

Chapter One of *The Secret Journal of Brett Colton*

I must have stared at that picture a thousand times. The picture rested in the same spot where it had for years, on the top shelf of our living room bookcase. Like countless times before, I was drawn to it, my feet moving me slowly towards its oval frame. As I'd done a thousand times before, I lifted it from the shelf and curled up on the couch to study it. The boy in the picture was fifteen years old at the time it was taken—a boy with dark black hair and soft blue eyes. He'd always been big for his age, but in this picture, he looked thin. Too thin. I knew it had been taken when it was first discovered how sick he truly was, and that at the same time, his little sister was born. His little sister who was me.

My eyes narrowed as I stared at his face. Because of him and his sickness, my babyhood was pretty neglected. Next to no pictures existed of me as a baby or even as a little kid. In fact, my family remembered hardly any cute things I did when I was little. No one knew for sure when I started to crawl, walk, or cut my first tooth—or even my first spoken word—because at the time this picture was taken, the boy in the picture—my brother, Brett—found out he had leukemia. According to my family, Brett put up a huge fight for two years, but the disease eventually won, and at the age of seventeen, he died.

It was completely self-centered of me to feel like I had a neglected babyhood, but since I *was* the youngest in my family—and a surprise baby at that—I didn't think it was a stretch for anyone to believe that I must have been the center of attention. However, this obviously didn't happen. Nothing I did was as important as anything that was going on with Brett.

I carefully brushed the thin film of dust off the glass covering Brett's picture. It was puzzling. More than just puzzling. Confusing. Strange. I'd never known him at all, because he'd died when I was two. And yet, somehow, there was something there—something just out of reach that I couldn't quite touch about him. Almost a—*connection* of some sort.

It was too crazy, of course. Any connection I might have thought I could feel was likely due to the fact that my family talked about Brett nonstop. It was a rare moment when my family spoke about anything or anyone else. Especially whenever my brother Alex and my sister Samantha came to visit. Both of them lived close by, so my parents and I saw them pretty often, whether I wanted to or not. There weren't two people on earth I had less in common with, although I did get along with Alex better than I did with Samantha. Sam. The gigantic age gap I had with Sam had to account for some of the issues I had with my sister—me being fifteen, and Sam being in her early thirties. But even without the gap, I think she'd still get on my nerves.

Whenever Alex and Sam came over to visit, our family's unique, mind-boggling event would occur. No matter what subject was discussed, the conversation would work its way back to long, drawn-out memories of times with Brett, and then, of course, his heroic struggle with his illness. Competing with perfect live brothers or sisters is difficult enough. Try competing with a brother who because he's not around anymore has reached Martyr Status. My family always forgot there was a reason I didn't enjoy the Brett Memory Sessions. Maybe to them Brett was a superstar, but to me, he was nothing but a stranger.

“Kathy, honey—are you finished straightening the living room yet?” Mom’s voice. I’d almost forgotten why I’d come into the living room in the first place.

“Is there some reason it has to be cleaned up this very second?” I griped.

“Because Sam and Stephen and Alex and Julie will be here any minute for dinner, and they’ll need somewhere to sit down before we eat,” Mom called back irritably.

I sighed. “Do they have to come over for dinner tonight?”

Mom stuck her head in the living room doorway with a hurt look on her face. “You know they want to see you to wish you well on your big day!”

I rolled my eyes. “I’m just starting high school—it’s not that big of a deal!”

“Off the couch, Kathy—I need some help in the kitchen!”

I turned my head towards Mom’s voice, ready with one last retort, but instead of looking at her, my eyes were drawn to the sparkle around her neck. It was always there and had been as long as I could remember. I couldn’t speak as I watched Mom absently twirl the gold heart on the chain around her neck while she looked at the picture of Brett. Once Mom had stepped back into the kitchen, still clutching her necklace, I looked back down at the picture in my hands and shook my head wryly. *It figured.* The heart necklace my mother always wore was a locket that held a picture of a baby—Brett—along with a picture of him before he died. Big surprise for us all that the only pictures she’d want inside a locket would be of Brett.

I couldn’t make my fingers loosen their grip on Brett’s picture as I pushed myself off the couch, and while I walked back to the bookshelves, my eyes roamed over the other pictures.

The first was held delicately in a large, shiny gold frame. My sister, Sam. She’s the oldest in the family and was a high school senior when it was taken, dressed in her maroon and gold Central High drill team uniform. At that time, Sam’s hair was long and glossy black. With her body turned to the side, only her face smiled teasingly at the camera. Whatever else my sister Sam may be, one thing I had to admit was that she’s beautiful. Placed by Sam’s picture was a black, heart-shaped framed picture of her in her wedding gown with my brother-in-law, Stephen. A small 3 x 5 picture of my nephew, Curtis, rested inside the bottom of the frame, angled to fit inside the heart.

My eyes moved to the pictures taken at Alex and Julie’s wedding, before pausing to linger on a 5 x 7 frame filled with three faces: My oldest brother, Alex; my brother Brett, who was a year younger than Alex; and Kelly, Brett’s best friend in high school—a real handsome guy with blond hair, big blue eyes, and a smile guaranteed to turn any girl into a quivering glob of Jell-o. All three were in their football uniforms, laughing with their arms around each other, looking all hot and sweaty, right after our high school took state in football. In this picture, Brett looked a lot like my father, with his wide grin, blue-black hair, and eyes that slightly turned up at the corners, but Alex looked like me. We both had Mom’s sandy blonde hair, greenish blue eyes,

and skin that refused to do anything but burn and turn white again in the summertime.

I studied Alex's face for a moment and felt my eyebrows draw together. Alex didn't play football anymore after high school. I asked him why once, out of idle curiosity, but all he said was, "It's just a game, Kathy. That's all. It's not important."

I frowned as I stared at Kelly's face. I knew little about him beyond the fact that he was Brett's best friend and had played football with Brett and Alex. No one in my family talked about him. Not only had I never met him, but I couldn't remember him visiting even once. Or seeing just a Christmas card from him. But Kelly was part of Brett's life, not mine. There was no reason for me to care about anything to do with him, so I didn't bother to ask questions. It would only have led to questions about why I was asking, or worse—more Brett stories.

A gold, 8 x 11 frame sat next to the picture of the three football heroes. In it was a nice studio portrait of my parents all dressed up in their Sunday best, so to speak, since we weren't exactly a church-going type of family. Even so, our family was pretty close, whether I liked it or not. My parents loved family get-togethers. They couldn't get enough of my nephew or of having everyone around every second possible. And of course, they loved to encourage every conversation about Brett that they could.

I sighed and looked at another shelf. Both of my brothers and my sister loved drama when they were in high school. Besides the yearly class pictures, a lot of the pictures on our bookshelves were from plays they performed in. The year Sam, Alex, and Brett were in high school at the same time, they were actually in the musical *Once upon a Mattress* together—a comic version of "The Princess and the Pea" fairytale. In this version, the king is silent throughout the play because of a witch's curse, and because Brett couldn't sing, he got the role of the king. The king acts as crazy as Brett supposedly did, so apparently the part was perfect for him. Alex and Sam had large roles in the play, too, and from the way my family talked about it, this play was the funniest and the best play Central has ever done or ever will do.

I stared long and hard at all of the pictures of my family's famous high school moments. Unfortunately for me, because my brothers and sister were major athletes and drama stars during high school, knew how to dress right, eat right, and breathe right, and were popular in every way, my family assumed that I'd follow suit. Right down to forcing me to enroll in Drama 101 instead of a literature class, which I really would have liked to take instead.

"You keep your nose buried in books too much as it is. The last thing you need is another *English* class!" Sam had said that as if the word itself was poison. "What you need is something that will force you to be social. Drama is a great place to do that."

Drama had been shoved down my throat after that. I fought hard for my literature class, but Alex and Sam worked on Mom and Dad and convinced them to force me to enroll in drama.

"Good—that'll yank her out of her shell a little." Sam had grinned in an obnoxious, triumphant way. "We'll work on your hair and wardrobe next."

I sighed again resignedly and looked down at the framed picture still gripped in my

hands, searching Brett's haunting, grinning face for I wasn't sure what before I put it back in the center of the top shelf where it belonged.

In honor of the big moment when I would enter the hallowed halls of Central High School for the first time as a sophomore, Mom had made my favorite dinner: cheese-stuffed tortellini noodles. Not that anyone noticed either of these two amazing events for long.

"I remember when I started Central High," Sam sighed dreamily before taking even one bite. "I really do envy you, Kathy. I would just love to live it all over again!"

I rolled my eyes and dug into my tortellini. It was going to be more than enough for me to have to live through the whole experience once.

"I'd give anything to relive a week. Man, I had some good times then!" Alex agreed.

"It's hard to believe our little Kathy is about to start high school!" Dad shook his head. "Remember when Brett started Central?" I stopped in mid-chew. Our family's unique, mind-boggling event was obviously about to occur yet again. "He wasn't anything like the rest of you. He had to be the class clown and make everyone laugh." Dad was smiling absently at basically nothing.

"And yet he always managed to get wonderful grades," Mom chimed in.

"Yeah, and don't forget what he did for Central High," Alex continued. "He helped the football team go to region his sophomore year and state his junior year."

"And he always insisted that he never chased girls. *They* chased *him*." Annoying uproarious laughter followed from everyone but me after that remark from Sam.

"And he was wonderful about tending Kathy while I was at work," Mom sighed. "It still amazes me that a teenage boy would be willing to spend so much time babysitting. Most girls wouldn't have put up with it as much as Brett did."

"I know *I* surely couldn't have stood it back then," Sam said, shaking her head.

"What a surprise," I stated dryly, digging fiercely into my tortellini. I was actually amazed at the angry-slash-hurt looks I received from everyone at the table. Except for Julie and Stephen. At least they seemed to find my attempt at dry sarcasm slightly amusing.

"Really, Kathy," Mom began.

"Well, anyway—Brett was definitely one in a million," Alex cut in with a broad grin.

I stared at my half-eaten plate of food. I couldn't help the familiar, hollow feeling that

was growing in my stomach just as it always did whenever my family got sentimental about Brett and times forever over and gone. Unfortunately, my family couldn't seem to help themselves. The well-worn rut down memory lane would be traveled yet again. Everyone was so enthralled with Brett's amazing feats that no one seemed to notice the mess Curtis was making. I watched with dull, glazed eyes while Curtis smashed bits of tortellini Sam had carefully arranged on his plate before happily smearing the mess into his hair and onto his face.

"You know what we haven't done in forever that I've been dying to do?"

I shook myself free from my trance to look hopefully at Alex. *Please let it be something that's at least slightly exciting!* I begged inside my head.

Alex was grinning at everyone's expectant looks. "Let's get out our old home movies! And not the ones transferred to DVD—the ones on the old reels!"

I sat stiffly in my chair through all the hustle and bustle while Dad, Alex, and Stephen set up the old projector and movie screen. Julie and Sam followed them with Julie holding Curtis, listening patiently to Sam's babbling about our amazing old home movies. Mom had begun to follow them but turned back to look at me expectantly.

"Kathy, you're going to come watch the home movies, aren't you?"

I hesitated before quickly standing to snatch and stack the dirty dinner plates as I moved around the table. "Someone's got to clean up."

"Oh, honey, that can wait. We'll clean up the kitchen together later."

I wasn't in many of our old home movies, and I really wasn't in the mood for more nostalgia tonight. "You know the kitchen will start to reek if all of this food is left out for long. I'll join you in a few, okay?" But Mom wouldn't take no for an answer. I was forced to relent and follow her into the living room.

We turned out the lights, and in a few seconds the familiar hum and click of the old projector began. A blurry green with shiny colored splotches flared into view before Dad focused it back into its true Christmas tree form. The first couple of reels were filled with Halloweens, birthdays, and Christmases when Sam, Alex, and Brett were little. I watched the silent images before me with only the projector's hums and clicks for background music. Everyone else laughed and interrupted each other with bits and pieces of half-remembered old memories. I wasn't sure what I was feeling, but I couldn't pull my eyes away from Brett's impishly grinning face as he raced Alex along beaches during the summertime—flying over our front driveway doing wheelies on his midnight blue bicycle—tripping Sam (something he truly enjoyed doing on film)—and ripping open red-and-green-wrapped Christmas presents under the tree. My eyes were stinging from staring so long and hard. Why is it that in old home movies everyone always looks so much happier than they are now?

I was glued to the screen, but at the same time, I could feel myself fading, drowning,

wanting to yell, scream, say something—and each reel was pushing me forward through the next year and the next until the images swam in a blur and I couldn't see anymore. My familiar hollow feeling was in full force, and I knew I wouldn't be able to take much more.

“Honey, are you all right? What's wrong? Don't you want to—”

I didn't think I'd made that much noise when I decided I'd had enough, but a second later, Mom joined me in the kitchen. I tried to pretend I was fine and made my voice as flippant and uncaring as I possibly could. “Mom, just out of curiosity, why don't we use the old movie camera anymore? Or better yet, why haven't we bought a camcorder? Doesn't anyone think we've done anything noteworthy in the past, oh, say, thirteen to fourteen years?” Mom opened her mouth to speak, but I was on a roll and didn't pause long enough to let her answer. “I mean, since everyone only talks about stuff that happened when Brett was alive, then I guess it's safe to say that no one thinks we've done anything interesting since Brett died. Right?”

Mom slowly walked towards me and reached out to touch my hair. “Honey, you know that's not true. We've had some wonderful, special times together since Brett died.” Her voice was low and soft. “I know it's hard for you to have to listen about times you weren't a part of—”

But I didn't want to hear anymore. “I just wish everyone would forget the past and just—move *on*. Why can't we all just *do* that?” I demanded. “Brett's gone. Why can't this family just move on?” I could feel a lump rising in my throat, and as I swallowed hard, Mom's hand dropped from my hair. I knew I'd said enough. Probably too much.

“Kathy, honey—” Mom whispered.

I stepped away from her and faced the sink, leaving her to stare at my back. “Please, Mom. Just forget it. I don't want to talk about it anymore.”

I spent the rest of the evening hibernating in my bedroom until Alex and Sam finally left. That wasn't unusual for me to do when they came for a visit. After locking myself in my room, I always turned to an ancient record player balanced on a little rolling table with two small, square speakers on either side of it. It was an old family dinosaur and had been kept in my room for just about forever. I had a nice CD player, but since I'd never gotten around to buying CDs of my favorite record albums that had also been in the family for eons, I had to spin the turntable if I wanted to hear my favorite old LP. Ever since I could remember, I'd put on an old, scratched-up Beatles album—*Rubber Soul*—to relax and sleep after an especially trying moment in my life. Nothing else cured the dark for me like that album could.

After lying flat on my back for a few minutes, I forced myself off my bed and flipped on the ancient record player before setting the *Rubber Soul* album on the turntable. I sank back onto my bed as Paul McCartney's voice softly crooned, filling up every empty space in the room.

I was forced back into reality when the last song ended. Although our home movies ended abruptly with Brett's death, leaving only a few glances of myself as a baby, my family's lives weren't as completely over as the movies might lead an outsider to believe. At least, mine

wasn't. I had other concerns in life besides listening to times long gone. I could go for days—even weeks—at a time without thinking about Brett. But I couldn't avoid our living room forever, and then I'd see that picture of him on the top shelf, and as unavoidable as day, I'd feel that strange connection again.