hand and ran down my arm. I screamed and closed my eyes, and when I opened them again the bed was empty. It was 3:30 a.m. My hand felt fine. There was no blood. I heard footsteps upstairs, and a faucet began to run. I wondered if I had woken my neighbours. I curled up into a ball and pulled the covers over my head. I never wanted to see Snakeman again.

The next day I couldn't resist the urge to return to the café, and I watched in horror as Snakeman walked in again, placed the same order, and sat down at the same chair. I thought about the dream the night before and remembered how he had grabbed me and started choking me. My hands were shaking, and when I looked down I saw two small puncture wounds between my thumb and forefinger. They were red and beginning to throb. Then I pulled up my sleeve and saw a dark purple bruise shaped like a hand-print wrapped around my wrist. I no longer knew what was real and what was a dream. It was as if they were tangled together, coiling tighter and tighter until I could no longer see the difference.

I didn't notice him approach the table, but when he spoke I knew that I knew his voice even though I was hearing it for the first time. He asked me to step outside so we could talk.

I shook my head. My stomach clenched like a fist, and I felt like I was going to be sick. I pushed my chair back and ran to the alley behind the café. It felt like there was something inside of me that wanted to get out, so I leaned over and vomited again and again. Black liquid spewed from my mouth and spilled onto the pavement. When there was nothing left, I opened my eyes and saw the snake from my dreams. It turned to look at me and then slithered under a dumpster and out of sight.

My face and neck were damp with sweat as I sat down on the pavement, took a couple of deep breaths, and waited to see if I would wake up again.