

Another dream. Ever since her sixteenth birthday, bizarre dreams of terrifying alien-like creatures haunted Amber. Their formless, blue, jagged glass bodies that always floated and their eyeless sockets that bore deep into her soul appeared frightening enough. But in every dream their mouths hung open constantly, revealing sharp razor like teeth ready to sink into her flesh. Usually, beautiful far-off places complete with friendly wildlife filled her dreams. But these other dreams seeped into her waking life, tormenting her relentlessly.

Although she desperately wanted to get to the source of the matter, the calendar reminded her that an especially important English paper needed to come first. Fortunately for her, only seven hours remained before the start of a research-filled weekend. But with her brother around, time became her worst enemy.

Chris always supported any hobbies Amber enjoyed doing, but as she grew older, he became snooty and overly protective—more than she wanted. Since their mom, Holly, always took extra shifts at the hospital, Chris' near constant presence provided a way to lessen any of Holly's concerns. Amber found no fault with her mom because of her frequent absences. Holly worked as a nurse, but her income barely made ends meet to support the entire family and keep their beautiful Victorian house. Due to the strenuous financial circumstances, Chris searched for a job as soon as he graduated. He later became a mechanic and received quite a bit of money for the type of work he did. For as long as Amber remembered, her family life consisted of only the three of them. She knew that her dad lived elsewhere, but her mom never went into much detail about it aside from the fact that their relationship didn't work out and he lived with his family.

After contemplating her plans for the weekend, Amber swung her legs over the side of the large antique bed—her bare feet brushing the cold wood floor. She shuddered as chills went up her spine. Suddenly, she felt something warm and soft rub up against her arm. Amber turned her head and smiled down at a rather large creature whose fur was brown and black striped. Her beloved cat, Sphinx, stood on her bed, vying for her attention. She remembered getting the friendly feline when she was only four years old.

The occasion when she got him was a little fuzzy. A few times she asked her mom why he never seemed to grow or even age, but her only response was that Sphinx was a special breed of Maine Coon and they were naturally large cats. But Sphinx was unlike any cat Amber ever saw. He never ran around the house in the middle of the night as most cats should, and he was generally quiet. Those who knew the family immediately saw an attachment between the cat and his mistress, but despite their connection, he was the family cat and only occasionally looked to Amber's mom and brother for attention. Often, Amber saw Sphinx as a great listener and confided many secrets in him—mostly those involving her bizarre dreams.

Amber watched as the cat lazily walked away and nestled down into her now empty pillow. His bright blue eyes slowly closed. She shook her head and quietly laughed to herself. Casually looking away from the cat, she noticed her alarm clock sitting on her nightstand. Her eyes widened in panic as the black digital clock glared 7:30. School began in less than thirty minutes! Amber scrambled around the room, shoving books into her bag. She threw on a pair of jeans and a plain t-shirt before running out of the room. The sounds of her pounding feet echoed throughout the house as she made her way down the old wooden stairs. Amber almost jumped the last few steps when Chris came around the corner, a steaming mug of coffee in his hand.

Chris held the mug out, preventing the hot liquid from splashing onto his hand, and exclaimed, "Whoa! Amber, slow down!"

Amber latched onto the banister to steady herself and replied, "Sorry, Chris. I'm going to be late. Why didn't anyone wake me?"

Chris brought the mug to his mouth but then paused. He lowered it slowly, staring at Amber with a confused expression, "We thought you were already awake."

She lowered her eyebrows in confusion and continued staring at Chris, "What would make you think that?"

"Mom and I heard you talking, we figured it was Sphinx," he replied, his last words muffled by the mug.

Uncertain of how to react, Amber fidgeted nervously where she stood. She never talked in her sleep before or if so, no one ever mentioned it. It made her curious as to why it would suddenly happen now, "It hasn't been happening a lot, right?"

"Today was the first I heard, I don't know about mom, though," he replied, starting toward the living room. "Don't worry, I didn't hear anything you said."

His last words comforted Amber a little. If Chris knew what she dreamed about, he would undoubtedly call a psychiatrist. Brushing off the encounter, Amber made her way toward the kitchen where she found her mom making lunches. Holly stood by the counter in her pajamas while her blond hair threatened to fall from its messy bun. Amber grabbed a pastry from the counter then made her way to the table. Sitting down, she watched as her mom finished.

Sleep deprivation masked Holly's beautiful face, and a large yawn revealed rows of perfectly white teeth. "Hi honey!"

Amber smiled. She always admired her mom for all her hard work. Sometimes she felt guilty for not doing enough around the house like Chris. Amber watched as her mom wearily walked over to the table with a mug of hot coffee. Strands of hair danced in the light breeze. Holly sat down next to her daughter, her pale blue eyes meeting Amber's green eyes.

Amber shifted uncomfortably in her chair and replied, "Morning, Mom."

Concern filled Holly's eyes, and she placed a delicate, caring hand on Amber's shoulder, "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, just tired. I haven't been sleeping well, I guess," Amber's voice trailed off as her eyes glanced away from her mom.

Holly's thin eyebrows raised at her daughter's response. She knew Amber better than anyone—including her secretive poses. "Amber, what's wrong?"

Amber reflected back on last night's dream. That dream consisted of two creatures instead of the usual one. Hatred emanated from them both as their cold bodies seemingly wrapped around her, suffocating her mind in a frozen tundra. But in the midst of their icy grasp, human faces appeared in her line of sight—familiar faces at that. No matter how hard she tried, she couldn't remember why. Amber peered back at her mom whose expression was a mixture of concern and curiosity. A small smile formed at the edges of Amber's lips. "I've just been having bizarre dreams. It's really nothing, Mom."

Holly put her coffee down and shoved it aside, giving Amber her undivided attention. Amber heaved a great sigh. She wanted to tell her mom about the strange dreams, but even she found them difficult to comprehend let alone explain. Besides, burdening her mom with such trivial things seemed too selfish. Holly saw Amber's hesitation and decided not to press the matter further. She knew Amber always came to her in her own time. Her eyes glanced at the large clock on the wall, "This can wait another time. Right now, you need to get to school."

Amber shot out of her daze as she bolted from her seat, "School!"

“Relax, I’ll take you,” Chris announced, coming in with a now empty mug, “I have to head to work, anyway.”

Suspicious of his sudden generosity, Amber took her backpack from the hook on the wall and replied, “Thanks, Chris, but I can just walk. It’s no big deal.”

Chris rolled his eyes and grabbed his keys. “I insist, it’s not like it’s out of my way.”

Amber nodded, getting up from her chair. Holly quickly pulled out a hair tie and started pulling Amber’s hair back in a pony-tail, “Mom, my hair’s fine. You’re going to make us both late!”

Chris chuckled at the regular morning routine. Holly always disliked seeing Amber’s hair covering her face, but Amber loved it. Her hair provided a shield to hide from judging eyes at school. Straightening his posture, Chris’ tone became mildly serious, “She’s right, Mom. We need to get going.”

Holly sighed in mild frustration and let Amber go, her dark brown hair bouncing freely in her wake. Chris already left the house before Amber muttered a quick goodbye to Holly. She raced outside into the cool, mid-September morning. She loved this time of year in Wisconsin. Not too hot or cold—just right according to Amber. She looked around her at the other Victorian houses on her street. Fall decorations adorned each one, and in just a few weeks Amber envisioned her street littered with the forgotten candy of the trick-or-treaters. She eagerly looked forward to that time of the year as the high school always put on the best Halloween party in all of Madison. It was a modest party compared to those of surrounding high schools, but it was just the right size for Amber.

Chris honked the horn of his silver pickup truck and poked his head out from the window. “You coming, Miss Dreamer?”

Amber laughed and then shook her head. “Can’t I admire the beautiful fall surroundings?”

Impatiently, Chris glanced around the area, not seeing her interest, “Yeah, beautiful. Can we go now?”

She rolled her eyes and hopped in the truck. The trip usually lasted only ten minutes—five if Chris drove. Amber tried striking up a conversation with him, but for some reason, his mind seemed far away. This seemed abnormal to her. Occasionally she stole a glance, but every time his expression remained the same—frozen in a state of concentration. Something bothered Chris, but just like Amber, he never expressed his problems. She always figured that commonality made them closer as siblings. Soon the truck crawled up to the curb—Chris peered out the window, making sure nothing hit his vehicle. Amber stifled a laugh. Of all the guys she knew, only Chris treated his truck in such an overprotective way. When it rolled to a stop, Amber jumped out.

Chris rolled down the passenger window as Amber started for the school’s doors, “Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do!”

Amber turned back and smiled as she opened up her arms in a challenge. “Then that should give me plenty of room!”

Chris stayed a while longer, watching his little sister enter the building. He put his hand on the gear shift as his expression grew solemn. He closed his eyes for a moment trying to brush a thought away. “Amber, you have no idea.” As Amber walked into the school, a feeling of dread instantly overwhelmed her. Students began walking into their classrooms, nearly emptying the hallways. She looked at the clock on the wall—a few minutes remained before the final bell would ring. Adrenaline coursed through her system as she ran through the halls, not caring about the rules.

With her mind so focused on getting to her English class, she accidentally collided with the last group of people she wanted to see. Books and papers fell out of her bag and scattered everywhere as Amber landed on the ground. She looked up to see James, his younger brother Jacob, and their friend Adam. The poster students for the high school, as Amber often liked to joke. In the eyes of the teachers and students, this trio epitomized perfection. But Amber saw, behind their façade, cowardly bullies.

James smirked at Amber's pitiful appearance, "Well, it looks like someone's going to be late. What's the rush, Amber? Is there a ghost behind you?"

Amber looked away from him as they laughed. She had grown accustomed to crossing paths with these boys. They always made fun of her for her unusual interests. Of course, their latest amusement came from the strange images from her dreams which they saw her sketching in her notebook. That just added to their fun. Still on the ground, Amber began collecting her papers and books. Her hands shook with anger as she shoved the papers in the bag.

Jacob kicked some straggling papers out of her way, "There's no point in hurrying now; you're already going to be late."

Amber put the last book in her bag as the final bell rang. She stood up, dreading the inevitable scolding from her teacher. Suddenly, a strange wave of confidence overcame her. "Guess we're all going to be late then."

Surprised, Jacob narrowed his eyes slightly. Amber never retaliated in any way before. Unfortunately, this just gave James more ammunition. "Don't worry about us, freak. We've got the teachers wrapped around our little fingers." Amber knew that James had stayed back a year. A devious smile formed at the corners of her lips as she began walking away, "Let me know how that works out for you when you get a job—that is, if you ever graduate."

James came up behind her, grabbed her backpack, and jerked her back. Pushing her against the lockers, he growled, "You may be the smartest kid in school, but remember your place. You're just a loser, Amber, and nothing more."

A wave of relief swept over Amber when a teacher came out into the hall. He heard the commotion and broke James' vice grip on her, "What's going on?"

James saw some papers sticking out of her backpack and quickly snatched them, "She tried to steal my English paper, Mr. Turner."

Amazed at his blatant lie, Amber gave her side of the argument. "What? No, I didn't! That's my paper. I was going to turn it in before James attacked me."

Not even checking the paper, Mr. Turner chuckled, "I highly doubt Mr. Colbert would be so violent. You must have provoked him."

"Oh, like he needs any provocation!" she hissed taking them all by surprise.

Mr. Turner raised his eyebrows at Amber. "I think Principal O'Connell would like to have a word with you." "Not again," whispered Amber, recalling back her previous visits to his office.

As Mr. Turner walked Amber toward the principal's office, she turned back and saw James crumple up her paper. He smiled and said in the most innocent tone, "I hope you can get your paper done, Amber."

Amber stopped suddenly. Mr. Turner grabbed her arm as she struggled to get free. Another outburst of anger erupted. "You know what, James? One day you will need a freak like me—one day you'll end up in a sticky situation, and I won't be around to help you!"

The teacher stared at Amber in shock. "Miss Oak, are you threatening Mr. Colbert?"

Amber looked back at the shocked faces. "Not if it comes true, sir."

The teacher forcefully led Amber away, muttering something unintelligible under his breath. Amber's heart pounded as she got closer and closer to the principal's office. Getting in trouble with the principal never really bothered Amber; she only worried about her mom and brother's reaction. Talking with the principal went as Amber expected. He rubbed his temples, trying to rid himself of an oncoming headache that always came whenever she sat in his office. Instead of reprimanding her as Mr. Turner had done, Principal O'Connell found it a waste of time after her first four offenses. With tired eyes, he looked at Amber and asked in a resigned tone, "Who should I call this time?" Amber felt a twinge of guilt at the thought of interrupting her brother and mom. Since her mom picked her up the first four times, she thought it best to give her a reprieve. Writing down his number, she slid the paper across the desk. "Just call my brother."

As the principal picked up the phone and began dialing the number, he looked at Amber with eyes full of disappointment. "You're a really smart kid, Amber. Please don't waste your life by making foolish choices."

*Since when is standing up for yourself a foolish choice?* thought Amber grimly as she crossed her arms.

About ten minutes after getting the call, Chris came to pick her up. Amber waited outside the office. Chris and Principal O'Connell's voices resounded loudly throughout the abandoned hallway. When Chris emerged from the office, he seemed even more upset than Amber suspected. Amber followed him down the hall, grateful that his anger came from the conversation with the principal. As they left the school, Chris muttered something about taking the rest of the day off from work and wanting to get to the bottom of these suspensions.

As Chris drove home, his facial expression grew even more severe than earlier that morning, "Amber, the principal said if this happens again you'll be expelled."

Despite the fact her principal thought she instigated the whole encounter, Amber knew she had done the right thing. "It wasn't my fault."

He sighed in slight irritation, then replied, "Can you tell me your side of the story? I know you worked hard on that paper and I know you didn't steal anything from that James kid."

Amber pulled her knees in toward her chest. "James did his usual thing and called me a freak. He didn't like how I stood up to him, so he pushed me against a locker. Mr. Turner came out, and James lied to him, saying that I stole his paper. I got mad and yelled at James, saying that he might find himself in a sticky situation that only a freak like me could help with. They took it as a threat."

As Chris parked the truck in the driveway, he turned and stared at Amber. Concern filled his face, and his eyes grew wide. For the first time in her life, Amber saw her brother speechless. She turned toward him, tears slowly falling down her cheeks. "Maybe he's right...maybe I am a freak."

He shook his head from his daze and gave her an apologetic smile, calmly replying, "No, Amber, you're not. You're smarter and braver than he is, which is what makes him feel so insecure."

Releasing her grip on her legs, Amber turned toward her big brother. "That's funny; when he threw me against the lockers, I felt pretty insecure."

He unbuckled his seatbelt and started opening the door. "I know it doesn't seem it right now, but life's got a funny way of showing us how strong we really can be. Come on, Mom's going to want to hear about this."

While Amber nervously relayed the story to her mom, James and his brother sat at their home concocting a devious plan for three unfortunate fourth grade boys. In the last few weeks, James caught these young kids throwing mud at his new sports car. Instead of dealing with them like a mature young adult, he decided to take revenge. Unlike most of James' plans, Jacob saw this plan only ending badly, possibly even in injury. This was only part of the reason why Adam decided not to join in on his friend's fun. But unlike his friend, Jacob found no way to successfully argue. James' plans always worked out in the end. Jacob watched from a distance as James spoke to the parents about taking their children off their hands for a bit. Unsurprisingly, these parents knew of James Colbert and his excellent reputation around the town. They even seemed relieved at his kind, spontaneous babysitting offer. He then approached the children and cleverly reeled them into his trap. They followed James toward the woods. Jacob followed closely behind becoming, increasingly paranoid about the whole idea.

About ten minutes later, they came to a large, barren field. Typically, tall, weedy grass filled the area and spread as far as the eye could see, but frost had slowly crept in. Everything looked dead, including the trees. The children grew wary of what James told them regarding a secret Halloween surprise and looked around nervously. When they reached an old, partially dilapidated building, the children became eerily quiet. They stopped and stared at the creepy structure, bricks and glass shards haphazardly strewn about everywhere.

Noticing their sudden hesitation, James' gestures became wild with excitement. "Oh, come on! It's no big deal."

"I've heard about this place. My mom told me it wasn't safe," a young red-headed boy stuttered, looking nervously to his other friends.

A sly smile flashed across James' face. "Well, she doesn't know about the huge candy stash we have in there. You want to get ahead of everyone on Halloween, right, Caleb?"

Caleb fearfully looked to his friends. They too knew about the dangers of this place. He hesitantly looked back to the building. "I guess it's okay."

James smiled and glanced at his brother, who seemed rather unsettled about this whole plan. However, James quickly shot him a warning look before replying to the boys, "There's no time to wait, let's go in!"

James and his friends often visited this location. They never used it as a place to pull a prank, but rather as their own little secluded hideaway. Rumors flew around the surrounding towns about this building and what it once was used for. But the boys never really paid any mind to those. History merely told them the building acted as a hospital of sorts years ago. The forgotten furniture and medical equipment disturbed them a little, but they found no way to explain it. As James hopped over fallen chairs and carts, he completely ignored the other surroundings. The children, on the other hand, trembled with terror—yet at the same time their new discovery completely fascinated them.

"Hurry up!" James called impatiently.

Jacob hid his nervous glances from his brother, not daring to ruin his excitement, but an uncomfortable feeling in the pit of his stomach warned him of ensuing danger. Jacob started looking off to the side, waiting for an unexpected part of the prank to come, but something else

caught his attention. He slowed down by a doorway and stared in, his face growing pale. He gulped and nervously called to his brother, “Dude, you’re going to want to see this.”

James, annoyed by the interruption, turned around and stared at Jacob. But when he saw his expression, he quickly changed his attitude. James went to the doorway as the children stood far back in fear.

Knowing how terrified the kids were, Jacob wanted to avoid any unnecessary panic. Through a fake smile, he whispered to his brother, “Wasn’t this room caved in before?”

Then James nodded silently, completely amazed at the now empty room. Impossible! This single word flashed across both of their minds. Only hours had passed since they had last visited the building and rubble, among other things, blocked the entrance. Removal of the debris would require a small tractor, but now the room sat entirely empty. Being the daredevil of the two, he bravely entered—curiosity and adrenaline driving him.

James nodded his head, trying to convince himself more than the others. “This is actually kind of cool.”

They cautiously entered the windowless room as the children backed away from the room. Jacob scanned the room, trying to figure out its possible use long ago. From what he could see, no fixtures or even traditional outlets marred the walls. The clean floor appeared vacant of the memory of dragged equipment or bed frames. He quietly moved over toward James. “Something’s not right. We shouldn’t be here.”

Irritated, James sighed and whispered through gritted teeth, “Shut up! Don’t blow this!”

Jacob rolled his eyes as he grew even more uncomfortable with the room. One of the little boys saw the look on Jacob’s face and began to back away. His heart began to race as he stammered, “Jake’s right, something’s fishy.”

James’ entire plan fell through; taunting became his only resort. “What, are you scared, Bobby?”

A strange sound came from above and grew into a loud roar as debris came crashing down, blocking the doorway. The two boys dove out of the way, covering their heads with their arms. As they heard tiny pebbles hit the floor, they opened their eyes and waited for them to adjust to the dim lighting. The sound of running footsteps echoed throughout the hall. As those diminished, the boys heard the sound of their own terrified screaming thoughts reverberating off the walls of their minds. They were trapped, and only the children knew of their location.

“What do we do now?” Jacob’s voice echoed off the walls.

James tried to look for another light source—the only glimmer of hope leading to their escape. Sadly, the only way out happened to be the way they came. “I…I don’t know.” Jacob’s heart sank. His older brother always invented a backup plan. Hoping to be of help, he asked, “Can’t we try to move some of this stuff?”

James tried lifting some of the debris, but stopped when he realized the weight of the mess. “With what, Jacob? It probably weighs more than both of us combined!”

James started backing up toward the middle of the room, trying to get a better view with what little lighting they had. He quickly stopped as a bright light glowed from behind him, followed by intense heat. With his heart racing, James knew that there was nothing else in the room. He closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and then turned around. In the middle of the room, dressed in a gown made completely of fire, stood Amber. Her exposed skin revealed veins as red as her outfit. Her crimson red eyes matched her entire ensemble, but her hair fell from her shoulders and halfway down her back in a waterfall of gold. The heat emanating from her body

nearly scorched the boys' eyebrows and the flames lit up the entire room, as if the sun itself broke through a transparent window. The boys jumped away from her as her cherry red lips curved into an almost wicked smile. Then a golden glow emanated from her outstretched hands, striking the debris in front of the door. A golden light as bright as molten lava spread throughout the debris and pieces of cement as it effortlessly shattered the pile into smaller pieces. Neither of the boys questioned why Amber decided to spare their lives as they dashed out of the room to safety, both with the same question in their mind. What in the world just happened?

