

Prologue:

There was darkness all around Katie. It was a deep, thick blackness that was far worse than the darkest night. It was a darkness that seemed to swirl around her like some angry, unseen spirit and it chilled her to her very core as it did so. The teenage girl was far from home...*where* exactly, she didn't know, but she had a gut feeling it was the farthest anyone could ever *be* away from their home. She was running blindly through what seemed to be an endless narrow tunnel, using her hands to guide her through the sightless void. She was trying desperately to catch up to someone...someone she loved...

She was in a small room now, lit by strange flickering lanterns on the stone walls that seemed to be floating in mid air. There was someone in a wooden chair in the center of the room...he was in terrible pain...

Sinister laughter filled the room – cruel, callous laughter that could only come from one who revelled in the suffering of others. The demonic laughter seemed to be all around her, taunting her, and she spun around, trying to find its true source.

When she finally found the owner, she instantly wished she hadn't. Only a few feet away, an almost translucently white face emerged from the inky black – one so hideous it made her skin crawl and her stomach churn uncontrollably. And inset within the gruesome face were glittering black eyes; eyes filled with hatred and malice; eyes that could drain the entire world of all of its beauty and happiness.

Katie wanted to scream, but nothing came out. She wanted to move, but her muscles were no longer taking orders from her brain. There was nothing she could do to help the figure in the chair and nothing she could do to get away...

Nightmares, Past and Present

Katie awoke in a cold sweat, startled by her own terrified scream. She sat upright in her bed and glanced wildly around the room, trying to reassure herself that she was okay. She let out the breath she had been holding in a big gush of air as relief swept over her. She was in her room and she was safe.

The silvery moonlight danced across the quilted blanket her grandmother had made for her when she was young, while the white, lace curtains rustled gently in the breeze allowed in by the open window. Dark shadows flitted back and forth across the opposite wall.

As she tried to slow her rapid breathing, she involuntarily shivered. It wasn't an especially cold night, and yet she felt as though a frigid wave was coursing through her body. She was chilled because of the nightmare she had just experienced, the same nightmare that had been disrupting her sleep for nearly two whole weeks. She had heard of recurring dreams, but this was getting ridiculous.

She glanced at the clock, its blue digits glaring at her from its perch on the night stand...4:00 a.m. She wrestled with her covers, trying to unwrap herself from the twisted mess and then stumbled from her bed. The cold wooden floorboards felt soothing against her hot skin as her feet touched the floor, and she tugged at her sweat-soaked pajama pants that were clinging mercilessly to her clammy legs as she tiptoed over to the large window across the room. She cringed and froze as a loose board gave a loud groan. The last thing she wanted to do was wake her mother up – who was a very light sleeper. (She was amazed that the frightened cry that had pulled her from her troubled sleep had not done so already.) After all, she was getting a little old to have her mommy come in and calm her after a silly nightmare!

She finally made it and situated herself on top of the writing desk under the narrow window pane, sitting cross-legged, facing the window. A haggard sigh escaped her lips as she gazed out into the night, filled with the voices of frogs and crickets serenading the sleeping city under the light of the almost full moon. The lamppost on the corner flickered lazily, intermittently illuminating the dark street in front of her house. It was silent and still, with no signs of life except for a scraggly black dog hunting for scraps to fill its shrunken stomach.

Katie scowled and ran a hand through her short, dark hair – currently drenched from her perspiration – which was a habit she adopted whenever she was nervous or agitated. That was what she was right now...agitated. What did it all mean? Why the same dream, night after night? And always around the same time? The most frustrating thing of all was the fact that she couldn't even *remember* the stupid dream – not even a split-second glimpse! The only thing she was left with, time and time again, was a residual cold feeling, deep in the pit of her stomach.

So how could she be so certain that it was the *same* nightmare, if she couldn't remember what it was about? She just *knew*. How, she couldn't hope to logically explain; she just *felt* that this was the case. The issue with this way of thinking was that she had never been one to go solely off of "gut feelings". But that was all she had at the moment.

Katie groaned. How could she hope to reach any sort of conclusion when she couldn't even remember what she had been dreaming *about*? All she knew was that it was different from anything she had experienced before. Normally, the only nightmares that plagued her were the ones about the night her father had died – although she couldn't quite shake the feeling that *these* dreams had something to do with him.

But *what* did it have to do with him?

The one and only thing she could be certain of, was that every single night she had woken up, chilled and panic-stricken because of a nightmare that would not leave her alone. It was the same show, just a different night. *This* she knew. Well, she knew that and, whatever images these terrors of the night contained, they must be utterly horrifying. They must be so frightening that her mind would not even allow her to recall what she had seen.

Could it be coincidence, or was there some underlying meaning; some unknown threat that she was blind to at the moment? She definitely wasn't usually one to put stock in such things as dreams of warning or significance...in fact she was the skeptic who enjoyed poking fun at all the suckers who ran out to waste their money on silly dream diaries or placing frantic calls to Silvia Brown. Up until this point, she had been quite content with the argument that dreams couldn't possibly hold any real relevance to reality at all. But...this was unlike anything she had ever experienced before, and she was beginning to have her doubts that perhaps those misguided, superstitious fanatics were onto something after all.

It was then that she felt something trickle down her clammy cheek, and she realized for the first time since she had woken up that she had tears in her eyes. She frowned and quickly brushed them away. Had she been crying in her sleep? She couldn't remember the last time she had really cried and wondered what could have been so terrible as to make her do so now. She cradled her head in her hands and tried desperately to call even a trace of her nightmare back to her memory. It was no use.

Lost in thought, she stared at the faint stars peeking out from the low haze over the city until her sight became blurred and the tiny dots merged together. Concluding that there were no answers to be found amongst the constellations, she sighed and went quietly back to her bed, settling back into the safety of her comforting blankets.

She mindlessly ran her finger along the stitched squares of the quilt and traced the patches of silvery light projected there from the window, still trying to contemplate the meaning of it all. Maybe she was making too much of this, maybe she wasn't. How could she possibly know what the real answer was?

If it wasn't for the fact that it was nearly five o'clock in the morning, she might have loudly vocalized her frustration – it would have certainly helped make her feel better.

As it was, she could only clench her teeth and give her pillow a couple of good punches. Whatever the answer, she didn't have any way of knowing if she was right or wrong, and it didn't look as though she would be getting any epiphanies anytime soon.

She sighed heavily and tried to squeeze her eyes shut. The night wasn't getting any younger, and, unfortunately, she had school tomorrow. As the long minutes passed and her mind whirled in aggravating, inconclusive circles, her eyelids began to grow heavy. It was about 6:00 when she finally drifted back to a troubled sleep.

The room was much brighter when she awoke again. She blinked and tried to focus her eyes once more on the clock. 7:15. It was later than she had intended – she must have hit the snooze – but she still had just enough time to get ready for school. She rolled out of her queen-sized bed and slid onto the dusty redwood floor. There was nothing she hated more than mornings – especially Mondays – and especially after a restless night of troubling dreams she couldn't even remember. This morning would definitely require coffee. Lots of coffee.

She sat motionless beside her bed, the blankets crumpled up on the floor around her, once again trying desperately to recall even a fragment of the nightmare that had been haunting her for the past two weeks. As frightened as it had left her in those early hours of the morning, now even the memory of that numbing chill was slipping away, as if all traces had been chased away by the coming of the sun. She groaned in dismay. It was hopeless.

She thought despondently that she would never have a decent night's sleep again if this was going to become a regular occurrence. If this kept up, she would soon have dark craters under her eyes, and, with her luck, some overzealous teacher would take their job as a mandated reporter way too seriously and call CPS on her mother on grounds of child neglect.

The sound of a loud voice brought her out of her thoughts and back to reality. It was her mother calling from downstairs.

"Are you getting ready, or am I going to have to come up there and dress you myself?!?"

The frustration in her mother's voice was very apparent, but Katie couldn't help but smile. It was kind of a morning ritual in the Matthews' household. No matter what she did, she always seemed to be running late.

"No, mom, I think I can handle it on my own, thanks. Don't worry, I'm coming! I still have" – she glanced at the clock...*crap!* – "uh, I still have five minutes!"

She must have been sitting there longer than she had realized. She quickly abandoned all thoughts of strange nightmares as she sprang into action. She had less than five minutes to get ready and into the car. That meant no shower today. At least she had gotten one last night before bed!

She jumped up, ran to her walk-in closet, and began frantically rummaging through the mess of clothes hanging precariously from hangers and strewn carelessly about on the floor. In times like these, although she would never admit it to her mom, she really wished she weren't such a slob! She pulled out a well-worn pair of blue jeans with a

patch covering the hole in the right knee. They had seen better days, but they were her most favorite pair in the whole world.

Then she clumsily hopped over to her dresser, pulling the pants on as she went, and narrowly missed crashing headlong into the standing lamp beside it. Flinging the dresser open, she pulled out the first shirt she saw and tugged the red tank top over her head while hurrying into the tiny, adjoining bathroom. She grabbed her tooth brush and cursed out loud as she accidentally squirted globs of toothpaste all over the cluttered counter in her rush. Something else to clean up later! She brushed her teeth, splashed warm, soapy water on her face, and quickly glanced in the mirror.

A pretty, fair-skinned girl of seventeen stared back at her. She had a small build and – much to her displeasure – had stopped growing at the height of 4 ft. 11, though she always insisted that she was “at least five feet tall.” (The last thing she wanted people to describe her as was “petite” or “cute.”) Her red-streaked black hair was cut in short, choppy layers, and, although a bit different from what was “in,” it complimented her round face. Her only regret about the hair was that she couldn’t go a week without some complete stranger commenting on her strong resemblance to Betty Boop. In fact, numerous family members had even given her memorabilia of the popular cartoon character for events like Christmas and birthdays, to which she had smiled and thanked them graciously, right before adding the unwanted items to the ever-growing pile packed away in a dusty box up in the attic.

The feature she was most proud of was the color of her eyes, which she had gotten from her dad. They were large, framed with thick dark lashes, and the kind of blue that consistently stopped people in their tracks.

Wrinkling her small, round nose in disgust, she ran her hands through her hair, trying to get in it in reasonable shape. She sighed and shrugged, deciding it was a lost cause. Finally, she snatched her make-up bag off of the counter – she didn’t wear much, but what little she did put on would have to wait until she got in the car.

She jogged back into her room, skidding on some Rolling Stone magazines scattered across the floor. She stopped briefly, long enough to slip on her black chunky boots over her mismatched socks, and to snatch up her red corduroy backpack off the desk under the window. Then, after one last glance around to make sure she hadn’t forgotten anything, she exited her room and went thundering down the stairs.

Her mom was standing in the kitchen, hands on her hips, giving her the obviously annoyed look she often had on these rushed school mornings. She glanced impatiently at the white gold watch – the one Katie’s father had given her years ago – that had taken a permanent residence on her slender wrist.

“*Why* on earth can’t you ever be on time in the morning?!? Honestly! You don’t even have time to eat! I just wish at least one time you could get out of here with a decent breakfast in your stomach! People are going to start thinking that I don’t feed you!”

Katie shrugged and grabbed the frosted pastries off the plate her mother had set on the counter for her.

“Oh, come on. Lighten up, mom! These are the breakfast of champions...choosy moms choose S’mores Pop-Tarts!” She grinned, as wide and cheesy as she could manage.

“Don’t you get smart with me, young lady! The way you eat, I’ll be surprised if you’re not a diabetic by age thirty! And don’t roll your eyes at me...you won’t stay young forever and one of these days all that junk food is going to catch up to you! Now *let’s go!!*” She still sounded exasperated, but a small smile was tugging at her lips. Katie smiled too. She knew her mom was never *really* angry with her, even if she acted like it.

Katie guzzled down a large mug of coffee, burning her tongue and almost choking in her haste, as her mother was pushing her out of the bright kitchen and through the tidy little living room. Katie plunked down the empty mug on the end table by the door as her mother shoved her outside and quickly locked the house, glaring at Katie as she did so. Then they clambered into an old, dented, white Toyota Camry, and sped off before Katie could even have enough time to shut the door completely.

Katie flipped open the visor and used the mirror to quickly put on her make-up, ignoring her mother’s typical warnings of poking her eye out with her eyeliner. When she was done, she turned her attention to the scenery flying past her window as they sped along the narrow street that connected to the main highway.

They lived in a semi-rural section of Elmont, Brooklyn, in the quaint little neighborhood of Cambria Heights. Technically, she lived in the Queens district, but it was Brooklyn where Katie attended high school. The drive took about twenty-five minutes, depending on traffic, and a couple minutes less than that if Katie took the subway instead of the car. There were definitely closer educational facilities, but it had been her parents’ school, and so it was unquestionable that she should attend there too.

Katie didn’t mind the drive and she was no stranger to travel, since she had originally been born in the upper east-side of Manhattan. Back then, they used to have to commute every weekend to visit her ailing grandmother in Brooklyn Heights. She had loved the big-city living while they resided in Manhattan, but she and her mom had been forced to relocate to their current residence when she was seven, a few months after the untimely death of her father because of the heavy financial strain that it had brought.

She still felt out of place sometimes in their little neighborhood, given that most of the other kids spoke with heavy Brooklyn accents, whereas she did not. For years she had attempted to adopt such an accent, just to fit in, but had finally given up when she heard herself on a class tape from a third grade play, and realized just how ridiculous she sounded.

As the tightly packed brownstone or stucco houses and small grocery stores turned into larger buildings, businesses, and over-crowded apartment developments, they merged onto the Grand Central Parkway and headed towards downtown Brooklyn. Katie could never quite get over how quickly the view changed on such a short drive.

Now, the moderately sized businesses morphed into towering, multi-storied buildings where tired-looking men and women with suits and briefcases buried their faces in paperwork and scurried from meeting to meeting.

Uniform brick houses sat about an inch apart, and lofty apartments riddled with graffiti and barred windows ran along the crowded street and sidewalks. There were suddenly hordes of honking taxis and angry pedestrians. Katie thought it rather sad how everyone seemed to be in such a rush, while they impatiently checked their wristwatches and scanned the street irritably for an empty cab. But she also loved watching the women dressed so fashionably in their designer labels and high heels; and the handsome men in their Armani suits and ties – the people that belonged to an elite class she felt she would never know, and didn't much care to anyway. It was like a whole different world, here in the very heart of the bustling city.

As Katie idly gazed out the window, she was suddenly hit in the face by the headliner that had, in recent months, begun to slowly come apart from the roof of the car. Annoyed, she tucked it back up under the visor. Someday they would get it fixed. The car, like the jeans she was wearing, had definitely seen better days. The once luxurious tan leather seats now had long cracks and tears in them, where the cream colored foam could be seen peeking out.

The windshield still had a large crack radiating from the spot where Katie's best friend Cooper had accidentally thrown an ill-aimed rock at it years ago. The dashboard, like the window, was cracked, from too many days in the sun. The backseat smelled of mildew from the rain allowed in by the back window that would only roll up halfway; and as much as her mother tried to keep it clean, it still smelled musky from the stray cats they just couldn't seem to keep out of it.

Katie attempted to casually turn the radio to the local rock station, only to have her mother reach over and change it back to Beethoven's 'Moonlight Sonata', playing on the classical station they had been listening to since they left their driveway.

"You know, they say that kids who listen to classical music get better grades in school. I can assure you it will make you smarter than that loud, obnoxious music you listen to!"

"Okay, mom." Katie rolled her eyes and sighed. "I wouldn't want to throw myself out of the running for an Ivy League college."

As much as she enjoyed spending time with her mom, she couldn't wait until she could get her own car. What was the point of being old enough to have a license, if you didn't even have a car you could drive? Then, she felt a stab of guilt because she knew these were selfish thoughts. She didn't have a car of her own because they didn't have enough money to buy one. Finances had been extremely tight ever since her father had passed away.

Her mom was doing the best she could, working as a struggling free-lance interior decorator. She was brilliant – she just hadn't been discovered yet (at least not by the right people). When she wasn't bringing home income from decorating, she worked part-time at the local long-term care facility. It was hard work, but it paid the bills. Katie glanced at her mother, studying her delicate features closely.

She had wispy brown hair tinged with grey streaks, although she was only thirty-seven. Her fair skin still had the flawless appearance of a twenty year old, although a few thin lines had begun to play around her tired brown eyes. As if she could feel Katie looking at her, she turned and gave her a quick but warm smile.

Katie loved it when her mom smiled; it didn't happen too often these days. She missed the days when her mom was happy – *really* happy, and carefree. That was before her father had died eleven years ago.

Her parents had met in their third year of high school. (The fact that she was the same age as her mother had been when she met the love of her life was not lost on Katie; in fact, it gave her the creeps.) They were both juniors, although her father, Greg, had been a year older than her mom. He was tall, tan and athletic, with messy, sandy colored hair and playful blue eyes. Talkative and easy going, he was always surrounded by a throng of friends and his last name had been doodled on more than a few girls' binders while they pictured their June weddings and pondered what their kids would look like. Julie was on the shorter side with a small frame, and – in her younger years – had thick, gorgeous chestnut hair that fell to the small of her back. Although she was quiet and typically had her nose in a book, she had been asked to Prom by over half of the males in her class.

As fate would have it, they both ended up on the track team, and they began dating after she had beaten his best time in the 100 meter dash, even though, as she would teasingly remind him, his legs were twice as long as hers. Both her beauty and her feisty spirit had captivated him, and he finally found the courage to ask her out a month later. Unable to say no to his down-to-earth attitude and irresistible charm, she accepted and they had been inseparable ever after.

That first year they were together, he had seen a white gold watch with diamond accents in a store window. He didn't have the money at the time, but he had vowed he would buy it for her someday. That day came on her eighteenth birthday, after they had both graduated high school. The following year, he gave her the only things he had yet to give: a promise of forever and a simple, but still gorgeous engagement ring.

Although elated with the prospect of marriage, they had decided in favor of a long engagement, to allow themselves the financial opportunity to both get through college. Four years passed and once they had graduated, it was just a couple of short months before they finally had their small wedding.

They had been happily married for a year when Julie became pregnant with Katie. They were both overjoyed; Greg, if it was possible, was even more ecstatic than his wife, and from the moment he laid eyes on Katie in the hospital, he was in love.

That day, many patients heard his joyful screams as he went running down the hospital corridor, yelling to everyone in earshot that he was the proud father of the most beautiful baby girl in the entire world. From that day forward, everyone had always commented on the amazing bond the two had, and she was without a doubt, "daddy's little girl" from day one.

Greg had graduated from high school as Valedictorian with a heavy interest in business and a knack for leadership, and he had continued on through college with even more determination and higher grades. He was smart and knew how to make the right connections with the right people. Just a year after finishing college with only a bachelor's degree, he became the youngest CEO ever of an up-and-coming pharmaceutical company that had set up its main headquarters in the city. The job brought home very good money, which allowed the young couple to purchase a nice home in Manhattan's Upper East Side. The only downside was the constant networking that a budding company required, which resulted in him embarking on numerous business trips around the globe. Katie would always cry when he left, but was quick to forgive him when he came home and bestowed upon her a special toy or souvenir from his travels.

The night tragedy struck their little family would forever stick in her mind, like the unpleasant odor of mold and cat urine that would forever linger in their car. She had only been six and a half years old, but she could still remember the smell of the spring flowers in the small, iron-fenced garden of their old house, mixed with the aroma of burgers on the grill, as if it were yesterday.

Her father had originally planned on attending the annual Spring Gala put on by his company. However, he had diverted from this plan at the last minute because her mother was sick with a cold and he hadn't wanted her to go out in the chilly night air. A cold breeze still remained, as if winter weren't ready to move over for spring just yet.

Katie and her mom were playing with her toy horses in the spacious living room in front of a pleasant, crackling fire. Suddenly, three large men dressed all in black and wearing (what Katie would later think of as rather cliché) black ski masks, came bursting in the front door. By the looks of them, nothing good was going to come of this unexpected visit. Katie screamed and her mother grabbed the fire poker, raising it menacingly as if daring the intruders to come closer.

At first, the masked men appeared startled, obviously expecting an empty house. Then, to Julie's horror, the terrifying trio all raised small handguns, pointing them at her and her precious daughter.

"Now, if you two will just behave, everything will be okay," the middle, tallest man said in an attempt to calm his accidental victims. His voice sounded vaguely familiar.

"If you get out of my house, everything will be okay," her mother replied brazenly, pulling her daughter closer to her with her free arm.

"I'm afraid we can't do that just yet...once we get a few things..." and he lowered his gun and turned to face the mantel above the fireplace.

He ran his hand almost lovingly over an old Persian vase decorating it – one of the many priceless items Greg had been collecting over the years from his countless expeditions out of country. Julie saw her opportunity and took it, lunging suddenly at the despicable intruder and brandishing the poker like a club. Unfortunately, the man was quicker than she had anticipated and caught it before it hit its mark. They wrestled momentarily until he got the better of her, knocking the weapon from her hands; but not before she managed to pull his sweaty mask off. Staring back at her in mixed anger

and fearful surprise was Greg's long time friend and business partner, Donovan Valentine. Julie's face mirrored his look of astonishment, unable to believe what she was seeing.

"Donovan?" She blinked in surprise. "How can you do this?" she gasped in horror. "I know that you've had some hard times lately – Greg mentioned something about marital problems and your gambling debt – but there are other ways to fix that! There's counseling and help groups for those kinds of things. And you have *us*, Donovan! You could have just asked for help! We're your friends! How many Thanksgivings have you spent at our house? How many times..."

"Shut up!" he growled. "Just shut up! You don't understand – I have no choice!" he whispered, his voice full of emotion. Donovan shoved her hard and she landed in a heap on the ground. "I owe a lot of money to the kind of people that you wouldn't want to meet in a dark alley. They don't exactly have self-help groups for that, now do they? Desperate times call for desperate measures, Julie. I'm sorry, I just don't have any other options."

She glared up at him with loathing and spite in her eyes. "You *always* have a choice, Donovan. Leave. Go home and find some other way to get your money. You're better than this!"

But he shook his large head and looked at her almost apologetically. "I'm afraid I can't do that, Julie. I wish I could." He sighed in frustration. "I didn't want it to come to this; you have to believe me when I say that. You weren't supposed to be home. The two of you have been like family to me..." He slammed his fist on the mantel, jarring the priceless items resting there.

"Christ, Julie! Why did you have to pull my mask off? Don't you understand? You would've been okay...but now...now you know who I am..." and now he turned to the other two men who had kept their guns raised, barrels still trained on the woman and child. He had the look of a cornered dog that had no choice but to attack. He looked revolted as he uttered the order in dismay. "Kill them."

At that moment, Greg, completely unaware of the terrifying intrusion, entered back into the kitchen. He was holding a plate of juicy hamburger patties and merrily whistling his favorite tune. His face, reddened by the heat from the grill, instantly was drained of its color as he stared, panic-stricken, at the unbelievable scene unfolding in his living room. His business partner and two masked men had small handguns trained on his beloved wife and daughter. It didn't make sense. It didn't seem real. Things like this didn't really happen to people, did they?

The plate shattered as it hit the floor, alerting the murderous robbers of his presence. The shorter one on the right cocked the hammer with determination to complete his task. Without giving it a moment's thought, Greg yelled and dived in front of Katie, just as a deadly shot rang out and the bullet meant for Katie went ripping into his chest.

Pandemonium broke out as Katie, screaming and sobbing, ran into the kitchen and frantically dialed 911. Meanwhile, her mother had again hurled herself at the attackers and was savagely clawing and punching their once-upon-a-time friend, Donovan, who

had looked thoroughly sickened as he watched Greg sink to the floor. One of his henchmen was trying to get a good shot at Julie without hitting his boss, while the other was checking to make sure Greg would not be getting up again before searching frantically for the little girl that had bolted from the room.

Amidst all of the chaos, glorious sirens could be heard screaming towards their two-story house. Donovan made a quick decision – clearly too appalled at what they had done to continue with the plan – and shoved Julie away from him. He motioned to the other thieves and they ran out the back door and jumped over the short fence, pushing past Katie in their haste to make it back to freedom – although later that night all three would be caught and carted off to jail.

Katie could still close her eyes and vividly see her mother sobbing hysterically over the crumpled body of her father, who would never again whistle that cheerful little song...

Katie jumped as the Camry's shrill horn came slicing through her thoughts. She looked up and saw her mother frowning at her, hand pressing firmly on the middle of the steering wheel.

"I swear, if you could stop daydreaming for two seconds...you're already late!"

Katie looked out the window in confusion and quickly realized that they were now parked in front of the school.

"Oh...sorry, mom; I'm going, I'm going." Katie tried to keep her voice even, afraid that it would betray the emotion her recollection had evoked. Her mom would worry if she knew she still experienced flashbacks from that night – even if they were just a product of her recent nightmares – and Julie certainly didn't need any more stress in her already much-too-chaotic life.

"Okay. Well, have a good day, alright? I'll pick you up after school."

"Sounds good. I'll meet you out front."

Julie smiled and kissed her cheek. "Be careful, honey. I love you."

"Yeah, I love you too, mom."

Katie fumbled with the stubborn seatbelt and stumbled out of the car. She threw her heavy backpack over one shoulder, avoiding her mother's disapproving glare at this action (she had already informed Katie of her fear that her daughter would become a lopsided hunchback if she continued the bad habit), and headed towards the entrance of Midwood High.

As she rushed up the concrete steps, taking them two at a time in her haste, Katie had just enough time to notice the bright Autumn sun had become obscured as black-grey, foreboding clouds gathered in the heavens. How fitting, it seemed, that the weather itself had darkened to match her mood. Katie sighed as she jogged down the empty hallway lined with lockers, praying that her tardiness wouldn't land her yet another meeting with the principal. If anything could make her mood worse, it would be that.

Heading towards the door to her math class, she decided she would have to do some serious thinking about the recurring nightmares that had begun to affect her daily

life so adversely. No matter what, she had to get to the bottom of it soon, because if she didn't, it was going to drive her insane.

*****This concludes the prologue and first chapter...the novel in its entirety can be purchased on C.M. Reber's website: www.cmreber.com - check out the "upcoming events" tab to find out about all book signings and promotional events! The book can also be purchased on www.Amazon.com, www.Barnesandnoble.com, and also at The Mountain Bookshop in Sonora. Ebook versions are available for all ebook readers*****