

## Chapter 1

She wasn't crazy. She knew she wasn't. Well at least, most of the time she did. Then there were moments like this when she wondered, which is what spurred her to repeat that reassurance in her head. *She wasn't crazy.*

The roads were a bit icy today, so the troubled girl drove with caution down the busy city street. It was 7:30, she had worked late again. Her stomach growled, reminding her that all she'd had for lunch was a small homemade ham sandwich and tea... and that had been nearly 6 hours ago. She considered stopping for fast food on the way home, but quickly changed her mind when she remembered the past due notices still sitting on her desk.

Medical bills had been piling up ever since the accident. She wasn't too keen to be driving on the icy roads after sunset, but it wasn't like she could just stop going to work because the seasons changed. After spending two days in the ICU and three months in recovery, driving had become one of her least favorite things to do, favorable conditions or otherwise.

She remembered how bright the sun had been that morning, as she slowed to a stop in front of a red light. "Green doesn't mean go," she repeated to herself once again as she waited, thinking of that bright glaring sun and the sound of glass breaking, as the metal of her car folded in on her. When the light turned green she looked carefully in each direction. The car behind her honked, but she ignored them. "Green means proceed with caution," she continued.

That was what the insurance agent had told her, when he asked her how it happened. She repeated it both ironically and as a serious reminder, that just because your light says it's safe to go, doesn't mean it actually is. The man who had hit her had been drinking, and was driving east, directly towards the sun. She shuddered at the choppy, blurred memory. It had been the most god awful sound she had ever heard, and then there was silence.

She hardly remembered anything at all after that; there were only fragments of images and sounds as she was raced to the hospital. She had been conscious, but completely disoriented. The pain in her head and legs blurred her vision, and she vaguely remembered vomiting on an EMT. She felt a bit bad about that.

*A drunk driver, at 9 a.m.* The tired girl shook her head as her silver Toyota rolled steadily down the highway at 55mph. The idea of someone getting wasted that early still made her brain turn summersaults. *Maybe they were just headed home after a crazy Monday-nighter.* She thought sarcastically, rolling her eyes as she flicked her right turn signal and moved into the exit lane.

Her job at the restaurant didn't have any benefits, and she couldn't afford her own health insurance. The driver of the other car hadn't been much help either, considering that he not only had a revoked drivers' license, but no insurance of his own. He didn't have any medical bills though, because he was able to get up and walk away with barely a scratch. She felt the familiar twinge of anger as it began to bubble up like a fire inside her chest.

She hated being a waitress, no, she *loathed* it, but it was the only job available to her right now and she couldn't just quit. The only benefit she'd managed to recover from the accident was that her car insurance covered five thousand in auto related injuries, and put the money down for her to get a new car. So at least there was that, but now there were the new car payments, and her old car had been completely paid off. She had been scraping by just fine until that asshole came crashing into her life.

Now there were the rest of the medical bills, the physical therapy, and to top it all off like a cherry on a shit sundae, there was *this*. She was *not*... crazy. There had to be an explanation for the sudden influx of dreams... or hallucinations... or something. She wasn't entirely sure *what* they were. It must have been the result of head trauma from the accident, but the doctors who ran her through an MRI and CAT scan insisted that there had been no brain damage aside from a very mild concussion, and that at this point it should not be causing her any problems.

It had all started as a mangled mess of a dream before she woke up in the ICU of the Marry-Rose Memorial hospital. It was a jumbled collection of events that happened so quickly it was almost as if they were all happening at once, but she knew it was a timeline.

Like fast forwarding through an old VHS at hyper speed, all the images ran into one and other too fast to really understand what was going on. There was no sound, and everything was moving by so fast it all looked a little fuzzy. There had been a few moments where it seemed like time was slowing down, and she spent a brief second or two in a real time event before things sped up again.

It *felt* like a memory, but she wondered if it only felt that way because the dream itself was a memory now. She couldn't stop thinking about it, and it hadn't ended there. If that had been it, she wouldn't have given it a second thought... even the doctors had said she may experience strange dreams for a short while. But that had not been it. Not. At. All.

Not only did she have these strange memory/dreams almost nightly, but they also came to her when she was *awake*, and that was the part that disturbed her. Sometimes it was just a flash in the back of her mind that seemed to come out of nowhere, but other times it was as if the dream itself was superimposed over reality – like a double exposure on a photograph.

She drove faster, watching as the needle on her speedometer climbed slowly upwards to exactly five miles per hour over the speed limit. She wouldn't go any faster than that, but her leg was begging her to get home just a little sooner. The accident had landed her with three fractures in her right femur, and a shattered tibia and fibula. She had a nice set of hardware in her lower leg now, including two plates and fourteen pins.

The doctors said that it would be possible to remove it eventually, but she was not too keen on having her leg sliced open again anytime soon – and besides that, she doubted she could afford it anyway. Her leg was mostly healed, but it would most likely be three or more years before the doctors considered removing the hardware- and even then there was no guarantee her leg would be

in proper working order. She figured it would probably be best for both her leg and her credit score to simply leave it in.

It always started out feeling fine in the morning, but by the evening after spending all day on her feet it would start to throb like she had knives stuck inside her leg. Pulling into the space in front of her studio apartment she yanked the parking brake and threw open the door.

Using the frame to pull herself out without putting too much weight on her leg, she locked the car and staggered towards her apartment. She glanced at the long, full length windows of the ground floor apartment as she passed and caught a glimpse of herself in the glass.

She wasn't a tall girl, only five feet and two inches. Well, 5' 1" and three quarters, but she preferred to round up. She had a small build and a thin frame, with long wavy dark brown hair that she ran a straightener through every day. Her eyes were a forest green with flecks of gold, outlined with a deep blue circle. She personally thought she looked rather average, with unimpressive cheek bones and eyes she felt were just a little too close together.

Most people seemed to disagree with her opinion though. Maybe she was just too stuck on the awkward pre-teen years to realize just how pretty she had grown up to be. Shrugging at her reflection, her personal opinion still stood strongly in her mind. Average. Nothing special, but nothing much she could complain about either. A white cat sitting on the windowsill watched her as she passed and headed for the stairs. *Damn stairs.* She thought as she stared up at them with disdain.

8 months ago she could walk up these stairs with ease, even with her arms full of groceries. She had chosen the 3<sup>rd</sup> floor apartment, even though it was fifteen dollars more per month, for the view and the vaulted roof with skylights. She enjoyed being able to lie in bed at night and stare up at the stars, and the small loft was always well lit in the day time, which was a bonus for all of her house plants. She took in a deep breath, preparing herself mentally for the climb, and sighed. *Just one step at a time,* she reminded herself.

It wasn't really the stairs that were the problem, it was her job. How did she end up as a waitress at The Purple Turtle pub again? Oh, now she remembered. She'd lost her nice, comfy desk job when management decided to cut costs at the lower level, and turned her paid position into an unpaid internship opportunity.

*"Sorry Nire, you're just not qualified for any of the other positions."* She mouthed mockingly as she turned a corner and began to climb the second set of stairs. She had only been working at the restaurant for three weeks before the accident. Mr. Anderson was kind enough to keep her position open for her when she was healthy enough to return, which had been nearly four months later.

*Damn.* Her leg hurt. She stopped for a moment and leaned against the railing, looking out over the parking lot. Her breath puffed out in front of her in a white mist, and little snowflakes were beginning to glimmer under the yellow light of the street lamps. If only she could have gotten the

bar tender position that opened last week when Michael quit. The tips from the bar were more than double what the waitresses got, but Melissa beat her out, having previous bar tending experience.

Taking another deep breath she began her ascent up the final stair case. *Damn*. She thought again, more urgently this time. *What is wrong with my life?* Everything had started going downhill when she was 13. She thought back to her childhood and how everything seemed so simple and perfect. She'd been happy, once. Her parents had enrolled her in some advanced art classes outside of regular school, the teachers had said that she showed real promise.

Then everything... fell... apart. Her mother had been diagnosed with stage four bone cancer the winter before she turned fourteen. After dealing with pain in her lower back for years she finally went to a medical doctor instead of chiropractors or massage therapists. The oncologist said that it was a decision that likely saved her life. He had been wrong, however.

Her dad had tried *so hard*. He took care of everything, her mom, her... the medical expenses. He had given it everything he had, and when she didn't make it he went down with her. She was only fifteen when her father came home with the news. He wouldn't speak, or even look at her. He just sat down silently, and shook his head. Nire knew what had happened, she didn't need his words to understand.

It was hardly six months later, just after her birthday that the rest of her world came crashing down. She had been spending the night with her friend, Jamie, when the phone call came in. He was three hours late picking up the next morning, and she had exclaimed "that must be him." Police said they had been calling each name in his address book trying to find the missing daughter when no one was found at home.

Her dad had been exhausted, depressed, and struggling to give Nire any amount of proper care while holding down two jobs. Jamie's mom, Denise, had been a friend of her mothers, and offered to take her off his hands for the night so that he could get some rest. He had gone out to a bar, made a new friend with Jack, and drove his car off the road and into the reservoir.

The police concluded it had not been a suicide, but Nire had already known that. He would never have left her, no matter how much he struggled, she knew that. The driver's side window was fractured, and he had not been wearing his seat belt. The police said that he had pulled the keys out of the ignition and attempted to use them to break the window, but he had just been too wasted to get out. She thought about her mom and dad as she fiddled with her keys.

She had been so *angry* with at him at first, for doing something so stupid and leaving her all alone, but she wasn't mad anymore. She had gone to live with her maternal grandmother after that, who'd helped her pay for some community college classes when she was 18. Then grandma started to run low on savings, so Nire moved out, got a job, and promised to pay her back for everything. She hadn't done that yet.

She reached the top of the stairs and pushed the key into the lock on her door. It stuck, like it always did, and she had to shake it a bit to coax it into turning. Pushing the door open with a huff, she walked inside and threw off her coat and boots, leaving them in a heap on the floor. Then shuffling over to the futon that she slept on, she collapsed.

*Fuck.*

She glanced over at her desk, and the small pile of papers with yellow and red print all over them. How in hell did they expect her to pay for all of this? She had earned \$15.25 an hour at her previous job. Now all she got was \$4.25 plus tips, which were tallied at the end of shift and split between all the waitresses and busboys equally. A nice concept, she thought, but hardly motivational.

Screw if she was more pleasant or a better waitress than Holly, who spent the majority of her shift sitting at the god damn bar flirting with drunk men and totally ignoring her section - which just happened to be right next to Nire's. So guess who always got waived over to their tables on the way by, when Holly was nowhere to be seen? That's right, she did. So at the end of the night, why in hell did Holly get the same amount in tips?

She let out a frustrated sigh and whacked the pillow to her right. Her internal dialogue had become more and more laden with curse words over the past few months. She never used to curse before. Her stomach let out another growl, reminding her she had still not eaten.

Shutting her green eyes tightly she fought back the urge to just pass out, and forced herself to stand. If she didn't eat something now, she'd wake at midnight with the shakes and she'd just have to get up and eat then.

She walked heavy footed to the kitchen area and pulled out a dry packet of ramen noodles. This had been her dinner for the last couple months. She could make herself another sandwich, but those were for work and she was running low on lunch meat.

Many places will give you a free meal if you work in the food industry, but The Purple Turtle only gave you half off. Granted \$3.50 -\$5.00 was a more than reasonable price for a nice lunch, but a week of sandwiches only cost about \$7.00 if she bought the cheap stuff, and Nire needed to save as much money as she could.

After a short deliberation she decided to heat up two packets of ramen, instead of one. Tearing open the flavor pouches, she emptied them into the large bowl of softening noodles and stirred. The scent of the salty beef flavored noodles smelled much better than it should have. She might as well have been eating cardboard as far as nutritional value was concerned, but artificially flavored broth was certainly a better option than starving.

Plopping an ice cube into the hot broth to help it cool and pouring a tall glass of milk, she wandered with the bowl and glass back over to her futon, sat them on the coffee table, and flipped on the TV. She didn't have cable, of course. She'd cancelled that along with her internet months

ago. But she did have an old pair of rabbit ears her grandmother had given her, that picked up exactly four and a half channels.

The half channel was usually the one she wanted to watch, of course. It played the more amusing sitcoms and prime time dramas, but no matter how she tried, it never came in all the way. Either she could see the picture and the sound was static, or the sound was clear and the picture static.

Not wanting to mess with it tonight, she flipped through the other four channels. One was the Spanish channel. Sometimes it played amusing soaps that, despite her inability to understand the words, were overly dramatic and funny to watch. Another was the basic local News channel which she watched mainly for the weather, the other was a public broadcasting channel of sorts, and the one she decided to watch tonight was the Education channel. They were currently showing a documentary on African cats, which was glazed over by a blanket of light TV snow and static.

When she was finished with her ramen she glanced back over at her desk again, but not to consider the stack of bills. She was looking at the other papers, stuffed in the back corner under a pile of crap she never seemed to be able to sort through. As much as she wanted to, she hadn't picked up a pencil to draw since before the accident. She had just been too stressed, too busy, and too tired.

Before her mom had been diagnosed, she had been signed up to take an advanced summer course before high school. The course was a necessary prerequisite for the private school she would begin attending come fall; The Lambeth Academy for the Artistically Gifted.

She had been so excited that she was going to be attending a private school that focused on art. Unfortunately her mother's cancer was discovered only weeks before she would be attending her first summer class, and it had to be cancelled. She was disappointed, but she understood. Private schools were expensive, and so was chemo therapy.

She'd always hoped that after her mom got better, she could take some summer courses on the side, but that never happened. The car that had been totaled in the accident 8 months ago had been her mother's. It was one of the few things that had been completely paid off and not repossessed or taken by the bank as collateral.

Her dad's truck had a loan against it for a loan he'd taken out to help pay for the deductibles, co-payments, and other expenses that the insurance didn't cover. After all was said and done, both of their life insurance policies combined only managed to pay off the rest of the bad debt, and her grandmother had paid for the funeral herself.

At 9:00 Nire flipped the channel over to the local news to check the weather report for tomorrow. *A hot bath right now would be great...* she thought. It was getting late though, and she was exhausted. *Maybe tomorrow.* It wasn't supposed to snow much tonight. She would not work a longer shift tomorrow, and she would go home when she was scheduled to. Then she could relax and take

a bath, before she was so tired she could barely convince her legs to get up so she could make ramen.

It was getting pretty cold in her apartment at nights now. She had to keep the heat down to make sure the electric bills weren't too high. She'd unplug the fridge if she didn't need it to keep the lunch meat and milk cold. The digital read out on the thermostat currently read 64. She flipped off the TV and stripped down to her underwear as she pulled out the futon. Sliding beneath the blankets that covered its surface, she nestled in and curled up into a ball.

"This sucks," she said quietly to herself as she closed her eyes.

She was standing still as the world sped by. Someone with yellow eyes seemed to be present frequently as everything rushed passed her. Suddenly the rush stopped. She was sitting next to someone, her eyes were closed. She could feel the heat of his hand as it hovered in front of her eyes, blocking her from seeing something dramatic going on in front of her.

She could hear shouting, and the thud of someone being knocked to the ground and then dragged away. The sounds were distant to her. All she could really think about was his hand, inches from her face, and how close it was to touching her.

In her mind she leaned forward, though she didn't actually move. The sounds had stopped a while ago, and she opened her eyes. His hand was gone, and he was staring at her with a raised brow, giving her a curious and confused look. Her heart beat sped up and she blushed deeply, realizing her eyes had been closed for much longer than necessary.

The world sped up. She lost all sense of time as everything rushed passed her. Someone with yellow eyes gazed down at her. He looked troubled. She felt disoriented and confused. He mouthed her name, but she couldn't hear him, it was as if the entire world was on mute. He leaned down and pressed his mouth to hers, and for a brief, sudden moment, *everything* was clear.

Her eyes shot open and she lost the clarity she'd had only moments ago. She scrambled to find it again, searching the depths of her dream for that epiphany that pulled all the shattered pieces together... but it was gone. She wasn't entirely sure why, but the man with yellow eyes who looked rather monstrous did not bother her. He seemed as though he should be rather frightening, but she felt comfortable with him as if he were some long lost friend.

She sat up and sighed. Everything just seemed so... familiar. None of it seemed new or surprising, like a movie you had seen many times as a child, but were watching again for the first time in years. The dreams weren't so bad really; it was just when it happened while she was awake. She'd seen things a few times in the kitchen at work; people in gray and white uniforms running around with dishes and plates.

She wasn't sure how long she would be able to keep this up. She had called and followed up with the doctors a few times about the waking dreams, but they always said she was probably just suffering from stress more than anything. Stress didn't *begin* to describe what she felt right now.

She wanted to cry, the ending of the dream had upset her. Bringing her knees up to her chest, she put her arms around them and tucked her chin to her chest.

Mark crept into her mind. They had dated for a while, and after the accident he was the only person who came to visit her in the hospital aside from her grandmother. He tried to keep things friendly between them for a while, but it hadn't worked out very well. She was surprised to see him at the hospital, but all in all she was happy he was there. Her grandmother had called and told him what happened; Nire hadn't told her they'd broken up.

Mark had been the one to call it off between them a few weeks prior. He wanted to be friends, and Nire believed him. He put an effort into calling her to make sure she was ok, but even though she agreed with the breakup, she still felt pretty torn up about it.

She wanted him as a friend. She would have wanted anyone as a friend right about now. It had been so hard for her to get close to anyone after her parents died, and most of her relationships just fell away after changing school districts. Jamie still called every now and then, but she had gone to an out of state college after high school, so it was hard to keep in touch.

Her chest hurt. That was another thing the doctors couldn't explain. She had always had a mild aching feeling in her chest, but it never caused any problems so she never mentioned it to her parents. It was just something she'd always lived with, well, for half her life at least.

Barely noticeable at first, she thought she simply had a problem with heartburn as a child. It had been growing steadily worse since she was about 12, so that was another thing the doctors checked out while she was there. They couldn't find anything wrong with her heart, lungs, ribs, esophagus, or anything else either.

The pain was a mystery, and the doctors suggested that it might be referred pain from her injuries. She found that hard to believe, considering she'd felt it well before the accident, just not nearly as strongly.

It wasn't just a mild ache anymore. It was a hot rock buried in her chest, and it heated up to molten lava every time she had those dreams. The dark apartment just felt so... *empty*.