Books by Larry Hayes

The Nightmares of Finnegan Quick
The Fate of Finnegan Quick

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Ramona and Tim. You did win more ashes

THURSDAY, 27TH OCTOBER

My name is Finnegan Quick, and I am exceptional. But not in a good way.

In fact, I'm exceptional in a really quite astoundingly crappy way. My life is a total mess. And it's all because of the nightmares.

You know how, if you wet yourself in a dream, you wet yourself in real life? Well, my dreams are a bit like that. I don't wet myself – *obviously*. What I mean is, everything that happens in my dreams can change real life. Dream a bruise? I can wake up with a bruise. Lose an eye? Yep, gone. My best mate, Squid, lost the top of his middle finger. You can even lose stuff you wouldn't think you could lose – I've lost my shadow, my actual shadow.

Now, you're probably thinking I should stop whining and dream myself up a Ferrari or a yacht or whatever. But it never seems to work out like that. It's always the bad stuff that comes true. The really bad stuff. I lost my mum and dad when I was just a little kid. And my dog. One night I just dreamed they were taken away, and *paff*, the next morning they were gone. Forever.

I'd be totally alone right now, or in an orphanage or something. Except somehow I managed to dream my gran back from the dead. So that's my family: me, an undead gran and nobody else. Not even a goldfish. It's just too risky.

Lucky for me, I've got mates: Squid and Cass. And together with Cass's dad (who is – very usefully – a billionaire), they're helping me find my parents. Because if I can bring Gran back from the dead, well, anything is possible, right?

It's a long shot, and to succeed we need a *portal* – a route to the afterlife so we can go and bring them back. We already found one portal, but then accidentally managed to smash it to pieces. So that's why we set up as paranormal investigators, to find another one. Because wherever there's creepy, supernatural, weirdo stuff happening, there's usually a portal.

You still following me? If you've got a problem, no matter how weird it is, then the Freak House Investigators can help. Maybe your baby sister's a warlock and nobody believes you, or perhaps your teacher's growing hair in unusual places around the full moon. We'll investigate absolutely anything; our first case involved a dead gerbil leaving messages on the bathroom mirror. But that turned out to be just a prank.

Unfortunately, or maybe fortunately, most things are fakes. People make up all sorts of guff if it means they get to be famous for fifteen minutes.

But our latest case looks totally legit. Squid found it on the internet. We call it 'The Case of the Teenage Daisy-Chain Death Banshee'.

Or just 'The Banshee Case', for short.

Here are the basics …

Twelve years ago, a teenage girl died in Ballynabas, a little fishing village on the west coast of Ireland. Except she didn't die. At least, not completely.

It's the custom there to lay out the body in an open coffin on the dining room table, so that relatives and friends can come to say goodbye. Weird, I know. But it's what they do. And in the days leading up to the funeral, a strange secret emerged.

Because the body of the girl stayed perfect. Lips plump, cheeks rosy – even her hair kept growing. And the smile on her face? Never faded once.

But there was something else, something even creepier.

When she died, the girl was holding a chain of flowers, daisies. Each day the daisies would wilt and die. But each morning she'd be holding a new chain, like it was fresh picked.

You can imagine, by the day of the funeral the villagers spoke of not a lot else. And when her mum refused to have her buried, the talk turned dark.

For months she lay there in that coffin, not dying – every morning a fresh daisy chain in her hands. Other extraordinary things began to happen. People said that her eyes would sometimes open, that she'd watch you, in total silence. And after that, well, things got really weird.

Some nights a shrieking was heard coming from the house. Like the 'wail of a Banshee' they described it. And sure enough, like all Banshee screams, the wail predicted death.

Sheep were found in the local fields, their throats ripped open. People in the village started getting sick, some even died. And so when the ancient spring that fed the local spa hotel ran dry – it was the final straw.

Everyone went nuts. Bricks were chucked through windows, threats were made. And the girl's mum was forced to move away, taking her daughter to a deserted island just off the coast.

According to Squid's research, they still live there, in an old abandoned lighthouse. The mother comes to shore in a rowboat once a week for food and supplies. The villagers still talk, but only after dark when doors are safely locked. Because the Banshee of Ballynabas is never far from anyone's thoughts.

They say the body of the girl never changed. Even as the years went by she stayed a girl, the smile not fading, fresh daisies each morning. But how 'they' know that is anyone's guess. At first, I thought it was just some stupid ghost story too. Something for scaring the kids at Halloween.

But it's not. It's all true.

I know because I, Finnegan Quick, have been inside that old lighthouse.

I've seen the dead girl.

And she's seen me.

1

THE LIGHTHOUSE DREAM

It was a disaster right from the start.

The first mistake was leaving Cass behind. Cass is the sort of person who can kick a Banshee in the head without even warming up her hamstrings. She's exactly who you want by your side in the middle of a nightmare. But as she pointed out, 'Only an idiot with a death wish would go anywhere near a Banshee.'

The second mistake was bringing Squid, but he insisted.

He may be my best mate, and he may be a total genius when it comes to knowing stuff. But when it comes to taking on a Banshee in an abandoned lighthouse on a remote Irish island covered in sheep, he's worse than useless. Literally worse than useless. For a start, he's scared of sheep.

'They're everywhere,' Squid whispered harshly. His eyes were big, shining in the moonlight.

'So?'

We'd dreamed ourselves on to the island's little beach. That's how we do most of our investigating – using dream tech. Which basically means you get high-resolution satellite images of where you want to go, and then dream yourself there. Sounds complicated and slightly impossible, but it's not. Not once you practise.

Except this time we got the coordinates a bit off and were lucky not to end up in the Atlantic. The sheep were shuffling across the sand towards us and Squid had backed away. Another couple of steps and he'd be in the sea.

You couldn't really see the sheep, just their eyes. They were black, the sheep – and the eyes. Everything was black. Which was weird. An island of black sheep with black eyes. The thought made me pause.

'Look at them,' said Squid. 'They're trying to surround us. *No, don't look at them* – don't make eye contact. The alpha will take it as a challenge.'

'Just keep moving,' I hissed. The sheep *were* getting close, but he was being ridiculous. 'We're here to investigate a Banshee. Not pick a fight with a herd of sheep.'

I took a step forwards, Squid's little body pressed into my back.

'Sheep *kill*.'

'You're thinking of cows.'

'No, sheep. I watch the news, remember. They *trample*.' He mouthed the word like it might give the sheep ideas if they heard it.

I shook my head, but couldn't help noticing the black eyes moving closer. I edged forwards, nervous for the first time.

'And they can smell fear.' He just wouldn't stop. 'Make yourself look big.'

But before I could do anything, the sheep parted, making us a passage off the beach. I ran through it and up on to the stone steps, not stopping till I'd reached halfway to the lighthouse.

The steps had been cut into the rock, and we knew from the satellite images that they curved a path up to the lighthouse door. The building itself was small – not much taller than two houses stacked on top of each other. But looking up the hill of steps at it now, inside the dream, the lighthouse seemed massive.

Its wide silhouette cast a heavy shadow in the moonlight, and an eerie glow shone from inside – feeble electric lights, or maybe an oil lamp. As we got closer to

the lighthouse door the thrum of a diesel generator gave us the answer. Electric.

'Is that a generator?' said Squid.

'I guess so,' I said, with my hand on the iron handle of the big wooden door. But Squid's hand on my shoulder made me stop.

'You remember the Banshee Rules?' he said quietly.

'Yep, I remember,' I said. 'Now come on, we don't have long.'

Our investigation protocol is to limit dreams to five minutes max. Much more than that and things usually go a bit haywire.

But Squid's hand didn't budge. 'Rule 1. Don't wake a sleeping Banshee.'

'I told you – I remember.' I spoke as loudly as I dared.

'Rule 2,' he continued. 'Don't look it in the eye. That's how it sees your future.'

I turned back towards him with a sigh. Sometimes you just have to let Squid talk.

'If a Banshee looks at you, then you won't be able to move. And if it screams,' he continued, 'then they've *seen your death*. There's nothing you can do. It's worse than voodoo. No matter how fast or far you run, no matter where you hide … death will *get* you.'

'OK, I get it. Can we just—?'

'Rule 3,' he finished. 'If it touches you, give up. You're already dead.'

'Look, we're just gonna check it out – no wakey Banshee, no looky, no touchy. OK? I just want to find out if this thing is real. Then we get out.'

'Quick,' he added. 'Then we get out … *quick*.'

'Sure.' I nodded with a smile. 'Quick is almost my middle name. Ready?'

But before I could take a step, the hum of the generator suddenly stopped, and the gentle light from within disappeared.

'*It knows we're here*,' whispered Squid in a voice loud enough to wake a Banshee.

'Probably because you won't shut up,' I whispered back.

'So what do we do now?'

'We're the Freak House Investigators. What do you think we do? We go freakin' investigate.'

And turning away, I opened the big wooden door and stepped inside.

Which, thinking back, was probably my third mistake.

Now, given everything I've said about how my dreams are different – about the bruises, and losing eyes and fingers and even my own shadow – you're probably

wondering how we could be stupid enough to dream ourselves into an old, Banshee-haunted lighthouse.

And you'd have a point.

But the bottom line is, we set up the Freak House Investigators because it's the only way I'm ever going to find my mum and dad. I *need* to do this. But it doesn't make it any easier. And I can honestly say, hand on heart, as I stepped through the door into that creepy old lighthouse, that I was crapping myself.

It smelt – the lighthouse I mean. That was the first thing I noticed. Most people can't smell in dreams, but I can. I want to say something dramatic, like, 'It smelt of death.' But it didn't, it was more like old fish fingers and peas.

Inside was so dark we could hardly see, at least at first. But we didn't really need to. Squid had somehow found the lighthouse plans online, and we'd memorised everything.

The lighthouse building was circular, with a massive iron pillar that ran up through its middle. Two doors led off from the main entrance room. A trapdoor in the floor went down into a basement. We weren't going anywhere near the basement – we're not totally stupid. The other door, a normal door, led straight on to some stairs, spiralling their way right to the lantern room at the top.

The door opened with the smallest of creaks. And even stepping on to the wood and iron staircase, we barely made a sound. Which was a bonus. Squid was right behind me as we moved up through the three floors. First, we emerged into a giant kitchen – with an old, cold iron stove and a big table built around the central iron pillar. Nobody home.

We took another turn of the spiral staircase and came up into some sort of living room, with old sofas and overflowing bookshelves that ran in a giant semicircle halfway round it.

'Still no Banshee,' said Squid ominously.

I looked at the ceiling. Somehow I'd known we'd have to go right to the top. But when I turned back, Squid's head was shaking, words struggling to come out of his open mouth.

'Mate …' I put my hand on his shoulder. 'It's OK. Honestly, you go back, I'll just be a minute. Have you got your peg?'

We have clothes pegs for situations like this. A peg on the top lip is painful enough to wake you up without causing any lasting damage. Sounds obvious, but believe me, it took a lot of trial and error before we came up with that. I've got the scars to prove it.

Squid shook his head.

'No,' he said firmly. 'We do this together. Banshee Rule 4. Never face a Banshee alone.'

I didn't deserve Squid. I thought about saying something, but I knew it would come out all garbled and embarrassing. So I just nodded, and tried to smile.

We took the final turn of the staircase. Still not even a creak. And I inched my head into the lantern room – the room that held the lighthouse beacon. The ceiling steepled up into darkness, but the walls were pure glass and starlight filled the room.

The beacon at the centre looked like a hulking alien head. Prisms of glass were wired on to a metal frame in the shape of a space helmet – or maybe one of those old diving helmets – but massive. Two circles of glass faced us like giant eyes, and for a moment I couldn't stop staring back.

Squid tugged on my arm, and nodded towards the far side of the room.

Laid out on a low bed, or couch, was a girl. *The* girl.

She was clutching a string of daisies, peaceful, asleep, maybe dead. But maybe not.

She certainly looked dead. In the cold starlight her skin was bone-white, like all the blood had been drained from her veins.

Moving slowly, we crept up into the room, and I

reached for the little mirror in my back pocket. It's an old doctor's trick from the days of plagues. You didn't want to touch a dead body if it might give you Deathpox, so you couldn't check for a pulse with your hand. But if the mirror fogged up, then you knew the person was still breathing.

The mirror was Squid's idea, obviously. He reads history books too. But even more obviously, I was the one to actually do it. There was no way I'd let Squid get that close to a Banshee.

He put his hand on my shoulder, and for a bad moment I thought he was going to start talking Banshee Rules again. But he just gave me a good-luck squeeze.

I walked softly, kung fu-style, keeping to the edge of the circular room. The walls were all glass, a giant circle of windows, and the view was astonishing. An endless ocean, thick black but dotted with swells of white surf.

I expected the old wooden floor to betray me at any moment, but I was lucky, and worked my way round the room silently, now focused entirely on the girl. She wore a long, white dress and had been laid on her back, arms across her chest – like a sleeping Dracula, except with flowers, and prettier hair. She was pretty too, but in a bloodless, possible-vampire way. Even so, I couldn't take my eyes off her face. Dead or alive she was

beautiful, totally at peace, with just the hint of a smile. Like the legend had said, *as if she were having the happiest of dreams.*

I inched close. There were no signs of breathing, not even any slow rise and fall of her chest. But I had to make sure. The mirror was in my hand and I reached forward, as close as I dared, holding it over her face. Close enough that with just the slightest of movements she could reach up and kiss it. I stood like that for long moments – waiting, afraid. Not even breathing myself.

Ever so slowly, I turned the mirror and stared into the reflection of my own terrified eyes, clear as anything in the cold starlight. The glass hadn't fogged at all. Whatever this girl was, she wasn't alive, and I allowed myself the very shallowest of breaths.

That's when Squid farted.

It wasn't totally unexpected. Squid says he '*holds a lot of his stress in his digestive tract*'. But it wasn't the best timing. To be fair, it was the faintest of farts. More of a bat-squeak than anything major. So quiet we'd have probably got away with it. But Squid's mum has always brought him up with proper manners.

'Pardon me,' he said, forgetting to whisper. And we were instantly doomed.

The girl's eyes flicked open.

Her face didn't move, didn't even twitch, but the eyelids lifted and her eyeballs started moving – searching the room – searching for *us*.

We'd broken Banshee Rule 1.

And a moment later her eyes settled on me. I just stood there, staring back – like I'd never even heard of Banshee Rule 2.

And then she sat up, and turned towards me. She seemed to float up off the couch and on to her feet. I couldn't move.

I like to think I'm pretty good in a dream crisis. After all, I've had plenty of practice. But this? I've never felt anything like it. She just fixed me with her green eyes, and the blood and colour seemed to surge back into her face – like an artist was painting her as I watched. Freckles dotted her skin, lips and cheeks pinked, and her hair seemed to burn copper-red in the moonlight. She was immediately very alive.

She came towards me. At least I think she did, because suddenly she was there, right in my face, so close I could smell her – fresh as meadow flowers. She smiled, but there were no vampire teeth, just the hint of braces. It was a victory smile, like she'd just won a race, or a game. *Kiss chase*, I remember thinking, suddenly aware how close her lips were to mine.

'Finnegan Quick, I knew you'd come.' She smiled again, the braces glinting. 'You have to understand, *it's a soul for a soul*.'

I didn't know what to say to that. But I didn't have long to not say it, because as she stared at me, only inches away, her face changed.

The smile vanished, and her eyes widened – first in horror, and then disgust as she gazed into my eyes. And then, before I could even think to move, she was screaming. Screaming with all the force of her lungs. So loud I thought she'd burst my eardrums, so loud I couldn't even think. She screamed in *revulsion*, because staring into my eyes, she'd somehow seen my future.

Maybe I started screaming then too, I'm not really sure. Because suddenly I was in another dream – a dream within a dream – or maybe a vision …

I stood on the bank of a little lake. It was night-time, but the moon was massive – its reflection warm on the black water. There was a cave on the other side, and shadows beyond – they were moving, fighting.

For a moment I thought I'd get to see them, but then a cloud must have passed over the moon because everything darkened. One of the figures raised some sort of weapon, but I couldn't see what.

Time seemed to slow down – or maybe speed up – and the lake flowed towards me, carrying a shape in the water. It snagged itself against an overhanging tree, and I saw it clearly for the first time. A body, face down in the water.

Even from behind, it was unmistakeable. Squid – in his favourite jeans, and the purple hoody he always wears.

The scream of the Banshee filled everything – the air, the water, the earth, everything. It filled my chest, until I was screaming too.

Then I was back in the lighthouse, the Banshee even closer – almost touching me, her eyes locked on mine. She'd stopped screaming, but tears ran down her face; her hand reached up to touch mine. And despite the sheer horror of everything, I couldn't help but think again how beautiful she was.

I could still see the vision reflected in her eyes – the lake and the cave and the shadowy figures fighting on the far shore. The light grew brighter, burning away the shadows as if the moon were escaping from behind the clouds. And I knew that in another moment the shadowy figures would be revealed.

'Orla?'

A shout came from somewhere below. A woman's voice. Angry.

'*Orla!*' the voice shouted again.

I should probably have had a thousand thoughts, but the girl's hand was almost touching my face – and I only really had one: *Squid's gonna kill me when he finds out I've broken Banshee Rule* 3.

But Squid had other ideas. He slammed into me, flying out of nowhere, smashing into my side like a mini wrecking ball. I let out a grunt as he knocked all the wind out of me, and together we went crashing into and through the nearest window, glass exploding.

For all the use it did, we clung to each other as we fell, the sea below lurching towards us with horrifying speed. Knowing my luck, we'd have probably missed the massive ocean and smacked right on to one of the little jagged rocks.

But I woke up long before we got anywhere near them.