

My feet pound against the pavement, and suddenly, I'm running on grass. It makes small sounds as I keep going on, but nothing can block out the screams. The screams, the moans, the terrified shrieks...they won't stop, and I have no way to know where they're coming from or what they're saying.

Savanna Choi remembers having night terrors as a kid. They'd interfered with her sleep. They'd messed up her social life. Eventually, they went away, and she went on living life as a normal child

At the start of Sophomore year, however, things take a turn for the worst. The night terrors come back. Haunting, frightening, eerie nightmares with disturbing images result in a constantly preoccupied, paranoid Savanna who begins having trouble distinguishing the difference between her dreams and reality...

DELIRIUM

A Novel

Reina F McKenzie

Bea Rich

For my lifelong friends aka singing partners aka videogame
players aka sleepover buddies aka the ones who make me laugh
until I cry aka more like sisters than friends

~R. McKenzie

For all the memories we share.

~J. Rich

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McKenzie, Reina F Rich; Justine Isabella “Bea
Delirium/ by Reina F McKenzie, Justine “Bea” Rich.-1st ed
Summary: The life of a 16 year old girl turns chaotic when
the night errors she’d been having since childhood develops into a
disorder, making it difficult for her to distinguish between reality
and hallucinations.

Chapter One

The air around me is thick, almost like breathing in too much of it would make me choke. The world around me is jet black. Despite this, I press on at full speed. My feet pound against the pavement, and suddenly, I'm running on grass. It makes small sounds as I keep going on, but nothing can block out the screams. The screams, the moans, the terrified shrieks...they won't stop, and I have no way to know where they're coming from or what they're saying.

I feel something grasp my right ankle, dragging me down. I hit the ground with my face in the dirt. Blades of grass get caught in my mouth as I clench my jaw, being dragged by my feet. A few times, I hear a voice crying out to stop. Is it my own? It sounds desperate, bewildered, confused...a throbbing begins, and I press a finger to my temple. It all needs to stop. This is too much. How long have I been dragged? Ten minutes? Twenty? And the screams...the screams...

Cold sweat drips from my forehead. I rub my head with my sweaty palms and take in a breath. The air seems breathable, which is a huge relief in and of itself. Sitting up slowly, I glance around me. Instead of the eerie darkness from a few seconds ago, I see the familiar yellow and brown walls of my room. Picture frames decorate my plain white dresser, binders and books wedged sloppily in their spots on the bookshelf. Posters of my favorite Korean bands and singers smile lazily at me from the wall across the room. Once I see them, I know for certain that I am home.

Once I've calmed myself down, my mind wanders back to that dream. It hadn't been particularly realistic, but it had been creepy... and painful. My head is still throbbing from all those screams. I've had some freakish dreams before, but none

like that in a long time. I feel sticky with sweat, but my entire body feels chilled to the bone at the same time.

"Anna!" When the door flies open and interrupts my thoughts, I jump up and let out a small cry. My reaction seems really dumb when I see it's just my mom. She stares at me, puzzled. "Savanna, honey? You alright?" All I can do is nod. I'm still feeling too jittery to properly function. She gives me 'the look'. According to her, all moms have 'the look', but for some reason, its effects are multiplied when a Black mother uses it. More specifically, my Black mother.

"Mom, really, I'm fine," I insist. She still glares, like she's trying to dig around in my brain for answers.

"Okay," she says finally. "But get up. You've got only an hour before Noah gets here. And that boy wouldn't wait for a ticket to see Jesus if it took more than fifteen minutes."

I have to laugh at that one. She's exactly right; Noah's way too impatient to sit still and wait for pretty much anything. He practically died saving up for his new Kia, which took over a year. After he got it, he offered to drive me to school, so long as I could get out the door as soon as he got there.

Mom leaves after glaring me down suspiciously while I remember my ride to school. I'm glad she didn't ask if I had a bad dream. I used to have what the doctors call night terrors, which are sort of like bad dreams, but way more realistic-feeling. I remember my parents making a big deal about it when I was a kid. Eventually, they let it drop, but I still think they put way too much time and energy into that whole phase of my life. The terrors started when I was six, but they got less intense as time went on. By the time I was in fifth grade, it was only the occasional bad dream.

My mind flashes back to the dream while I'm combing the tangles from my dark brown curls. The grass is back in my mouth, and for a second, I swear, I see some shadowy figure in the mirror behind me. Frantically, I slap my hand against my

mouth, desperate to get the grass from my mouth. Is this actual grass? And that person behind me...!?

The towel...it's just a towel. I hold a piece of the grass up to my eyes. It's just my own hair. Neither of these two facts make me feel any better; they just verify that I'm an expert at both creepy dreams and freaking myself out over nothing. For the longest time, I stand staring at the bottle of detangler and smelling the toast downstairs. Toast. Breakfast should help me calm down. After all, food is food is food.

Dad's still here when I get to the kitchen. His coarse, Korean hair is jet black and messy, contrasting with his navy blue business suit. He's on the phone with one of his co-workers, going on in Korean about some stocks going down in China. Some people think it's cool that I can understand Korean, but I don't care for it. When your dad is constantly smothering you in Korean and everyone else around you is yelling in English, your brain can't tell which is which.

"Apa, you hear from Noah?" I grab my usual banana from the kitchen counter.

No, nothing, he says in Korean. Why?

"Didn't Mom tell you?" I ask. Already, I can tell that this little conversation is going to go downhill. "He's driving me to school." Dad grimaces. He sets his Blackberry down. I know I'm in trouble then; the only time his Blackberry isn't attached to his ear is when he's yelling at me for who knows what.

Out of the question, he tells me. I don't want you in the car with that reckless boy who just got his license. He pauses to glare at me for only a second before his attention goes back to the Blackberry. He's like a teenage girl when it comes to that thing. He looks up again when Mom comes in, kisses her on the cheek. I frown.

(Apa,) your tie! She exclaims with a laugh in native-sounding Korean. It's on backwards again-

"Mom!" I interrupt. "Tell Apa that you said it was okay for me to ride with Noah!" Mom blinks. Poor her. She never knows when she's about to become a peace maker until she walks right into a fight. She turns to Dad, who looks stupid trying to adjust his tie.

"I told her last week that it was alright," she enunciates in English so he can understand.

I don't want Savanna in the car with that boy, Elani, Apa insists. He is so hasty and does not think before he does.

(Apa,) we have known Noah for years, and he is a responsible person! Mom fights for me hesitantly. Apa frowns. He is a good driver. Savanna will be fine.

"Exactly," I exhale. "And, besides, Noah's had his license for, like, a month and a half now. He drove his little brother and sister to their grandma's house in Ohio." I look at Mom who looks at Apa who stares back at us. Dad will fight on and on with us, even though he's out numbered. Lucky for me, though, he knows when he's lost a fight and when to give in. He nods his head and says nothing. I guess that means I can go with Noah, but I think it could also be because his phone rings again and he picks it up as he's heading out the door. Mom heaves a sigh when she hears the garage door close.

"Well, now that that's all over and done with, finish up! Noah should be here soon." She sits down at the kitchen table and looks over some papers in a manila folder. She is already in her scrubs, even though she doesn't have to leave for work for another couple of hours. "So, Savanna, tell me. About Noah."

That question throws me off. What does she want to know about him that she doesn't already?

"Umm...well, he's five foot ten and a half...blonde shaggy hair and, um...has a little brother and sister who both adore him..."

“Savanna, that’s not what I’m talking about,” Mom interrupts, an amused look on her face. “I mean, tell me about you and him. You have known each other for a long time, huh?”

“Yeah, and?” I take a bite of my banana. Where is this conversation going...?

“You haven’t gotten a little crush on him, have you?”

“...noo, Mom!” I snap, almost defensively.

“I’m just asking!” she says with a little laugh. “Because, to be honest, I wouldn’t be all too comfortable with you alone in a car with a boy you have a crush on-”

“Mom. Stop now. Please! Me and Noah are strictly friends. Strictly. Like, orthodox kind of strict. We don’t even hug.” Which is true, except for this one time that Mom does not need to know about and will not know about. She lets the subject drop, going back to looking at her papers and talking about normal stuff. Like, the weather.

“It’s supposed to rain tomorrow,” she tells me. “Maybe Noah will take you to the city and kiss you in the rain.” Mom grins at my screwed up face. *Did those words come out of her mouth just now?* She leaves me, giggling like a teenage girl. As I moan, the doorbell rings.

Speak of the devil.

As soon as I open the door, Noah holds up his keys with a wide grin. His blue eyes shine brightly, as does his wet hair. He has perfected the art of making his hair look messy and good at the same time. It’s a wonder he only spends two seconds ruffling up his hair and it still turns out looking hot...*wait, what am I thinking...?*

“Brand new Kia, baby!” He jokes. “Let’s ride.” I smile at him and he grabs my arm, dragging me towards the front door. I pull away, suddenly remembering that I’d left my phone over on the kitchen counter. As I reach for it to toss it in my bag, a sound from elsewhere in the house catches my attention. A

moan. A shriek. Someone in pain. My mind goes back to the dream once more. The screams, the cries...

“Mom!” I cry. The edginess in my voice surprises even me. “Mom, what *is* that?”

It’s just the news, Anna. Some girl from downtown was kidnapped, she yells down to me in Korean. For the third time that morning, I force myself to calm down. The news. Of course. Only the news...

“Hey, you ready to get going?” Noah asks, suddenly at my side. When I turn to him, he looks at me with concern. “You okay?” I nod slowly, wiping the panicked expression off my countenance.

“Yeah...yeah...I’m good,” I murmur. I start out the door before him. “Let’s go.”

Noah starts the car as I put my stuff in the back seat. I bite my lip, trying to get the dream off my mind. I once heard that pain is the best way to distract yourself from any unwanted thoughts. Ever since then, I’ve tried biting my lip to keep my mind off anything that I don’t want to think about. Bad dreams are no exception.

“You’re doing it again,” Noah notices.

“Doing what?” I ask, dumbly.

“That thing you do with your lips when you’re nervous or something.”

“No, I’m not.” I glance over at him. If he gets distracted by me trying to distract myself, our distractions will end up with us in a hospital. “Keep your eyes on the road, man. Do you have a Chemistry test today?”

“Changing the subject doesn’t work with me,” he says in a sing-song voice. “Now, what’s up?”

“Chemistry,” I insist. “Test. Do you have one?” He sighs, giving up. From that point on, it was small talk. And even though I knew that he was paying attention, I kept on biting my lip.

* * * * *

“Anna, your lip’s bleeding.” I glance over my shoulder. Sofia de Alno is tapping at me with her pencil. Her voice surprises me; I’d been dozing off while Miss Tarana droned on and on about where to place a comma. The teacher is completely oblivious to the rest of the class, including Sofia and I. With my finger, I gently touch my lip. Sure enough, crimson smears onto the pad of my finger.

“Oh,” is all I say.

“What did you do to your lip?” she asks, leaning forward. “It looks pretty nasty, no offense.” The throbbing of my lower lip doesn’t really hit me until then. Judging from the amount of blood on my finger, I’ve done more damage than good with his distraction technique.

“I was...um, never mind.” I decide against explaining my whole “biting my lip to keep from remembering my dream” thing. Telling Sofia about that would pretty much result in me having to reveal my whole life story. I shrug with a sheepish smile on my face. “Guess I was nervous about a Chem-”

“Sofia and Savanna, I’d appreciate it if you’d pay attention!” Miss Tarana says loudly, her beady brown eyes glaring at us through her moon-sized glasses. Her tiny little eyes widen as best they can from behind the enormous frames when she takes a good look. “Savanna, what is all that blood from?”

“Someone’s time of the month,” some smart-alec remarks from the back of the class. The other guys in the room snicker, but Sofia scowls.

“Wouldn’t the blood be on her crotch, then, ¿tontos?” she snaps. Miss Tarana says nothing to scold Sofia’s sharp words. Sofia gently takes a hold of my arm and stands, pulling me up out of my seat. “Miss Tarana, is it alright if I take Anna to the bathroom?”

“Sign out,” she says, then goes back to droning on once more about commas and semicolons. Sofia lets go of my arm once we’re out of the room and roaming the halls in search of an unlocked bathroom. She whips out her phone.

“Thanks, for, um, helping me out?” The statement sounds more like a question when it comes out of my mouth. Sofia turns to me and smiles warmly.

“Hey, what’re friends for, eh?” she says. “Besides, that grammar lesson was killer! You can’t tell me you weren’t dying to get outta there, chica.” I smile because she’s exactly right. Sofia and I have known each other for years, and if there’s one thing I’ve learned, it’s that she doesn’t take no for an answer. She’s got a fiery, sharp personality with a bob cut to match.

My face is just as Sofia had described it earlier; nasty. Blood mixed with saliva is covering half my face and dribbling down my chin. My lip itself is swollen and puffy around the area I’d been nibbling. More blood is welling up from the original wound. All I can do is stare at my appearance, disgusted. Sofia clicks her tongue inside her mouth.

“Dang, girl,” she says, her dark brown eyes wide. “Must be some Chem test you’re worried about.” I nod slowly, taking a few paper towels and scrubbing at my face. My frizzy curls stick to my face, making my appearance even more disheveled than it had been before.

“Yeah...first one of the year, and you know how hard Spitz is.” Despite the fact that my lip is puffy and discolored, I go right back to chewing on it as we’re leaving the restroom. Sofia eyes me strangely, sliding her phone into her back pocket.

“You sure you’re alright?” she asks. The skin of my lip breaks open once again and begins to bleed a little. Not nearly as much as last time, but enough for me to taste it on my tongue. I give her a weak smile, telling her that I’m fine. I don’t put much gusto into making my claim convincing. Upon returning to class, the smart-alecs are still making stupid jokes

about used tampons while Miss Tarana goes on about grammar. Towards the end of class, I quite biting at my bottom lip and try to concentrate more on the teacher. Instead, I find my mind wandering back to some twisted version of my dream...

The air around me is still thick. I might as well be breathing through a straw. Unlike before, I'm not running and am able to see everything. What I see, however, is anything but pretty. The faces of my classmates are mangled and mashed up, half their brains on the outsides of their faces. Especially the smart Alec. One of his eyes is where his nose should be. The skin of his face looks as though a dog has been gnawing at it, deep crimson blood dripping down onto his desk. His teeth are jagged and yellow, an extra row of them squeezed into his tiny mouth.

A shriek pierces the air. I clutch at my middle and bend over, my head on my desk. My hair is covering my eyes, nothing visible through the curls. Had that scream been my own? I can't think straight. The sound of my whimpers are much too loud in my own ears.

"Savanna..." one of them moans. "Savanna..." All I want it to do is stop saying my name! Stop saying my name!

"Stop saying my name!" I snap, jerking to an upright position. A scowl is surely plastered on my face. I can feel the muscles of my face tighten. Slowly, reality begins to set in. Those screams. Those hideous faces. None of it had been real. But the confused and irritated expression on Miss Tarana's face is all too real.

"Excuse me?" The words come out of her mouth so slowly that I'm surprised she gets them out before the bell rang. I don't stick around when it does. The entire class is looking at me like I am deranged. Ignoring it all, I dart out of the room, pushing some hair in front of my eyes to hide my face.

Lunch is a breath of fresh air. For once, the lunch is actually good-barbeque turkey subs with a side of spicy,

seasoned fries-and I remembered money so that I could buy it. During freshman year, Noah created this theory. At the beginning of the year and after a long break, the lunches are good for about a week. After that, they all suck. So far, I guess he's correct.

As I slide into my seat, Noah gives me a grin. He's stuffing his face with fries before I can even open my milk. The rest of our table sits down just after us. The twins James and Kodi "Short-for-Dakodya-or-Shorty-Short-For-That" Rian are arguing about an answer on a Health test from third period. Sofia is texting, occasionally glancing up to smile at something funny that James says. Ryan Chols and Ryan Wayne are the last to arrive; Chols is a girl while Wayne is a boy. Both of them are laughing as they sit down, bottles of Gatorade in hand.

"Turns out I did have a Chemistry test," Noah says after a belch. He's cleared half his plate, most of his sandwich already eaten. "It sucked. Who freaking gives their class a Chem test not even a month into the school year?"

"Spitz, apparently," I grumble, munching on a couple of the fries. Usually, they're my favorite side. Today, they taste too spicy and I offer them to the Ryans. Noah looks at me. His blue eyes aren't bright and clear like they are most of the time. Instead, they're narrowed right at me. I guess he hasn't forgotten what he'd tried to interrogate me about earlier in the car.

"What's with your lip?" he asks, his voice hushed. He raises his eyebrows when I don't answer right away. I groan.

"Nothing, okay?" I hiss. "Nothing happened. I was chewing on it and it started bleeding in English. I'm fine." Thank God that Sofia is too busy smirking at the messages on her phone to chime in and retell the story of what happened in English. Noah already knows my history of night terrors and how it affected me mentally. If Sofia fills him in on my little episode in English, he'd grill me for sure. Before he can say

anymore, I feel my phone buzzing in my pocket. Too sidetracked to check the caller ID, I pull the phone right up to my phone and answer.

“Hello?”

“Anna!” The warmth and familiarity in the voice on the other end causes a broad smile to spread across my face.

“Josiah!” I exclaim, and the tension on Noah’s face disappears. I haven’t heard from my older brother in over a month. He went off to the US military base in Japan after being in Iraq for over a year. I’ve come to terms with having a brother in the military. It used to scare me half to death, wondering if my brother would or would not come home. Wondering if he’s dead or alive. While the possibility of him dying still exists, it doesn’t quite bother me as much now that I’m used to him being gone. His reassuring calls home every once in a while also ease my anxiety.

“The school year’s started, am I right? This is your third week of school, eh?” he asks. I hear almost nothing in the background; in Japan, it’s gotta be around four in the morning.

“Yeah, I’m just now getting a bad case of ‘when’s the next day off’ syndrome,” I laugh. Josiah is the one who’d come up with that syndrome, when I was ten and he was starting high school. “I think it’s because of a Chemistry test I just took.”

“Aah, Spitz’s official ‘Start the Year with a Bang’ test,” he chuckles quietly. “I remember that. Except, I was dumb, so I didn’t take Chem until my Junior year. And I was bad at it.” He laughs for a moment longer before clearing his throat. “Well, that’s not actually what I called to talk to you about.”

“Well, what’s up?”

“I’ll be coming home in a little bit,” he announces. I count on my fingers how long he’d been gone; five months and eleven days. At the end of six months, he can return home until he’s called out again. “Hey, I gotta get going. Let mom and dad know, kid. Okay?”

“Of course!” He hangs up after that. I’m sure he doesn’t realize it, but his phone call just made my day. Josiah’s coming home! My big brother is returning to the States after so long. Granted, I’ve gotten used to him being away, but I am constantly worried about him. With him at home, I’ll know for sure that he’s safe. Noah leans in, his face suddenly a few inches from mine.

“So?” he asks, his eyes wide. “What’s the news, eh?”

“Josiah’s coming home!” I tell him with this ridiculous grin plastered on my face. Noah leans away from my face and fist pumps the air.

“Sweet! That means there’ll be a family dinner with authentic Korean and soul food. You’re going to have those dumpling things again, right? And that barbequed stuff too?” Sofia sets down her phone and smirks at Noah.

“Boy, did she even invite you yet?” she teased. Noah merely shrugs with a sheepish smile.

“You never answered the question,” he says, his attention on me again. Sofia raises her eyebrows and watches our conversation. “The dumplings? They’ll be there? And that Bulgaria beef?”

“Mandu and Bulgogi?” I correct him. “Yeah, it’ll be there. You won’t be, though.” Sofia burst into a fit of laughter after that. Noah pretends to be hurt by my rejecting his self invitation, and all is well for the rest of the period. A couple of times, I find myself nibbling a little at my bottom lip. Noah notices, but says nothing about it. There is no way he will let this drop, but I’m determined to change the subject any and every time it comes up.

I spend the rest of the day trying to stay awake and forget about my dreams. Once or twice I find myself dozing off in Trigonometry (who wants to stay awake for that?). No dreams, fortunately. In my Japanese class, the smart Alec who’d made the “time of the month” comment gives me a few dirty

looks. I ignore them, although I shudder once he's turned away. That image of his gruesome, hideous face is burned into my brain. Just a day before, I remember thinking of him as cute. He isn't unattractive. He's got eyes that change color with the seasons and dark hair that's cropped short during swim season. After that little episode in English...? Let's just say that I can't stand to look at him with a sideways glance.

Crossing the parking lot to Noah's Kia that afternoon should lift my spirits. With a best friend who can drive, I don't necessarily need to go straight home. Noah had even suggested stopping for a quick snack before heading home. He's standing in front of his car as I make my way over, sunglasses hiding his eyes from view. Standing by him is a girl, her back to me. Her long, strawberry blonde hair is getting blown around by the late August wind. I hear her high-pitched giggle as I get closer and closer. Finally, Noah turns his head to grin at me. When he does, the girl does as well. My own smile falters just a little.

Demy Latter, apparently, is some new student from a wealthy family in England. Her dad's a music producer and her mom works for some company overseas that gets her hundreds of thousands of dollars a month. She used to live at some boarding school for privileged children in London. Rumor has it that she was quite promiscuous there, and her parents took her out and moved her to America. And somehow, she ended up right in front of me, chatting casually with my best friend since grade school.

"`Ello, Anna," she says. Chipper girl she is. For the millionth time in the past few weeks, she's wearing this bright yellow top with sparkly make-up to match. I swear, she only owns yellow and orange. "It is so nice to finally meet you!" Her accent makes "nice" sound more like "noice."

"You too," I mumble, trying my best to smile through my teeth. Why am I in such a crappy mood right now? Demy turns back to Noah and beams even more than she had before.

"So then, I'll be seeing you tomorrow in French class?" she asks, raising her eyebrows when she does her voice. Noah nods and stares as she walks off.

Scratch that.

Noah nods and checks out her butt as she prances off. I grunt and climb into the passenger seat. I guess I should be thanking the girl; she's the perfect way to distract Noah from wanting to talk about what had happened to me earlier that day. For whatever reason, though, she's pissing me off more than anything else.

"You're jealous," Noah teases. He pulls out of the lot, more focused on smirking at me than the road.

"You're stupid," I remark. He chuckles, still not paying attention to the light that's changed by now. "Go."

"You're *really* jealous."

"Jealous of that...?" I try searching for a word. Slut, hoe, whore, airhead, and prissy all come to mind. However pissed I am, I choose to be the better person and say none of them. "No. Never. And will you *go*? The light changed."

"You're jealous *and* you're trying to avoid admitting!" he laughs. At least he's pulled out of the lot by now. "You are such a girl."

"And you are such a boy!" I say in a sing-song voice. "Don't go pointing fingers at me about what I do. I saw you lookin' at her butt. Whatever would Jesus think of you, Noah?"

"He would think that you should concentrate on trying to win me over and get rid of that skank," Noah jokes. "Relax. I don't like Demy."

"I wasn't even jealous!"

"Say what you want! I know you better than that." He gives me this long look while we're stopped at a traffic light. I know he's just teasing me, but maybe there's some truth behind his words. What if I am jealous and am denying it? "Granted, the girl is hot."

“Noah Josephson, you are nasty.”

“I can’t deny the truth!” He holds up his hands, careful not to lose control of the car in doing so. “She is hot! I’m a guy; I can’t help it! But that doesn’t mean I like her.”

“Alright, I believe you!” I laugh. “So are we going to grab some shakes from BK or what?”

Chapter Two

The nightmares started off innocent enough. Mom and Apa were never too worried about them when they first started. A bad dream here or there about a monster in my closet or under my bed wasn’t anything to get worked up about. Plus, I was a die-hard Scooby Doo fan, and had an older brother who loved to play pranks.

At first, Apa made me stop watching anything that he thought might be the cause of the nightmares. That meant no Scooby-Doo, no Little Mermaid, no Sleeping Beauty until the bad dreams subsided. It was infuriating to my five year old self that Josiah could watch “whatever he wanted” (aka whatever was on Cartoon Network before eight o’clock) and I was restricted to a select few video tapes. Eventually, I got over the fact that I couldn’t watch Shaggy and the gang figure out mysteries about old amusement parks and watched the tapes. The nightmares didn’t let up, though. In fact, they grew worse.

Some of the dreams were random and unrelated. Others were like one long, continuous horror story that interrupted my peaceful sleep each night. When the dreams weren’t as bad, I’d whimper and whine, trying to convince Josiah to let me sleep with him. He refused to let his terrified kid sister share his room, but sometimes would let me sleep in there for a night or two if I was crying. As they began to worsen, Josiah was no longer enough protection from the horrors of my imagination. A daily routine began to develop for me; go to bed, have a terrifying nightmare, run to Mom and Apa’s room, whimper for an hour before I went to sleep peacefully.

Mom was the first to suggest going to a doctor when I was six. While most kids were thrilled be starting first grade, I was terrified. Towards the end of my kindergarten career, I became more and more standoffish and timid. Several of my nightmares included children from my class. For a majority of

the time, they were not the “good guys.” The disturbing images of them from my dreams lingered when I went to school. Even the kids that I’d been friends with before would terrify me as the dreams got worse. There was no way I was excited about first grade. After all, what six year old wanted to sit in a classroom with “bad guys” all day?

“There’s nothing scary about the dumb kids in your class,” eleven year old Josiah had insisted. It was two days before I was to start first grade, and I refused to put anything in my backpack. Josiah was supposed to be helping me; instead, he was going on and on about how I shouldn’t be afraid. It was too late for that, though. I was very afraid of nearly everything. Half of the summer I’d spent cowering in my room, the safest place there was. Outside of my room, no one and nothing was completely out of harm’s way.

“Yes, there is!” I’d argued. “Conner and Jesse tried to eat Mama!” My brother rolled his eyes. He threw a box of Kleenex at me, smacking me in the face. Tears sprang up in my eyes. “Hey!”

“Wake up, Anna,” he’d said. “That was all *in a dream*. Dreams aren’t real!” Over and over, he tried drilling that into my head. Dreams aren’t real. Once I woke up, I’d be safe. Everything was fine.

None of it worked.

My entire first grade year was a disaster. I had to be pulled from my class constantly because I would ramble on and on about unsettling things. Kids in the room dying. Hundreds of spiders and ants sucking the skin from my teacher’s face. A gun man entering the school and blasting our heads off. It got to be so bad that psychologists had me tested several times a week. Most of them suggested having me medicated. A few thought I wasn’t stable enough to even be in a class with other children.

“There is nothing wrong with our daughter!” Apa snapped at every doctor, nurse and shrink Mom had me see.

He’d even shout it to Mom herself at times. “She is going through a phase, that is all!”

“Drew, she is *not* just going through a phase,” Mom disagreed. “She is scared of everything. All the time. She has nightmares every other night. If she doesn’t get help, she could be in serious trouble.”

The summer before second grade, I practically lived in the doctor’s office. Mom tried everything before she had me medicated; yoga, shrinks, group therapy...anything that she thought would help calm me down or erase my fears. Medication was the only thing that seemed to help at all. Within the first few nights I began taking the pills, my parents noticed differences. Even if I did have a bad dream, it wasn’t quite as intense, and I could recover from it quickly.

Instead of risking another dreadful year in a public school, Mom arranged for me to be homeschooled until my behavior got better. Although I’d shown drastic improvements, she was very wary of letting me go back to the classroom. I excelled in home school. All of those hours I’d spend up in my room reading really ended up paying off in the long run. By September, the doctors suggested weaning me off the medication. For a several weeks, I was just fine, and Apa announced that I would return to public school.

After the first couple of days, my behavior went downhill. All of the kids in my second grade class had been in my kindergarten and first grade classes. Their faces brought back frightening memories of appalling dreams. Every single face made me want to cringe and run away...

Every face except for one.

He was the “new boy” according to the rest of the class. He moved from California according to some, and Oregon according to others. He was quiet but friendly. Most of the other kids in the class adored him, especially when he’d share some of his pretzels at lunchtime. At first, I kept my distance

and watched him from afar, mostly because he was the only face that didn't scare me. When I wasn't looking at the teacher, I was looking at my desk or at him.

One afternoon on the playground, I was sitting by myself on the swings. As I contemplated anything a six year old could contemplate, a few third graders raced over and knocked me off the swing. When I looked up, I noticed two faces that always triggered memories of old nightmares. Immediately, I was frozen with fear. Then, I began to panic. I took off, searching desperately for a place to hide. Being only six, the best place I could think of was behind a tree far away from the playground. I cowered there for several minutes before I heard a twig snap. Ever so slowly, I peeked my head out from behind the tree.

"Don't come any closer!" I whimpered. "Please! I just want to get away from those *things!*"

"What things?" The voice was a new one, one that I didn't quite recognize. When I opened one eye, I saw it was the new boy. He was watching me with a slightly amused look on his face. I blinked.

"They had faces like spiders and bodies like people," I explained, softly. "They're everywhere! I can't get away from them!" He took a few steps closer to me, still watching, but not saying anything. Suddenly, he darted away, turning around when he was closer to the playground.

"Come on!" he yelled. "I know how to get away from them! Follow me!" For the rest of recess, the new boy and I ran around, dodging the spider people and facing our fears. I still felt afraid. But, for once in my life, I felt like there was a way to escape the terrors. When we lined up to go inside that afternoon, the new boy handed me a small stone.

"What's this?" I asked.

"It's a special Noah rock," he explained. "Whenever you see a spider person, you tap the rock and they will turn into the

good guys." At first, I'd doubted the power of the "Noah rock." It seemed silly that something as scary as a spider person could disappear just by touching a rock. For two weeks, I kept it tucked away in my backpack. I almost forgot about it until the new boy mentioned it one day at lunch. Ever since the day he gave me the rock, he'd join me by the tree and we'd battle more creatures. On that day, he stopped running and turned to me right in the middle of crossing a lava bridge.

"Do you have the Noah rock?" he asked.

"In my backpack," I told him. "Are you sure that it really works?" He nodded with a smile. He seemed positive that it worked. I decided that since he said it worked, I believed him. When we went back inside, I grabbed the rock from my backpack and set it down on my desk. While the teacher was telling us about multiplication, I was looking around the classroom. One face caught my attention and reminded me of a dream. Before I had the chance to panic, I rubbed the rock.

"Be on my side," I'd whispered. "Be a good guy." As soon as I did so, the little boy turned to me and offered me a purple crayon with a grin. I was shocked. He wasn't a spider person. He wasn't an evil dragon. He wasn't anything except for Conner Owens, a nice boy who offered me his purple crayon.

For the rest of the day, I used the Noah rock whenever I saw someone whose face reminded me of a nightmare. Just as it had worked for Conner, it worked for nearly everyone else. The next day, I raced up to the new boy with the rock in my hand, my eyes wide.

"Hey! This thing actually works!" I said. He grinned.

"I know," he replied. "It's the Noah rock. The Noah rock always works." From that day on, the Noah rock went everywhere I did. School and life outside my home became less and less frightening. The nightmares were still a regular occurrence, but I began to feel like I could face my fears. As I started to become more sociable, I was allowed to go more

places and do normal things. I was able to go to birthday parties and play dates. I could watch Scooby doo once more. I could go on field trips.

By the middle of fourth grade, I no longer needed the Noah rock to feel safe. I did, however, need Noah. He and I became close friends, and became even closer once I learned his name. It was an added bonus that Noah lived just down the street from us. I needed no medications, no shrinks, no doctors. All it had really taken was a rock and a friend.

By fifth grade, I had very few nightmares at all. The ones I did have were often forgotten within a week's time. I played recreational soccer and took swimming lessons for the first time. Noah and I would go bike riding on warm days. In the winter, I'd go to overnight camps. I had finally made it to the end of my long, stressful nightmare-filled years.

Chapter Three

"This book blows," Noah sighs, leaning back against my bed. He turns the page and groans. "Anna, I am in pain. I don't even understand what I'm reading." He leans forward and stares at me with his ridiculous blue eyes. "Help me?" I laugh and push him away. He shakes his head and opens the book again. We're supposed to have the first one hundred lines of Antigone analyzed in a week. So far, Noah's doing a pretty sucky job of it.

"I don't think it's bad," I say. "The only thing that's annoying to me is the old English. I can't believe people used to understand this." Noah takes a few more good looks at page two, then throws it down.

"I say we move on to Chem," he announces.

"Ugh. That's ten times *worse* than this," I complain. He opens his mouth like he's going to counter my insult to Chemistry, but his phone rings with that awful heavy rock song he's been in love with for the past few days. He picks it up without bothering to check the Caller ID.

"Noah Thomas Josephson, how may I help you?" he asks in an unnaturally high voice. He doesn't speak for several long moments, his face turning red. "Oh, hey, you...yeah, sorry, I was goofing off...um, yes, that's actually my middle name...how'd you get my number...ahh, gotcha." It suddenly gets really hard for me to concentrate on Greek philosophers and their affairs while Noah keeps talking to this mystery person. I know I'm probably a jerk for eavesdropping on my best friend. But forget about being the better person; it's been ten minutes and I still don't know who he's talking to. Whoever it is, they're making him grin like an idiot while staring off into space.

“...Yeah, I’ll be there. Hah, I wouldn’t miss it for the world. ...Alright, I’ll catch ya later... bye,” he finishes with a somewhat flirty voice I’m not too familiar with.