

DAWNAH
& THE
DARKHEARTS

DANA & GEORGIA GLAZER

DANE-GRAMP PRODUCTIONS LLC

Dawnah & the Darkhearts

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For information about this title or to order books and/or electronic media, contact the publisher:

Dane-Gramp Productions LLC
info@danegramp.com
www.danegramp.com

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*This book is dedicated to
Margie Glazer & Ken Baltin.
Thank you for all of your love
and support over the years.*



Queen of the Rats

My name is Dawnah Dayton. I'm gonna be twelve next week. Right now, I'm sitting next to my dad as we drive upstate to a camping site. Dad plays David Bowie's "Is There Life On Mars?" for the hundredth time. He promised it would make me feel better and I guess it does. No, I don't have mousy hair like the girl in the song, but brown, shoulder-length, and dyed blue on the ends, although it's fading a bit. The girl in the song is forced to go to the movies, sit alone and watch the same tired stories again and again; but for me, I'm stuck seeing the same faces over and over at school—a constant reminder of how I'm a puzzle piece that just doesn't fit. Have you ever felt that way? Anyway, I go to Reed elementary. It's actually a really awesome school, well, minus the other kids. But Dad says I have to go—yeah, like the song.

The one fantastic place is the science room and all the animals in there. You see, I loooove animals. The gerbils. The boa constrictor. The hamster. Frankly, I connect with them much better than I do with those annoying humans! I can talk to the animals for hours. And I know this is going to sound super weird, but they seem to listen to me. No, I'm not Dr. Dolittle. If they make any

noise back, I don't know what they're saying. But they listen. I tell them all of my problems when everyone else is outside during recess.

Mrs. Delanza, my science teacher, once caught me talking to my "little buddies" and she got a tiny bit worried. "Don't you wanna be outside with all your classmates? How about you go sit on the buddy bench?"

The buddy bench. Don't even get me started. The problem is that I stink at four-square and the boys hate it when I play in the gaga pit because I destroy them. Not all the boys. Just the ones who hog the pit and easily knock out the smaller fourth graders who share our recess time. I get really bothered when I see a kid being picked on and I have to do something about it. You'd think that would help my popularity but nope. They just call me "Ditzy Dawnah" or "Queen of the Rats."

So, I just sit back and stay inside. They can't force me to go, right?

I bet you're wondering why they call me "Queen of the Rats." Well, if you look in my lap you'll see Shiloh. He's the cutest and fuzziest rat you'll ever meet and I love him to death! He's got these well-groomed whiskers and silky black fur and a moist little black nose that looks like a gumdrop. I know it may sound crazy but rats actually make awesomely good pets. When I'm not at school, Shiloh goes everywhere with me, except the time I tried to sneak him into school and he climbed under my teacher's skirt and scared her half to death. Maybe that's why I don't have the best connection with my teacher.

Sometimes I slip him into my pocket (when we go into stores and restaurants) but most of the time he likes to rest on my left shoulder. He never claws at me and I always tell him, "Shiloh, you just stay put," and guess what? He does! Once or twice an old lady has let out a scream from seeing Shiloh there, but I explain that Shiloh is the most wonderful and well-behaved

rat on the planet, and I bathe him and brush his little teeth at least once a week, so that would also make him the squeakiest, cleanest as well. I'd even share a slice of pineapple pizza any day of the week with Shiloh over those dumb kids at school! Shiloh also has the best-smelling breath in the world. PS. I should also add that his breath smells like cheesy corn dogs.

So, you must be asking, "Where are you going with your dad, Dawnah?" And my answer is "None of your beeswax, human! I only talk to animals!" Okay, okay I'm only kidding. Well, maybe kidding. I do like to joke a lot. Sometimes it gets me into trouble but I just can't help myself. Life is too short not to have a good sneeze once in a while, right? Oh, I mean laugh.

Alright, I'll answer for real. Dad is taking me camping. I've been asking and asking him for months and he finally said "Yes." You see, my dad is not what we would call a "seasoned outdoorsman." He grew up in the big city and so this is pretty weird stuff. All that being on your phone and taking buses does not translate to the outdoors, but Dad's a good sport and so we went to the camping store and bought all this awesomely cool stuff to make this happen. Dad's been watching YouTube videos on how to start a fire and pitch a tent, so I'm sure it's going to work out great.

The mosquitos also adore how my dad tastes. It's like he's a cupcake or something. I know I'm going to be fine in the wilderness because they pass right over me to take a nibble of my dad's moist batter and his sweet pink frosting. I'm praying that the bug repellent he bought will do the trick. None of the other repellents have, but thirteenth time's the charm! No reason for him to suffer on my account.

Now, the big reason I wanted to go camping so badly is that I love adventure! Who knows what animals we'll meet! But most importantly, I understand that up in the mountains, cell phone reception is bad and since my dad is completely bonded like

EXTRA-EXTRA sticky slime to his phone, this will force him to pay more attention to me.

Honestly, I think Dad is doing this to bond with me better. He had a meeting with the principal at school last week regarding this little incident that occurred in the science room. The long and short of it is that I caught this kid, Danny Guzas, squirting the hamsters in their cage with the water dispenser and, when he refused to stop, I pushed him really hard into a desk—just as Mrs. Delanza was entering the room. I explained what happened but either Mrs. D didn't believe me or just didn't care since I was "violent." So, I was expecting some major punishment from Dad, but he came out of the meeting, looked at me and said, "I've been thinking about camping . . ." My face turned as red as a red velvet cupcake. (There are a lot of cupcake references here because I'm addicted to them!)

"I thought you were going to punish me," I said at dinner that night. Dad put his fork down, took a deep breath and looked at me.

"There are too many bystanders in this world, Dawnah, who turn a blind eye when someone is being victimized and I'm glad you're not one of them. You're like your mother that way. Just be a little smarter about how you handle it next time, okay?" he said and I nodded appreciatively.

When Dad said I was like Mom, that was probably the biggest compliment he could have given me. Mom was always doing stuff to "save the planet" and protect the poor and needy and she'd take my older sibling and me to hold up signs at rallies, go door to door collecting signatures, and bring blankets to homeless people. She'd drag my sibling, Tedi, and me along with her and, even though our feet got tired and we sometimes got cold, we never complained.

"Why do we do all this stuff?" I once asked Mom as we were packing heaps of blankets into our car and she just looked at me and replied, "Because we can, Dawnah."

I guess I should share what happened to my mom. You see, she's not with us anymore. She had some weird kind of cancer I can't even repeat because the word is so strange and confusing. And horribly rare. I was told only one in a bajillion people get this thing. It was like winning the death lottery. And she was the unlucky one.

When Mom was younger, she was the lead singer in a band and traveled all around. She told me eventually she got tired of doing that and wanted to have a family. She never got to be a rock star, but for my older sibling Tedi and me, we saw her that way. Mom loved to play her guitar and sing to us. I remember telling Mom she should record herself on YouTube and become a star that way, but she had no interest in that. Only playing for us.

When Tedi and I would fight, which happened a lot, Mom had written this one particular song, which she would make us sing together. Tedi and I would groan on and on about singing it, but we would do it and somehow by the end of it, it would fix whatever had broken between us. Anyway, the chorus went like this:

*Life's too short for swords and knives
Or sticking one's hand in another's beehive.
So, put your hand in mine
And that's the way to live our lives.
And that's the way to live our lives.
And that's the way to live. Our. Lives.*

Mom was the one who got me Shiloh. She read in some magazine how rats make good pets, and when my father said "No!" to us getting another dog after our first one died, she was the one who took me to the pet store to pick my beloved, whiskery friend. I still think my dad was pretty upset about it.

When my mom was first diagnosed, Dad insisted on working

from home more. Eventually, he quit the big law firm altogether. Dad was so in love with my mom. They had met while both were vacationing in Martha's Vineyard. There's this bridge everyone calls Jaws Bridge (because that's where they shot the movie) and people like to jump off it and into the ocean down below. I've always wanted to go there. Maybe someday. Anyway, the story is that my mother jumped off Jaws Bridge and hit her foot on the rocky bottom. Dad swam to her and carried her out onto the slippery rocks like a hero. They were stuck together like purple sparkly crazy glue from then on.

Dad and I sat by Mom's side for days on end when she could no longer get out of bed. I tried to giggle even when her jokes started making absolutely no sense, just so she'd know I was with her. There are so many horrible people in the world who live to be old and wrinkly. Why not my mom?

Now, I should have shared something about Tedi, my sixteen-year-old sibling. Tedi used to be my brother but now they are something called non-binary. Pronouns are funny in this world now.

"I wish Tedi was with us. Couldn't we have scooped them up from boarding school? It's not that far away from here, right?" I ask.

"He's studying for his finals," Dad replies.

"They," I correct Dad for the gazillionth time.

I guess it's harder for older people to make sense of these kinds of thingies. Well, harder for some anyways. Mom had no problem with it. She always smoothed things out between Dad and Tedi but now that she's gone . . .

"Almost there!" Dad shouts, pointing to the green highway sign that reads "Wantakee Campground—2 Miles."



TWO

Wantakee

Five minutes later and we're driving through the gates of Wantakee Campground, which is at the base of Wantakee Mountain. First, we stop in at the main office, which looks more like a log cabin. The man behind the front desk has round glasses and a white puff of beard. He introduces himself as Mr. Tiddlebee. Then he gives us the parking pass for our red station wagon. Next to a rack of snacks, I notice a batch of hiking maps and brochures on display.

“What’s the Appalak—eee-innn trail?” I ask and Mr. Tiddlebee gently corrects my bad pronunciation of the Appalachian Trail as he unfolds the map.

“The A.T. runs fourteen states up and down the coast. Most campers just climb our mountain but the Trail is a couple of miles from here, so in case you and your daughter want to check it out . . .”

I study the map and then notice a town it runs past a few miles up.

“Look Dad, if we followed the Trail it would bring us pretty close to Tedi’s school!” I exclaim.

“That’s several days of hiking, Dawnah. I think we’ll just stick

to the mountain for now. Besides, we don't want to bother your brother during finals week."

"They're my sibling, Dad. Tedi doesn't want to be called that anymore," I correct.

"Sibling. Right," Dad mutters. "Visiting Tedi is just not in the cards, Dawnah."

"Okay," I say, a little disappointed, but then grab the trail map anyway and stuff it into my pocket. You never know.

We head past a sea of RVs and wood cabins, looking for campsite 12A. I picked it because it's close to the nearby pond, although it's not super-hot out to swim just yet since it's still early in the season. We get to hear frogs croak at night, which is relaxing.

We pull into our spot. The only thing that awaits us is a weathered picnic table and an iron ring to make a fire in. Dad opens the trunk and I help him take out the tent, sleeping bags, and cooking stuff—most of which still have price tags on.

"Dad," I yell, "What are we gonna do about these price tags? We don't have scissors out in the wild!"

But Dad surprises me with his spectacular Swiss Army knife, which has every last thing in it. He tells me that Mom got it for his birthday fifteen years ago and now he finally gets to use it for the first time.

"Swiss, like the cheese?" I ask. I love getting off-topic.

Oooh, new flavor: Swiss Cheese Cupcake. I bet Shiloh would like to share that with me!

We find a cozy spot for the tent and I lay out the blue tarp on the ground, so we don't get water on all our stuff. Dad takes out his reading lamp.

"Dad, that's close to glamping," I say and he smiles at me and puts it back in the car for later.

Dad reads the tent instructions as I dump out the poles and stakes.

A group of kids sail past us on their bikes. The last one is using a Segway.

“Why don’t you go play while I get everything going?” Dad asks.

I tell him that I want to help, but Dad is the kind of guy who likes to do things himself like a lone wolf, so I just nod and head away.

Not far from our campsite is a small pond. I see some little kids swimming there with their parents. They’re riding in a yellow, inflatable choo-choo train. I used to have the same train raft and I remember Mom and Dad bobbing in and out of the water, playing peek-a-boo. There’s a white, wooden lifeguard chair and a very overweight, bare-chested twenty-something sitting there, twirling the string that’s looped around his whistle.

Suddenly POP! POP! POP! Are those gunshots or firecrackers? I can feel Shiloh digging his tiny nails into my shirt in response. I pet Shiloh, telling him he’s okay. The lifeguard gets up and fumbles to where the sound is coming from, an annoyed look on his face. I decide to follow.

There’s a clearing behind some of the RVs and I can still smell the gunpowder that exploded in the area. The lifeguard kicks the charred remains of the firecrackers and yells “Fireworks are not allowed here!” to anyone in earshot. I wander away only to spot some teenagers quietly stashing something in a crevice at the back of the outhouse.

There’s a small playground with an empty gaga pit and a jungle gym that’s a bit rusted. There’s also a giant trampoline that has a hole in it. I climb on top, with Shiloh still on my shoulder, bouncing up and down. A little girl sees me and looks like she’s about to ask me to play until she notices Shiloh.

“Aaaaaaahhhh! There’s a rat on your shoulder!”

“His name’s Shiloh. You want to pet him? He’s really sweet.”

She shakes her head and scurries off. Oh well! So, I just sit

there and gaze up at the giant mountain. A moment later and the kids I saw earlier arrive at the playground. They seem more interested in Shiloh than the little girl.

“He is kinda cute!” a nine-year-old girl with frizzy hair says. We exchange names and I learn she’s called Izzy. I let her pet Shiloh and she giggles at the feel of his silky fur. The other kids take turns petting Shiloh.

They ask me if I want to play gaga with them. I happily nod back but then send a memo to myself: don’t play so well. I put Shiloh on a nearby picnic bench and tell him to stay put, which he usually does. He’s such a smart rat.

So, I step into the gaga pit, and guess what happens? I immediately forget the memo! I dodge the ball and hurl it back with amazing aim. It takes less than two minutes to knock the other kids out. I’m the queen of gaga! An older boy with a mohawk scowls at me as I take him out.

“Hey! No cheating!” mohawk boy shouts.

“I didn’t!” I say loudly. No one should call someone a cheater if they haven’t cheated.

“Yes, you did. You did something funny to the ball when you threw it.”

Mohawk boy is referencing my secret spin. Tedi taught me that. It’s a golden shot!

“Nobody said anything against spinning,” I defend.

“Rat-girl cheats! She cheats!” mohawk boy goes off, dancing around until all the other kids add a chorus.

“Cheater! Cheater!”

I think this is a new world record for losing friends. Dang gaga! I should have never played. So, I scoop up Shiloh and head back to our campsite.

Dad’s trying to get a fire started. Trying. It’s not going well. Our tent’s lopsided and he seems to have a bandage around his hand. He’s such a gem.

“Is that from the swiss cheese knife?” I ask.

He snorts at me like a red-faced pit bull.

“You find that gang of kids?” he asks.

“Mmmhhhhmm.”

“How’d it go?”

“It went”

“Gaga again?” he asks. I look away.

Dad shakes his head.

“You’ll figure it out eventually.”

I help with starting the fire, which under my super abilities is roaring within minutes. Dad’s impressed. He takes out some hamburger meat from an ice-packed cooler and instructs me to make patties and add garlic powder and salt. Well, I can’t say they’re the best burgers you could ever eat but they are mostly edible.

It’s pitch black out now and Dad says it’s time to dump some water on the fire and head to bed. I put Shiloh in a shoebox that has a tiny pillow and blanket, which my mom had stitched for me, and a little stuffed bunny that I made myself.

Dad snores like a dying pig lawnmower and I keep nudging him but then he starts up again. Eventually, I drift off as well. When—BOOM! What??? I open my eyes in the darkness. There’s screaming from outside our tent and—what’s that? Something growling???



THREE

Bear and Crows

“Dad, wake up!!” I whisper loudly, pushing at his shoulder. “What? What?” He groggily opens his eyes and looks at me. Then I spot the fear in his eyes.

“Shhhh,” Dad orders with a finger to his lips.

Someone’s blaring a car horn and the high beams make the inside of the tent glow. There’s continued yelling and then silence. Then I hear a thump-thump and see the shadow of the bear against the tent. I’ve never been this close to a bear. I hear his heavy breathing followed by a low growl. Dad grabs his megaly-huge flashlight as a weapon, readying to defend me to the death!

I don’t know if it’s my biggest problem or my greatest strength, but I don’t always listen to my dad or anyone for that matter, especially when my heart feels like it’s going to explode out of my chest and start dancing. I stand up in the tent and yell:

“GO AWAY BEAR!!!!”

My father looks at me, stunned, horrified even. There’s total silence outside as my scream seems to bounce around in the bear’s head. Then the bear whimpers and clomps away back into the woods.

We wait a few moments and then Dad carefully peers out of the tent to make sure the bear is gone. He motions for me to come out as well. The other camping families poke their heads out of their RVs. Everyone is nervously talking. Everyone but me. I just clutch Shiloh, stroking his fur. He looks a little shaken. We all gather around the smashed cooler and empty meat packages that my dad had left out on the picnic bench. One of the other fathers yells at him for being so stupid. Dad apologizes and then brings me back into the tent. He looks at me in this funny way, then we both get back to sleep.

As I try to fall back to sleep, I keep replaying a moment from three years ago with Tedi. This was before they went to McKinley-Lawrence Prep and Tedi was still living with us. After school, Tedi and I would sometimes stroll into town. On this particular day, I was really excited about this new sparkly slime that Walgreens had on sale. My pockets were jammed and heavy from all of the loose change in my room and I had just enough to buy this super-sticky new slime! Tedi and I slipped into the store and I made a dashing run to the slime; but when I got there, I realized that they had disappeared on me.

“Tedi?” I called out.

“Over here,” I heard a loud whisper.

When I found Tedi, they were in the makeup aisle.

“What are you looking at, Tedi?” I asked.

They turned fruit-punch red.

“I was thinking of getting these,” Tedi showed me a small makeup kit.

“For Mom?” I asked. She put on makeup on fancy occasions but not usually.

“Maybe.”

Tedi then reached into their pocket and pulled out some dollar bills.

“Can you buy them?” they asked with this needy look on their face.

Of course I agreed and when we arrived at the check-out, I understood why. The cashier was a classmate of Tedi, this boy with so many pimples on his face, it looked like an oozing red garden of poison ivy!

When we got out of the store, I handed the paper bag back to Tedi and they were about to take it when they spotted these other kids from the grade above: Scott Dickson and Noah Spengler, ‘Dick and Spanks’ as we jokingly called them. They were really mean to Tedi, pushing them around at school, calling them “Bed-Wetty Tedi” due to an unfortunate incident at a Cub Scout trip to Frost Valley years earlier that embarrassed Tedi so much that they quit the troop immediately after.

“Hey Wetty Tedi! Wetty Tedi!” they called out, laughing to each other. Somehow the name still stuck.

Tedi ignored them but now they were heading over to us. Tedi gestured to me to turn down a side street, away from the bullies. Once around the corner, we ran like our clothing was on fire! Just outside the center of town is this nature trail and we raced into it. Out of breath, Tedi and I hid behind some bushes to make sure we hadn’t been followed.

After a minute we both relaxed.

“C’mon, I want to show you something.”

“What?”

“You’ll see!” Tedi said, leading me into the trail.

Now, what’s wayyyy cool about this nature trail is that it dips into the woods and ends up at this gi-normous rock that’s bigger than our house! I had never been here before. Tedi helped me climb up the rock, which is really steep. When we got to the top, we were standing just over all of the trees. I gazed out and there was New York City in the distance. Wowzers!

“I sometimes come up here to get away from everything,” Tedi

whispered in my ear as quietly as Shiloh squeaked.

Just then, from one of the treetops we heard this loud squawking sound, like a bunch of birds were suddenly putting on a party.

“What kind of bird is that?” I asked.

“Oh, that’s just a murder of crows.”

“They’re murderers?” I asked, confuzzled.

“No, silly. A murder of crows is just what you call a group of crows. Check this out!”

Tedi cupped their hands around their mouth and made a similar ca-caw! sound. The crows grew silent and then started squawking as if they were saying, “Who said that? Was that you? Or you? Or you?”

Tedi laughed. Then, when they had quieted down, they ca-caw’d again. This time the birds flew up from the tree as if trying to figure it out.

“It’s just me, you murderers! Don’t mind us!” Tedi yelled, waving and the crows flew back down out of sight as if to resume their conversation. My sibling turned and grinned at me.

“See? They’re my friends,” Tedi said proudly.

Then they reached for the paper bag that I was still clenching. Tedi took out the makeup kit and removed the plastic wrapping.

“Why did you buy that?” I asked.

“I’m curious. Is that okay?” they responded and I nodded back.

Tedi took the red lipstick and glided it along my lips. Then they did their own.

They then opened the compact to see themselves, puckering and pleased.

“Want me to do something more for you,” I offered.

Tedi grinned in agreement.

There were some colored stamps and blushes. I took out a black heart stamp and made a heart on Tedi’s left cheek. Then Tedi did the same for me. We admired what we had done together, sharing the small mirror.

“Now, please don’t tell anyone, okay?”

“But why?”

“Just swear to me you won’t,” Tedi said and I agreed.

At that exact moment, we heard some small stones banging their way down the side of the rock, followed by boyish laughter.

Tedi nervously wiped off the makeup with their shirt and stuffed the makeup back into the bag. Then we headed down the giant rock in the opposite direction. I slipped but Tedi caught me while holding onto a tree branch.

“Let’s run!” Tedi ordered and we did; but as we neared a big oak tree, Dick and Spanks stepped in front of us, blocking our way.

“We saw you up there, Wetty! Whatcha doin’ with the makeup?”

“None of your beeswax!” I said.

Tedi’s face suddenly looked like a plum cupcake. Dick and Spanks cackled louder, taunting Tedi further.

I grew mad.

“You get away from us!” I shouted, grabbing a nearby stone and holding it as if to throw it.

“Oooohhh. Wetty’s little sister has to stand up for you, because you’re such a weakling and can’t do it yourself, ya loser!”

“You leave us alone!” I yelled again.

“Or what? Are you gonna—”

That got me so mad that I hurled the stone at Dick. It smashed him on the side of his head, startling the big bully. He touched his head and found blood.

“Why you little—” Dick said enraged, then lunged at me, taking me to the ground. Spanks went after Tedi, hitting them over and over and over.

“HELP! HELP!” Tedi screamed as Spanks continued beating them.

Then Tedi looked past Spanks and made the same kind of

ca-caw! scream that they had demonstrated earlier.

“You’re going to regret what you did!” Dick threatened me as I lay pinned to the ground, unable to move. He picked up a stone.

“Eye for an eye!” Dick yelled.

Screaming and crying with tears and snot everywhere, I scrunched my eyes, waiting to be hit by a stone. But then something happened that I’ll remember until my dying day:

CA-CAW! CA-CAW!!!!

A crow swooped down and knocked Dick off of me, digging its beak into the back of his neck.

“ARRGGHHH!!!!” Dick screamed!

More crows arrived, ramming into Spanks. Both boys stumbled up and ran away from the murder—oh, I love that word now!

I remember getting up, shaken, and going to Tedi, who was still panting on the ground with a giant bruise around their eye.

“Tedi, are you okay?” I asked. They nodded.

A moment later and the woods were silent again.

“What just happened?” I asked.

Tedi was still silent and stunned.

We went home, washed ourselves off and put on new clothes without our parents ever knowing. I’ve never shared any of this until now.