

“Dream Catcher”

A Short Story

By

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“Dreamers can’t be tamed.” –Paulo Coelho

I.

It took me forever to first notice it.

I am embarrassed to admit I have no recollection of when I was first able to do it. I do not know how long I have had this power, this inherent ability to manipulate the world, to change it for the better. For all I know, I have had it since I was born. Perhaps even before. I am truly ashamed it took me so long to notice it, to do anything with it, if such is the case.

But I do remember the first time I noticed it.

It bears explanation first, some exposition, as it were, about the woman of my dreams. There she was smack dab in front of me. She stood tall, wearing red high heels and a summer dress that hugged her body tightly, running down and flowering outward at her knees. Red lipstick, nails, and thick, long, curly red hair to complete her ensemble. She was smiling and her green eyes cut out at me, piercing directly into my soul. The woman had stepped straight out of my dreams.

Several years prior to her sudden appearance in my life, I had dreamt of her. We were in love, stood together in a garden overlooking the sea. It was warm. She made and poured me a lemonade spritzer. We knocked them back together. I can taste its sweetness, just thinking of it. It was good and went down smooth and cooled my parched throat in that waning warm daylight. Then, I held her, and we danced. I pulled her in close, kissing her as the sun began to set, creating bright, beautiful streaks of orange, red, and yellow across the sky that reflected in the rippling waters below, all the way across the horizon as night gradually faded in.

I awoke and felt an intense and sincere sense of loss. I longed for the woman, for her touch, her warmth, her loving embrace. The dream had been vivid, real, some kind of accidental tuning into another person’s life, in another dimension, who was beyond fortunate enough to have this woman in his life.

It was *real*, the dream, somehow I knew it.

And I wanted to go back.

She appeared several more times to me in my dreams that month. Each time I was both elated and filled with a powerful sense of *déjà vu*, followed by a hollow longing once I awoke and parted from

her. I reveled in whatever time, fleeting though it may have been, short glimpses or long, romantic walking and talking, I got with her in my dreams.

During the next long months that followed I sought after her. She and the dream became an unhealthy obsession. I bought over the counter sleeping aids, liquid-gel caps, and medicine-tasting syrups. I popped melatonin and went to bed frequently, early, eager to enter the dream world for the chance of being with my beloved even for the briefest moment.

Sometimes I would see her. More often, I would not.

My mania intensified to the point that I quit my job, living only on savings, making my newfound quest my full-time commitment. I dreamed, sleeping constantly, searching for the red-headed woman who was so elusive to me.

It was during this time I noticed odd things happening.

In my dreams I would move things. It started small at first. A cup on my bedside table would be on my dresser across the room when I woke up. I would dream of folding the clothes in my basket on the floor next to the wall opposite my bed and would awake to find them neatly piled and stacked. At times I would awake fully dressed for the day, having gone to bed in PJ's, and changing in my dreams; my attire always matched what I had put on in my dream exactly.

Was I sleep walking? Crazy? Both?

At first, performing what I told myself was Occam's Razor on the situation, I accepted the simplest explanation that I was sleep walking. Until something weird, amazing, and at the same time, awful, happened.

My savings had worn thin. I was down to my last penny. I was quite stressed about this. Getting another job in my line of work proved quite difficult; my former employer seemed to have blacklisted me, possibly due to my resignation's timing, it being during the busiest time of year for my company. I struggled to find some sort of occupation, some day job that could help feed me, pay rent, and continue to fund my current habit. My job search proved fruitless.

I remember falling asleep one night, nervous butterflies whirling about in my stomach, thinking only about dollars and cents, and how surely soon my electricity and water would be shut off, wondering how I was going to pay those bills. In my dream, I walked the streets of my town until I stood outside a bank. I walked directly through the walls of the bank, passing through brick, mortar, insulation, and drywall. I slipped straight through the vault. I lined my pockets with bundles of bills. I even took off my shirt and tied the sleeves and neck hole off, creating a sack, which I filled to the brim with notes. Then, I exited through the door, setting off an alarm, its shrill, high pitched screech blaring into the night, and returned to my apartment with the money-filled sack.

When I awoke in the morning, to my shock and horror I found a crumpled heap of money, as well as a veritable cornucopia of banknotes in the form of my shirt lying on the floor next to my bed, its bountiful bills billowing out of it onto my floor.

I pinched myself.

I was quite awake.

Pacing about my apartment as I listened to the morning news, I frantically thought about what to do. The reporters, investigators, and experts on TV were all baffled. 25,000 dollars had suddenly vanished in the night. The security footage showed no one entering. There were no signs of a break in, of any entry, sneaky, forceful, or otherwise into the bank building whatsoever. None of the cameras showed anyone or anything inside, or any sign of a disturbance. There were no fingerprints left at the scene or any kind of forensic evidence to show for the sudden vanishing of a small fortune at all, save for the front door suddenly, spookily opening as if an invisible person were walking through it and setting off the alarm. The money seemed for all intents and purposes to have been there one moment, then POOF! Gone the next.

After I had calmed down, and consequently had not slept a wink the next several nights due to nerves and an overarching, crippling feeling of guilt, and no policemen had showed up at my door, a trend that continued for a day, then another, and finally a week, I resolved to keep the money.

It was an awful thing to do. I would like to state that for the record I felt horrible about my decision. However, it was also a necessary thing to do. An idea had sprung into my head. If what I thought was going on was accurate, and I had some kind of power, a kind of previously unrealized supernatural ability, then I needed to take the terrible thing I had done and turn it into something good. I was going to use it to do good. I would make my petty robbery right. In my eyes, the future good I would do with the money and my gift far exceeded the wrongness of my theft.

Besides, I had not seen the woman in red for close to 6 weeks now. Much to my chagrin, after painstakingly striving to find her again, I had not seen her even once. I could not, despite my best efforts. I searched for her in my dreams. I looked everywhere for her, wandering the streets for a while each night while asleep. At first, I had wept. I had longed, I had bitterly bewailed not being with her. After not seeing her in so long, her memory was beginning to fade. And I hated that. But eventually, no longer having the tangible, vivid, loving experiences of her, and not even knowing so much as the woman's name, I had to give up. I had to move on. And now, I had to find another place to focus my energy and time.

I thought I had found a worthy cause. But first, I had to be one-hundred-percent sure.

The first of my experimentations was simple. I returned \$12.5k back to the bank. The next day, reporters, detectives, and locals alike raved about the miraculous, inexplicable reappearance of exactly half of the missing money, which had materialized just as mysteriously as it had disappeared, followed by the ghostly opening and closing of the front door, and signaled by the alarm.

For my second test, I walked the streets as a spectral dreamer late at night. Eventually, I saw a young woman leaving a club. She bade her girlfriends goodnight and crossed the street alone. It was dark, and the street was empty, save for a few scattered parked cars lining its sides. The buildings were tall, reaching up with their cracked, weathered brick and rusty metal hands to block out the light of the low hanging moon.

I saw a grayish blur dart between the space of the two buildings. I crossed the street myself, trailing the woman down the sidewalk, staying just a few strides behind her. Suddenly, the gray blur burst out from the shadows, brandishing a blade. He grabbed the girl, holding the knife at her throat. A

slew of other, greasy-looking men came out of a darkened back alley, where they evidently had been lurking.

The knife-wielding man muttered deep, guttural threats to the girl, promising to do unspeakable things to her in her ear. Tears gushed from her eyes and her body shuddered in scared sobs. The grimy henchmen inched forward.

That was when I made my move.

Lunging, I kicked outward. I quickly became a mess of flailing arms, biting teeth, and kicking legs. Some men's crotches, others' shins, knees, and other weak areas were met by my kicks. Some others of the gang were knocked into the streetlamp post, or had their faces beaten badly into the sides of cars as I grabbed them each in turn, jumping from man to man and fighting the woman's assailants.

The man with the knife stood bewildered, still holding his captive fast. All his henchmen were invisibly beaten, and lay before him, a crumpled heap of moaning, bleeding, and bruised men. The criminal's eyes darted all about in fear. He slowly backed toward the wall of a building, anxiously anticipating his attacker's next move.

He reversed until his back was nearly touching the building.

THWACK!

I brought down the tire iron I had retrieved moments prior from an alley, having speedily darted there and moving into position so that the man backed right up to me. The iron contacted his head and he fell to the ground face first, joining his comrades in a dreamless unconsciousness. The young woman stood staring for a few long moments, her mouth agape.

"Go home now and stay safe." I said to her.

She did not hear me.

Turning, finally she left. I followed her until I finally witnessed her entering an apartment building that I assumed was hers. Then I returned to the beaten bullies, whom I bound tightly with rope I found in a nearby dumpster. I left a note for the police next to them, and walked away quietly into the night, listening to the sounds of faint rings coming from the mouthpieces of all their phones, which I had picked from their pockets, and on which I had dialed 9-11 in succession.

When I heard sirens, I smiled.

Sure enough, the next day while I was awake, I saw the girl from the night before on television. She had phoned in and informed the police of her story when she saw an earlier broadcast about the hooligans who had been found badly beaten in the street by the police, all tied up, with each of their phones arranged in a circle around a sticky note with their confession scribbled onto it. They had all admitted to it when they were booked. I threw back my head in laughter when one of the hoodlums, wide-eyed, and looking freaked out, told the cameraman about being beaten up by an invisible assailant. I then applied a fresh bag of ice to my very sore hands, wincing as it touched my knuckles.

My final bit of research involved watching out my window in broad daylight. When there were enough people out in the street to produce enough hustle and bustle that morning, I went to my bed,

laid down, and chewed a mouthful of melatonin gummies. Several minutes and relaxation breathing exercises later, and my dream-self joined the people out my window walking along the city's sidewalks.

Eventually, I happened upon a helpless elderly woman desperately trying to get out of the middle of a busy intersection. Her arms quivered involuntarily with nervousness each time a new car horn blared at her. I walked out, took her by the arm, and led her safely the rest of the way. She stepped unharmed onto the sidewalk opposite of the one from which she had begun her adventure. I half expected her to look spooked or scared; she did not. Instead she smiled, looked upward, and said, "thank you, Jesus!" with great sincerity.

When I awoke, I rose, walked downstairs, and looked out my living room window through my binoculars. Several streets away, I witnessed the old woman walking inelegantly, deliberately, yet *unscathed* down the sidewalk. I grinned to myself and nodded.

I had decided.

It took nearly a year to establish my detective agency.

During that time, I was incredibly busy. I purchased supplies, a desk, a chair, a table, a couch and armchairs for interviews, filing cabinets, folders, legal pads, pens, a laptop computer, and all sorts of other business-esque things to furnish the small office space with its large, glass bay window and painted letters reading: "Dr. Day Dreame: Psychic Detective." I had chosen this name as a suitable pseudonym as well as a private joke with myself.

Additionally, I busied myself not only with self-promotion, both in-person, handing out flyers, and attending public events and so forth, (pretending to be a paid office clerk for the good doctor) but also on social media. I marketed the agency as belonging to a psychic detective who would communicate with his clientele through telekinesis remotely, scribbling invisibly on a legal pad to answer their questions and gather info from them, never meeting them face to face. I would dream frequently, running about here and there, collecting clues, discovering evidence, and solving cases for any client who would come along.

It wasn't long before I gained some notoriety, or at least Doctor Dreame did, as a competent Private Eye, and more cases came flooding in.

The news reported abductions, disappearances, odd things happening. People were vanishing from their homes in the night without a trace, inexplicably. There were power outages all over, too. Different metals and chemicals had gone missing from various companies in the city. I had this hunch that all these things were related and being hired by one such chemicals company to do so, began investigating.

My first instinct led me to check the power grid for any unusual activity and construct a map of the power outages. Contacting the city's electric company, explaining who I was, what I was doing, and why, and after a short visit to their headquarters, I was able to construct just that. Looking at my map, with various scribbles on it, notes and so forth, that included details like surges in voltage, I noticed a particularly unusual and significant surge in the north of town.

Tracing the power outage to its central source, I traveled to and entered the building it was coming from in my sleep, where I found a janitor in his office. He was trying to send out a signal from the school he worked in from his computer and it was being jammed. He had all sorts of odd contraptions lying about his desk, such as a strange, spinning accessory with a broom and mop plugged into it on both ends.

I observed him quietly for several minutes. After watching long enough to see him let out an exasperated sigh and declare he had to protect the town no matter what and could not let any evil befall the children, I decided he was alright.

Scouring the school grounds, I searched for the source of the signal jammer. Finally, I found it hiding on the roof, directly above where the custodian's headquarters were. Attached under a satellite dish was a blinking black box with a glowing pale blue light. That must have been what was causing the surge! I yanked it off the dish, pulling and severing its black power cord. The box blinked red once then died. I traversed through the ceiling again to take one last look at the school's curator, who whooped in victory as he finally got his message out, followed by an even more excited outburst when he received back a friendly reply.

I smiled. It brought my heart joy to know I'd helped someone else benevolent in doing something good (whatever that was) even if it was in some small way. Alas, though helpful to the overall common good my action may have been, it was, finally, a detour that led to no progress in my own case. I awoke with a start in my bed at home. I arose, showered, got dressed, and after a quick bite to eat, returned to my office building.

Several hours had passed, in which I compiled all the evidence I had so far. I pasted the map I had constructed based on the information from the power company to the wall of the conference room adjacent to my office. I had also erected photos, paper clippings, and printed out internet forum posts on the wall, connecting all the details which I felt were related to one another with yellow yarn.

At each crime scene I had encountered there was an alarming lack of physical evidence, although a crime had certainly been committed. Turning it over in my brain, I frowned. A theory was developing in my head, one that pointed to a certain kind of criminal. I stepped back into my office and sat down at my desk to check some emails. A few minutes of this and there was a knock on the door.

Taken aback, as I normally only admitted people in while I was dreaming, and by appointment, I answered the knock, stuttering, and unconsciously replied with the first words that automatically came into my head:

"C-come in!" I called.

"Hello." a familiar female voice spoke.

Looking up, my mouth fell open. There, standing in a crimson dress and high heels, her red hair fluttering softly in the breeze drifting in through my office window, her vibrant green eyes piercing out inquisitively, veritabily singing to me with her sudden presence, was the woman from my dreams, the one whom I had gone to such elaborate effort and ends to find, standing in my office in the flesh.

I gasped.

She smiled, blushing slightly, the corners of her mouth curving upward ever so slightly.

“Dr. Dreame, is it?”

“Yes,” I stammered, once I had regained at least a small portion of my composure.

“I need your help.” The woman said.

2.

She was an absolute likeness to my dream girl, down to the finest detail. She even had the same distinctive yet flattering crow’s feet in the corners of her eyes that I found charming and had grown to love in my dreams. Her nose crinkled in just the same way I’d seen night after night when she smiled, and the familiar, faint dimples in her cheeks were quite distinct and obvious to me; it was her, without a doubt. She even had the same mole between her shoulders on her back, visible between the thin straps of her red dress.

Speechless, I sat there at my desk, stunned, for several seconds, studying her mystifying face. At length, I realized, embarrassingly, that my mouth was still hanging open. I closed it. She stifled a snicker.

“So,” I said, trying my best to repress my face’s rushing redness, “what seems to be the problem?”

“Well, you see,” she replied, with a voice that chimed like the bells of St. Mary’s, or like money in a coin purse, “my little Fi-Fi has gone missing.”

“Fi-Fi?”

“Yes. He’s my miniature poodle.”

I paused for a few moments. The illusion, the spell, was temporarily broken. I was taken aback by what she was getting at, even somewhat offended. She had come here, the beautiful woman from straight out of my dreams who was, remarkably, real, just to enlist my help, the great Dr. Dreame, one and only true psychic detective, for help to find her dog? I normally would have told her to get lost.

In fact, normally she would not have seen me face-to-face at all! It was my method to lucid dream at home, after all, communicating remotely by projecting my essence, invisible to the waking eye, providing only a notepad and pen, upon which clients would write and I, the unseen phantom, the dream version of myself, would write back replies. The downtrodden, worried would-be clientele would ooh and awe or gasp when they saw the pen pick itself up and etch letters of empathy, understanding, and a willingness to help them, temporarily relieving them of whatever bereavement ailed them!

It was a helpful gimmick that both added to my notoriety and protected my identity. This woman had caught me off guard. And during one of those rare times in which I was physically present in the office, having come in person to scrutinize my hard-sleuthed evidence while awake, and quite distracted with my studies of it, no less.

At length, looking at her, my brain switched gears once more. Her beauty and my rekindling desire and admiration for her melted the icy anger and I felt the entropic energy of my indignation dissipating, draining away from my head and face.

"I see." I said. "Tell me when he disappeared."

The woman smiled. My heart hammered a bit harder and within my stomach wall I felt what might have been a small fish surface, do a flip, and splash back down into its acids.

"Well, it was two nights ago. I was sound asleep, and dear old Fi-Fi was curled up next to me. At midnight, I felt an electric pulsing, like static in the bedsheets, but stronger. It had a buzzing to it. My hair stood on end. I heard him whimper, and when I started awake, he was nowhere to be found."

"Uh-huh..." I murmured as I jotted down these details on the notepad and tried considerably to push down the judgmental thoughts struggling to come up for air in my head about a male dog being named Fi-Fi, of all possible names.

"I got up and looked for Fi-Fi everywhere, but he was gone!"

"Were there any signs of a break in?"

"No! None of my doors were forced, they were all still locked and shut tight. None of the windows were broken. Everything was locked up tighter than Fort Knox and the blinds drawn!"

"Hmm... describe the electric sound to me again."

"It was sort of a pulsing, electrical humming noise, that buzzed, like...like if you ever walked near a transformer or low hanging, high voltage power lines, like that humming, hissing sound." She shuddered as she recalled it.

"Ah. I see." I said, jotting this down and circling the words *ELECTRIC HISSING*, as it was a common denominator, a phenomenon described by all sorts of my clients whose loved ones had gone missing lately. Now I was intrigued.

"And you've notified the police?" I asked.

"Yes! And they didn't find any evidence, fingerprints, or anything. They haven't made any progress. They say they're swamped too, so many disappearances and odd things going on lately. They have no clues or leads or anything." She sniffled.

"Mmm-hmm," I hummed, trying my best to conceal the excitement I felt as I realized this seemingly small, insignificant dog was connected to the bigger picture of my main case I was grappling with. "Miss, the phenomenon you've experienced is becoming all too common in this city. You aren't the first one to come to me with a case like this."

"Is there anything you can do? Will you help me?" she asked, imploringly.

"Of course. I will do my best, ma'am. I intend to get to the bottom of this and learn what has become of your dog." I said, trying diligently to sound professional and confident, and perhaps deepening my voice slightly more than its usual tone.

She looked at me in the most peculiar way, as if she were amused by me for a second, or disbelieved my competencies. Then as quickly as the look flickered across her face it was gone, and she smiled.

“Thank you, oh thank you, Doctor!” the woman exclaimed.

Leaping up, she bent her tall torso over the desk and planted a kiss on my forehead. My heart raged and my cheeks flushed red. There was nothing I could do to stop that this time. After this, I took down some more info from her. Standard stuff, her name, the dog’s fur color, age, weight, and dimensions (...black, 8 years, 15 lbs., 12” high, and 18” long) as well as the woman’s phone digits and address.

She bid me farewell and strutted out of the office with a bit more spring in her step. I sat in silent solitude for several seconds, pondering all that had just transpired, still lightheaded from the sudden, surreal sight of the subject I’d previously seen only in my sleep. I felt dizzy, fuzzy headed, nearly like I was falling into a dream.

I don’t know how much time passed after she left, but I found myself starting, maybe moments, perhaps an hour or two later, picking up my head from my desk, peeling a piece of notebook paper off my forehead, and finding myself quite groggy.

I arose then, shook my head several times, and quickly scuttled to the conference room. Gazing at my evidence board, I considered that strange detail, the common denominator, in all my cases. The mysterious electric hissing and static-electricity-like sensation moments before a disappearance. When the sun began to sink low in the sky, inching ever closer to its repose behind the hills on the horizon, I locked up and left for the evening. I ate dinner, brushed my teeth, and went to bed. It was time to sleep and gather clues, adding this case of the missing miniature poodle to my ever-expanding load of cases, and body of evidence.

Stealthily and swiftly I strode down the street, scanning with enhanced dream vision, searching for signs of the missing pooch; during the past several months I had honed this new skill. If my suspicion, that most remarkable of conclusions to which the facts were beginning to coalesce, the clues apparently bowing their caps toward it, then I needed to search for what I had started to call “dream residue.”

You see, as of then I had never encountered another human in my lucid, spirit-casting dream state. Not a sleeping one, that is, at least not one who had stayed around or whom I had had a conversation with or had been able to do what I could do, anyway. No, the humans who were awake were entirely unaware of me, and I had only caught glimpses of dreaming humans here and there, and fleetingly so. Sometimes they would appear, look around wildly, and then suddenly disappear. Other times they would get pounced upon by a dream-ghost of a dog or cat, jump and yell and then disintegrate.

I figured they were in what for humans would be the beginning stages of dreaming before entering the realm of deep sleep. Somehow, I was able to consciously stay in this state and do what I was doing, interacting with the real world, while others either ascended to a “dream-world” or woke up.

I did much more frequently, however, see animals. Sometimes it was the spectral presence of a sleeping cat, hunting. Other times it was a dog or several such canines chasing the spirits of squirrels and the like.

During the daylight hours when I dozed, I would see the astral specters of nocturnal animals, bats, owls, opossums, raccoons, etc., rapidly racing all about or flying in their dreams. They seemed not to pay any heed to my presence, at least not any more than they would to any human while in their waking states. Unlike me, they seemed unable to affect the waking world and any object while they were asleep. Whilst observing the cretins' movements, though, I began to notice that they did leave footprints, tiny, glowing imprints, spectral residue, on objects and places in the real world that could only be detected by one like me in my sleep as they interacted with various things and places in their dreams.

With time, practice, and patience, I began to be able to discern both animal and human, and oddly enough, plant signatures left behind when these creatures slept. Sometimes humans would touch or bump into something. A rodent would scamper up a tree. When I concentrated, my eyes would glow, and a milky white, fog-like smoke would drift from out of my eye sockets. In my vision, whatever traces, footprints, paw prints, or simply places where a being's dream self had brushed against something or someone, would emblazon itself and glow, standing out in contrast from everything else around it.

It was in this way that I went about gathering more evidence, collecting clues, and that evening, looking for tiny poodle paw prints in the middle of the city.

What must have been several hours in the waking world passed, and I had made little progress, finding only the circular patterns of fallen sleep pollen from various flowers on the ground. Beginning to get bored, I began walking back to my apartment. I crossed a street and paced past my office building. It was then, that, out of the corner of my eye, I caught a glimpse of a glowing set of tracks. I looked down and followed them. They led all the way to my office building.

Intriguing.

Upon closer inspection, they seemed to be human, and from the pointed toe of them, to have come from a high-heeled shoe, and from the size presumably from a woman. Also, they had been left behind by walking forward out of my office building. I followed the trail of the unknown human woman who'd left the tracks. They disappeared and reappeared at odd intervals, and were spaced apart sporadically, finally sputtering out as they curved around the corner of the building.

My brain sparked, making a startling realization. These were the steps of a faltering woman, whose tracks were made in this realm in this manner because she was struggling to maintain consciousness. I briskly burst around the corner and onto an unsettling scene.

Sure enough, there were several male assailants accosting a young, blonde woman wearing a black dress. They wacked her in the back of the head, and down she went. Almost immediately, her spirit appeared, hovering in a dream state above her body. I bolted forward, brandishing a bat I had with me that I kept stashed behind a bush near my office building (I had many such objects hidden around town in case I needed them in my detective work now) and swinging it around, connected with several of their skulls. In a similar fashion as I explained before, I beat the brutes with brutal bludgeoning blows, and the soon all fell to me.

“You’re okay now,” I said, turning to the woman’s spirit, “It’s going to be alright. I’ll stay with you until you wake up and make sure nothing happens.”

She stared at me, recognition dawning on her face.

“It’s you!” she gasped. “I found you.”

I frowned, confused, but before I could ask her anything, at that moment a series of rapidly happening events unfolded. I heard a loud, shrill bark, that which had to have come from a small dog. Snapping my head around, I saw the ethereal form of the same canine specimen the red-haired woman had shown me in a picture on her phone. He was floating in the air, flying toward me and my unconscious companion, its paws stretched out and flailing, as if some unseen line were dragging it. I reached out to grab the dream pup, but my sweeping arms missed, due to a sudden tugging sensation that seemed to pull me up off the sidewalk and drag me, too, into the air.

Hearing a scream, I looked back over at my female friend. Struggling against the same invisible force, she too was being drug off the concrete and into the air against her will. Glancing up, I saw we were being pulled towards an enormous, pulsating, glowing ball of light. The woman reached it first, followed by the dog. There was a bright flash, and both disappeared with an electric hiss. Looking downward at the street, I noticed that the woman’s sleeping body had vanished, too.

I was being pulled upward and inward to the orb, too, more quickly with each passing second. It was unavoidable, a veritable gravitational pull. As I moved forward toward it, I concentrated, resisting, calling out to my physical body across the dream world. I sensed strongly something sinister was transpiring, and wherever the little dog and lady had disappeared to was not a place I wanted to go, at least not yet, unarmed and unprepared, and the woman’s physical disappearing along with the mental disturbed me greatly.

“Wake up. Wake up. WAKE UP!” I hissed to myself.

I was quite near the orb now and it pulsed and rotated with its bright glow. I could hear a humming sound coming from within it. It electrified the air and my dream hairs stood on end on the back of my neck. I had almost touched it, inducing it’s bright, teleporting flash, when I closed my eyes, gritting my teeth tightly, resisting it with every fiber of my being.

I woke up suddenly, and with a gasp.

I was covered in a cold sweat. I darted my gaze all about disoriented, discovering eventually as my wits returned to me that I was in my own bed in my own room, safely inside my own apartment. I breathed a sigh of relief and after a few moments, my heartrate began to return to a resting rate of revolutions per minute.

“Whoa,” I spoke aloud to myself, and sitting up in bed wondered who the woman was. Where had she and the dog had disappeared to, by what mechanism, who was behind it, and just what kind of wild thing in this wide world had I stumbled upon?

3.

More and more people were going missing.

Poof!

Gone in the night, without so much as a warning. Without a trace of where, when, or how they had gone, except littered reports of a strange hissing and electric feel. Now the investigation on the part of the authorities had intensified: sometime in the last few nights, a federal agent on the case had been abducted, too. This shocked me and I re-doubled my efforts to resolve this situation, working even more intensely and diligently.

I stood watching the flooded frenzy of news reports the next morning. Making calls to the press and explaining that yes, I was *the* psychic detective, Dr. Dreame, I jotted down the addresses of each disappearance with pen and notepad.

Heading to my humble headquarters, and entering the conference room, whose walls were adorned now with a veritable tapestry devoted to this case, I pushed a red tack into the map I'd extrapolated from the power company's tips on each of the addresses where the disappearances I learned from the news had occurred.

Standing back and somberly studying my map, my eyes grew wider when I surmised the shape before me; within one city block, each of these addresses formed a circle. Tying a piece of yarn to each red capped tack and running it from one tack to another, linking each of them to the one directly across from it in the shape on the map, I pushed down a larger, brass-colored tack in the threads' intersection, the center of the circle, or at least as close as I could pinpoint it using this crude method.

My theory was beginning to solidify. I went over the facts aloud to myself.

These people had each disappeared in their sleep.

The woman, the dog, the vortex/orb.

Whatever building, structure, or place that corresponded to the center of those threads I was sure *had* to be where all the victims had been taken, teleported to. I looked closely at the map, squinted, then ran to my laptop, and pulled up Google Maps on my web browser. I drug the screen to where I wanted, dropped a digital pin, and examining street view, I found a large, brown warehouse.

Bingo!

Jotting down its address, or rather an address nearby (the warehouse had no such information of its own listed anywhere,) I hurried out the door and headed home to my own hearth, where I would lay my head and slumber.

Passing from one state of consciousness to another, and entering the dreaming, I darted down sidewalk, alleyway, and under street signs.

I ran as a ghost dreamer, a specter through the streets and byways, turning this corner, taking that shortcut, hurriedly making my eager way towards my destination, until finally I was there, and:

Nothing.

Just an old, immense, rectangular brown-brick warehouse. Its windows were high and out of reach, and, while lit, I could not see into them. Circling the block, I found an incredibly odd detail about the building: there were no doors or entrances of any kind visible on it. I marveled, walking its perimeter several times, just to be sure. I wondered how nobody seemed to ever have noticed this particularly strange aspect of this building. I decided after a while to sit and watch this suspicious structure. It was all I could really do. No activity or sound came from the building, and, waiting for some considerable unit of time, I saw no one enter or exit the warehouse. Sitting, eyes sagging from the uneventful stakeout, and beginning to wonder just what would happen if I fell asleep within this dream, I think I very nearly woke up from boredom.

Then, a familiar yipping and a clacking of toenails on sidewalk.

The dog!

Around the corner I went, practically flying, and there I found the tiny, curly-black-haired miniature poodle who had disappeared into the orb a couple of nights before. He yipped at me and wagged his tail excitedly.

“Here, Fi-Fi!” I called, amicably stooping to the ground.

Fi-Fi whirled and scurried away. I pursued him down the street and around the corner of the warehouse, until I stopped dead.

Fi-Fi had inexplicably disappeared, again.

Frustrated, I gasped and sat up in bed, awake in my apartment again, heart pounding. I got up, panting, after which I walked to the wall and looked out my bedroom window to greet the morning sun.

The following two nights this routine continued.

The first night I took chase to Fi-Fi, and nearly grabbed his tail, missing it by inches before he turned the corner and vanished again.

The second night I acutely anticipated his asinine actions, and rather than pursuing him, I turned and ran the opposite direction. I sped around two corners of the brown warehouse, then, stopping abruptly at the third, hid and waited to pounce at the little barking ball of fur.

Sure enough, Fi-Fi rounded the corner at top speed. I leapt out, swung my hands low, and clasped him on both sides snugly. The dog was going too fast to stop or change directions, but it still tried nevertheless, attempting to skid to a halt prior to me grabbing him, resulting in a flailing and jerking of his doggy head, and the small animal toppling tumultuously head over heel directly into my hands.

I let out a victory laugh, flinging my head backward. No sooner had I done so, then I saw a bright, green, eerie glow. I inadvertently let go of Fi-Fi. Oddly, he sat on his haunches beside me, going

nowhere. My eyes darted to the source of the glow, which had apparently been triggered by gripping the little dog.

Before me, the warehouse had transformed. Instead of a plain, ugly, brown brick warehouse, a monstrous, towering castle with high spires and minarets, gothic in architecture, stood sprawling before me and shining incandescently. I gasped and gawked at the spectacle. I looked down at Fi-Fi, in shock, and half expected the dog to say something, to offer any explanation.

The dream dog simply sat, seemingly grinning smugly, before rising, heading straight toward the warehouse/castle's outer wall, walking straight through it, and disappearing inside.

"So *that's* where he'd been disappearing to," I thought.

Standing fully, I gazed upward at the extravagant palace before me. Its glow seemed to change colors, pulsating between purple, blue, now red, now orange, now back to green. This had to be the hidden headquarters of whatever or whoever was responsible for the abductions, of whatever hideous villain and his heinous crimes I had been pursuing, gathering evidence against each night.

Everything, all of it, had led me here.

Taking in a deep breath and then striding forward from the sidewalk, I stepped through the castle wall and entered inside.

Traversing through the brick I found myself on the base level of the castle, which was composed of similar plain, brown brick as the building's plain warehouse disguise seemed to be. A blazing, psychedelic display of lights illuminated and swirled and danced on the inside walls of that wide, expansive first floor hall.

It looked like any normal warehouse might otherwise, full of seemingly endless rows of shelves packed with various stock and supplies and miscellaneous stored items of numerous natures. On and on I walked, and so, too on and on the shelves went, as far as the eye could see, which while I knew they could not be endless, certainly gave off the optical illusion of being so.

I knew that there must be some way up to the next level of the castle. I searched up and down the aisles, examining the walls and floors, looking for a crack here that might reveal a trapdoor, or a rise in the wall that may hide a button or switch opening a secret passage. I had no such luck and wandered aimlessly as a dreaming phantasm, solemnly, silently, and cautiously, for what seemed hours, my search never turning up anything.

Finally, exiting the last row of long shelves across from where I had entered the building, I reached the opposite wall. Looking up and down the plain brickwork, I scanned until I found it: a wooden door that looked to be quite old and misplaced in the modern, dull-looking warehouse brick. From underneath it beamed out a pulsating, multi-colored light, matching that which illuminated the shelves behind me but brighter, with more vibrant colors, more *real*.

I had found it. The portal leading upward and further into the dream castle, and toward the inner sanctum of whatever conniving culprit I would find, culminating my search.

Stepping toward the door, I was blocked by the sudden appearance of a tall, dark figure who stepped forward from the shadows. She was tall, slender, and wore a dark, green bandana around her face concealing her features, so that I only saw her jade green eyes. She was clad in a black spandex suit that hugged her feminine form, making her physique tight and obvious. I stepped forward, attempting to tip toe around the vigilante, but when I stepped to one side, she replicated my motion, blocking me.

I was sure then: she could see me.

I had hardly half a hallowed second to comprehend that she, too, was a lucid dreamer, having powers like my own, when I was harried by a horse-powered roundhouse kick to the chest and knocked to the ground.

Leaping to my feet, I lashed out with a lightning fast left. She caught it with her right, clutching my shirt in her left hand, spun me, then flung me to the ground. I popped right back up again, feigned left, then kicked her in her stomach, knocking her breath out.

Having caught her by surprise, I pushed her head downward, grabbed her by the back of belt, and flipped her, hurling her hard to the deck, where she lay flat on her back. Not missing a beat, the ninja like woman kicked out and her toe met my shin, causing my head to bow in pain, then she leapt up in one fluid motion and delivered a dazing uppercut.

I staggered backward, knocked somewhat senseless for a few seconds, before I regained control over my limbs and the world stopped spinning. My opponent stood, arms raised for attack, in a ready stance.

We fell at each other, delivering blow after blow, blocking, bowing, twisting, locking in a tight dance, a veritable duel to the death, for several minutes. Sweat dripped from both our figures. Yes, I even sweat that night in my dream, I swear. It left dream residue all over the warehouse floor. The fight continued and as it progressed, I felt further and further fatigued. I was however, bound and determined to gain the upper hand. I *would* get past her and reach that door, to thwart whatever malevolent purveyor of mayhem lay above.

Ultimately, I faked a flinch, and when the woman leapt to deliver a karate chop to my solar plexus, I dodged her, and used her own momentum to throw her against the wall, against which she collided with an "umph!" I grabbed her by the bewildered shoulders and held her arms down, pinning them to her sides. She struggled against me. I struggled right back, trying to sidestep her while holding her arms still until I could jimmy open the wooden door, slam it behind me, and spring away from her safely.

Doubtlessly, she would pursue me up whatever path or stairway lay beyond its threshold. (I had not even begun to imagine what I'd do were the door locked!) The woman wiggled, wriggled, and grunted. I held her in a bear hug from behind, my arms reaching around her holding her arms fast with both my hands clasped together. I could feel her tender breasts beneath my wrists. She stopped struggling momentarily. Then, she sucked in her breath and flipped completely around in my grasp facing me. I was quite taken off guard, impressed by her flexibility.

Smiling, she delivered a kiss on my lips. Just a quick peck, but enough of a distraction.

Stunned, I stepped backward, releasing her.

Something shot out at me, clasped in the fighting woman's hand. The metal object glinted in the glimmer of the dancing psychedelic lights. I felt a burning followed by a stinging, and then a warm wetness under my shirt and across my chest as the woman's knife slashed me.

I stumbled backwards, leaving bloody handprints on the brick as I did so. I clutched boxes on the shelves, pulling them down to separate myself and impede the woman's progress, who stepped over them gingerly, still pursuing me and brandishing the knife in my direction.

"Let me go!" the woman demanded, in an oddly familiar voice.

"Let you go? What are you talking about?" I sputtered.

"Don't play dumb!" she screeched. "This is your little operation here, and you abducted me the other night! I want out, and I am going to bring my men in, somehow, on a raid! The jig is up!"

"...what are you *talking* about?" I repeated. "I'm not the bad guy, here! I'm Doctor Dreame, you know, the psychic detective?"

The woman had utter confusion, I mean flat out bewilderment, on her face. She held the long knife over her head now, ready to bring it down and sink it into my chest at any moment. At that moment, I realized why I recognized her voice: she was the woman from the night before.

"Wait, you, *you're* Doctor Dreame?"

"Yes! Who are you?"

"Agent Tabitha Grail, FBI. I've been investigating all the disappearances."

"Me too..." I pled, trying to convince her not to chop me down with her knife, which she had temporarily lowered a bit.

"Yeah, you have, haven't you..." she said, making connections in her mind, some epiphany dawning on her that completely evaded me. "And no one's ever seen you...until now..."

I had backed myself all the way to the brick wall from which I had originally entered the building. I was losing a good amount of blood at that point and starting to become lightheaded. Her green bandana-veil had fallen in the struggle, revealing the same feminine face I'd seen the night before, with compact, round features surrounded by somewhat ruffled blond hair. I squinted to get a better view, but in the dazzling flashing lights followed by brief periods of darkness, and the generally shadowiness of that warehouse hall, I could not make out her face fully.

"Listen, it's over! You. Will. Let. Me. GO!!!" Tabitha shrieked, leaping at me, about to swing the knife down on me to end me.

I fell backward, sitting with a hard plop onto the floor right onto my bottom, and my back touched the brick. I passed through it partially, so that my body was halfway in and out of the castle. Flying toward me, knife flourishing in the multi-colored light, Tabitha came down upon me. I winced, anticipating the final blow.

When her body contacted the castle wall, she suddenly vanished altogether, at the precise moment she would have slain me. I jumped.

I sprung awake in my bed at home again, screaming out in pain. Much to my shock and horror, my *real* chest was burning, and my t-shirt was slashed and soaked with blood. I rolled out of bed with a groan and leaving a trail of variously sized red dots on my floor, limped to the bathroom.

Thirty minutes later, after much applied pressure and self-administered First Aid, I lay back on my sheets in my bedroom, bandages wrapped around my chest. Bandaged, bruised, and savagely beaten, I closed my eyes and slipped into a black, dreamless sleep this time, going nowhere, seeing nothing and nobody, and thankfully, checking out of the world for a while until the next day.

III.

I had to get in. I had to. It had to be done.

Whatever was going on inside that warehouse I was determined to reveal to the world; its nefarious person within had to be exposed and stopped. I stood outside on the sidewalk, in my dream state. Sure enough, now multiple guards stood around the outside. These were ones who could see me. I knew they could. They pointed at me, whispered to one another, and stared.

How was I going to get in?

I thought for a second, then smiled when it came to me. I was dreaming, right? I took three big steps back, then bounded forward, took an enormous leap, and soared into the upward into the air.

When I had awoken that morning, I rolled out of bed with a searing, burning pain in my chest where I had been stabbed. Apparently if you get hurt in the dream state, it reciprocates to your real body. Good to know. I changed my wound dressings after a shower and headed into the office.

I walked up the flight of stairs to the level of the office building my detective agency resided upon, only to find the doorframe splintered and the door hanging slightly ajar, swinging loosely on its hinges. The entire interior was in disarray; someone had come in and wrecked the place, looking for something, and sending me a message.

I sprinted through the reception area, hurdling a toppled chair, and entered the conference room. My evidence board was gone, and papers, newspaper clippings, and pieces of yarn were strewn all over. I backed out of the room, very nearly about to suffer a panic attack, and entered my office. My desk lamp was smashed, my laptop sitting at an odd angle. Checking its screen, I saw that it was locked out; whoever had been there had made too many incorrect attempts at guessing its password.

I noticed a yellow piece of paper on my desk, a sticky note placed in a location in the middle where I would notice it. Picking it up, I read the message scrawled onto the paper:

“Nice try, last night. We’ll have you soon, Dream Catcher. Don’t leave town. –Det. T.G.”

I was happy to learn that Tabitha was alive and okay. She had made it out of the dream and presumably woken up safe and sound somewhere when she hit that wall from the inside, in reverse effect of when the dog would touch it from the outside, or so I believed. I didn’t have time to think

about why touching the wall from inside the warehouse didn't have the same effect on me. I had to get out of there. Surely the place was under surveillance, and they would ambush me, having watched me, followed me, waiting for me to come back?

I raced down the same flight of stairs but turned a corner, walking down the landing hallway, and exiting the building out a back door into the alleyway behind the office building.

Where would I go?

I couldn't go home. They were surely watching my apartment. That would be the first place they'd grab me. I evidently was their prime suspect, standing wrongfully accused as public enemy number one, and why? All because I, too have a mysterious power like whoever was doing this. Sheer coincidence. I had to stop the real villain, to clear my name, and to bring justice upon him, now more than ever. I had to enter the sleep again. But how? Where would I go?

I decided to run. I ran and ran and ran down street, alley, and byway. I ran for a good hour, clearing the city, stopping only to grab a cellphone I had stashed in a bush near the edge of the urban living's boundaries. I continued running on out of the city, past its suburbs, and to the outskirts of town. Eventually, I found an Inn on the side of the road, which I hastily checked into, having sufficiently worn myself down to where I could fall asleep for a couple of hours. I filled out the necessary paperwork, paid, for the room, and took my key card. Falling upon the pillows and blankets, I quickly got into bed and within a few minutes I passed out and made my way back into the city, toward the warehouse.

Now, I soared high into the air. I had done it. My theory had proven correct. I could fly! I was lucid dreaming, after all. The thugs guarding the warehouse below gazed upward at me uselessly, unable to reach or stop me. Up and up I went, until finally I willed my momentum to slow, and angling downward like a diver, I plummeted toward the tip-top of the building. Down, down, down, I went, gaining speed as I dove, until with a whoosh my spectral body hit the top of the warehouse and I disappeared from the villains' sight below.

I knew I did not have much time. I had to get what evidence I could, track down the bad guy, confront him before the appropriate parties were alerted inside here and they caught me, or my body was awakened by the F.B.I. in my room at the Inn. I walked down a darkened corridor, up some steps, and through a large, metal door. I was greeted at first with a bright, brilliant array of multi-colored light like I had seen before on my first expedition.

When my eyes adjusted, what I saw horrified me. I was in a gargantuan room, lined from wall to wall with beds. On each of the beds sat a person, and each person was clad in a similar black jumpsuit and green bandana as I had encountered Tabitha Grail wearing the night before, though around their necks as identifying markers, not covering their faces. Looking closer, I recognized many of these people as the children and adults who had been reported missing in the news. At the foot of each bed sat what appeared to be a doctor in a white lab coat, swinging a watch on a chain back and forth and muttering soothing things to them. Each person would fall into a deep sleep.

Then, I saw the dream-versions of many of them appear by their bedsides once they had been sufficiently hypnotized, and they began to walk around the room with their doctor at their side, who,

putting on a special pair of what appeared to be sunglasses, which I supposed allowed them to be seen, began instructing them in various things, one of which seemed to include hand-to-hand combat.

I traversed that room, going here and there and snapping photos on the smartphone I'd stashed in town and snagged on my run, collecting as much evidence of this as I could. I would make sure to get a good photo of the boss, too, and then fly out of there, and show the feds that it was whoever was the brains of the operation here doing these things, and NOT me. I reached the opposite end of the room from where I came in, and there was a metal staircase leading up to another door. I climbed them and entered the next chamber.

This chamber was smaller, but much darker. It was bowl-shaped, with black painted walls. I walked down its sloped sides into the bowl and toward its center, which housed a gigantic monstrosity of a contraption that I needed to snap a photo of. The whole thing was about twenty-five feet tall, and consisted of a cylindrical metal base that was the same shade of black as the chamber it sat in, with a considerable, wide circular loop made of what looked to be thick wiring or cables covered on its outer rim in black leather or rubber.

Wires made of various metals and in varying thicknesses were woven over and under each other in a pattern inside the loop, stretching from its thick outer cables to its inside, angling downward as they ran toward the center, until they stopped at a hollow circle of air that was teardrop shaped, seemingly staring outward like an eye.

At the bottom, whether as a joke or for aesthetic effect I never knew, a braided rope was tied from which all kinds of feathers, presumably from different birds, were strung.

The center of the beacon sparked and hissed, fed with a powerful electric current supplied by some dark, black cables connecting to its base. Suddenly, a bright orb of energy sparked to life at the very middle of the giant machine, sending electric arcs rippling along its woven wires, and a crackling wave of multi-colored energy that seemed to writhe like it was alive.

A flash and a person in their pajamas materialized in the air in the center of the large loop. He fell to the ground with a thud, the impact forcing a sharp, vocal exhale from him. Several minions in black came from out of the shadows and escorted the groggy, disoriented-looking man through the door I had just come through, doubtlessly below to be brainwashed and trained how to use the powers I had for whatever degenerate purposes. I thought briefly and vaguely, wondering why I had been inside this building so long and been allowed to see so much without being apprehended yet, or seeing any signs of being pursued, but I shook off the thought and kept moving.

So that was how they were doing it, with that behemoth contraption, and this was where they were bringing them. And whoever they were, they were training some sort of an army of people just like me. The thought made me shudder. I tiptoed my way across that blackened room, taking care to gingerly avoid the giant mechanistic monstrosity, and surveyed the wall on the other side. A small door, that to the untrained eye would not stand out from the black wall, with a small label that read: "Dream Catcher's Office."

This was it: my confrontation with the boss. Whatever or whoever lay behind this door likely held the key to everything, all the evidence, everything I needed to know. Here I went. I touched the

door, searching for a handle. I found a groove, with a latch mechanism within it, and pressed it. The door clicked open. I pushed it open and walked in.

An office, full of filing cabinets, a computer that looked a little like it belonged in the Bat-cave, lots of books and folders and files lying all about. I stepped up to examine the computer screen, and froze. My heart skipped a beat and I could not believe what I was seeing. Shaking the mouse, awakening the computer, I saw that the background image was me and the red-haired woman from my dreams. In fact, it was us standing together and smiling in the French Riviera, a scene straight out of one of my dreams!

Click-clack, click-clack went the sound of high-heeled shoes on the black metal ground behind me outside the office, accompanied by the clickety-clacking of a miniature poodle's toenails. I whirled around. There she was. The woman of my dreams in the red dress had just entered the office, Fi-Fi by her side.

"Kip, dear! You're here! Welcome home!" the woman said with wide open arms.

When she said the name, it was like she was calling me, calling me back from far away. Flashes, Christmases, crimes, scenes from years and years of repressed memories and experiences came flooding back to me. I did my best to concentrate on my breathing, to clear my mind, to stop it.

"Wha-what did you call me?" I demanded. I dropped the phone on the floor.

"Why, I called you Kip, it's your name, isn't it?"

"No-no, my name's...my *real* name's..." I realized to my utter horror that I could not find my real name anywhere in my head, no matter how hard I struggled to recall it.

She chuckled, a kind of chuckle that sounded like she genuinely thought the mental pain and anguish, that the conflict, the cognitive dissonance going on so intensely within my head now that I staggered and clutched the desk chair for support, was *funny*, or perhaps even cute.

"Tell me, darling, do you remember your first day of school? Or where you even went to elementary school? How about your parents' names? Your graduation? No?"

I really could not remember any of those things. And it caused me pain. I knew they were real, knew I had experienced them, but try as I might, I could not conjure their names, or now any recollection of them at all.

"N-no..." I said, sputtering and gasping, on the verge of tears now. Finally, overwhelmed, I let loose the frustration and emotion and bawled, hunching over the desk entirely. The woman came over and rested her hand on my back, rubbing it up and down. Somehow it consoled me, almost automatically stopping my tears.

"There there, honey, it's okay..." she said with a soothing voice like jingling money. Then, "You do remember *my* name, though, don't you?"

"Yeah, you *told* me in the office, it's Rena."

"Oh, that's right. Bad example, sorry dear. Oh, I'm just so glad to have you here again! I thought I had lost you for good. All those exploits, all that planning, all that dream-projecting and labor was very

taxing on you. You ran off, disappeared! And when I found you, working under an alias, too, as a dream detective, trying to solve it all!”

“W-what are you saying?” I stuttered. “Wait...how can you see me? I’m in my dream state...”

“Oh honey,” Rena said, rubbing my cheek, “I’ve *always* been able to see you.”

I looked at her then. Really looked at her, for the first time, and saw past the mystique and charm and noticed it for the first time. My stomach did a cartwheel. How had I not noticed? There had been something about this woman the day she came into my detective agency, that time she asked for help, something ethereal about her, an extra glamour, something *more* than real.

“No way...” I said.

“It’s true, dear!” Rena said, smiling. “I’m more like you than anyone else on earth!”

“But how, the picture...” I said, pointing at the monitor, still not comprehending things one hundred percent, “how did you get a picture from my dreams?”

“Oh honey,” she said, giggling once again, “that wasn’t a *dream*, that was *real*, from a vacation we took after one of our big jobs, don’t you *remember*?”

I shook my head furiously.

“No. I can’t accept it. I won’t. Even if I am responsible... for... all of this,” I said, sweeping my finger around to indicate the entire warehouse, “with you, I want out. I quit. The FBI is already searching for me, I’ll wake up and tell Agent Grail tha-”

I was interrupted by Rena laughing the highest and loudest she had yet, her red hair bobbing up and down as her petite frame quaked with her laughs.

“Oh goodness, honey, really! Agent Grail! You aren’t going to be telling her anything, and she isn’t going to be telling anyone anything, or solving anything for that matter! She will be disappearing again, I am afraid, and this time won’t be returning like she did.”

“What are you talking about?”

Rena stepped forward, bent down, and opened one of the manila folders. Shuffling through some papers, she finally unclipped a photograph from a paper and held it up beside her face so that it and she were facing me. She smiled with the same smile. With the exception of hair color and a few facial features, I was looking at the same woman.

“Oh my God.” I said. “It’s- you’re-”

“One and the same. Come on, now, you didn’t really think I’m a natural redhead, did you?” she chuckled. “It was all part of an elaborate ruse to both get my beloved back, and throw the FBI off our scent to maintain what we’re trying to do here. I sought you out, I wanted you back, but you were just good enough at playing detective. Not to mention you were working with and aiding the police. So I had to invent a persona to throw them off and continue luring you in.”

“But that doesn’t make sense. You tried to stop me from entering here last night. You fought me. You *cut* me.”

She frowned. “I am truly sorry for that, dear. I’m afraid that was a little glitch in our machine that caused things to go a little wonky when I was unintentionally beamed up. My brain got a bit scrambled and I was confused. But luckily, you helped fix it, in the culmination of our little scuffle, if quite inadvertently so. I mean, it did take you so *long* to catch little Fi-Fi! I was surprised when I found out!”

I was speechless. It couldn’t be. Yet, it fit. I really did not remember anything specific about my background, my past life before I was Dr. Dreame. My daytime, waking alter-ego was substantially lacking substance. And the memories, the details of my life with Rena and before, were becoming increasingly clear and solid in my mind by the second.

“So, you’re saying. You’re really saying, that...”

“That’s right. It’s been you this whole time.”

I still could not accept it. I would not.

“No, No, NO!!!” I shouted, shaking my head.

Rena took a step back, looking genuinely worried for the first time. I ran at her. The dog barked. I pushed her backward, out of the door, slammed, and locked it.

“Now, really, Kip, come on!” Rena said.

She pled with me to open the door, but I refused. Instead, I bent and picked up the phone. I opened the filing cabinets and threw papers everywhere. I sifted through documents, photos, evidence. I accessed the computer, typing in the correct password on my first try (how did I do that?) and scrolled through a mountain of evidence. I then looked at tons of real, personal photos in an album on the desktop full of pictures and memories Rena and I had shared, some of which I distinctly remembered from what I had previously believed were dreams. It looked like the evidence was, in fact, all pointing at one person.

I was my own worst enemy.

Still confused, still scared, still not fully able to accept it all, I hung my head, touching my forehead to my desk, and sobbed. Rena first asked calmly, then a bit louder, and finally shouting, demanded I let her back in. She pounded on the door.

BOOM.

BOOM.

BOOM.

The dog barked.

And here I sit, now. The sobs have subsided. I am calm. I am clear headed. I am breathing, deep and long, and easily as I contemplate. I swipe through my collected evidence, the pictures on my phone,

taking it all in over and over again. It is all laid out before me. I have examined the evidence, measured the mound of information, looked at all the documentation in this room, some pieces of it several times. The conclusion is unquestionable. There is simply too much here for it to have been fabricated.

BOOM.

BOOM.

BOOM.

And a bark. Rena, the woman of my dreams, pleads with me, begs for me to let her in, to let her console me, to rejoin her and my life of crime, the memories of which are solidifying now, more tangible and vivid than ever. I am more me now than I have been in quite some time.

BOOM.

BOOM.

BOOM.

It seems to me that I have a choice. I can let her in. I can rejoin her and this undertaking, picking right back up where we left off. Or I can resist her, turn against her, thwart her. Continue being the hero I've become over these months, the Dream Detective.

What to do, what to do?

BOOM.

"HONEY, LET ME IN, PLEASE!!!!"

BOOM.

I consider the consequences of each course of action, considerably.

BOOM.

"Yip, yip!"

BOOM.

I think I'll sit here for a little while and think about it just a little bit more.

BOOM.

But I cannot stay in here forever.

BOOM.

THE END.