

CHAPTER 1 – THE VISION

A thousand feathers across my skin cannot portray the feeling when it comes upon me. The calling is not like Jesus summoned to suffer for humankind, or the Buddha to sit under the Bodhi Tree. It is a calling to walk the line between sanity and insanity, where one wonders if madness is only a short step out of this reality. A voice beckons me to awake, a sound that invades my soul, my body. It comes crashing into my consciousness, a lion on the hunt. The sound is real, undeniable; it is physical, and tonight it comes from the depths of sleep. A presence with no face breathes into my ear, awakening the other me, the one who hears and sees things that cross the boundaries of certainty. Burying my head in the pillow does not help. Images already flash behind my eyes. The Voice has come for me again.

“Madison... rise,” its whisper cracks the underpinnings of my thoughts and rationality.

“Go away!” I shout. My heart races. I pound the mattress with clenched fists. My legs kick off the blankets. Feet find the floor. In a room darker than a closed coffin, it guides me to a small desk. My body shakes, for I fear the baleful instructions I will receive. To think I own myself is only mischief on the surface of an ocean that is deeper than one can imagine.

“We have something to give you,” the siren calls.

But what they give is nothing I want. *Remain calm,* I tell myself. *Breathe!* They will show me things I do not need to know and a future I do not want to live. I have seen how murderous and tragic humanity can be. They’ve shown me a future of destruction in which nobody wishes to exist but also revealed a way to save lives, mine for one.

I switch on a lamp that barely illuminates the workspace. My shadow is nothing more than a lifeless silhouette on the floor. The sketch pad before me lays open, my hand waits for

instructions to begin. The Voice will hijack my artistic talent, making me a puppet, reacting to strings controlled by a phantom that has no body. I am a vessel forced to drink unholy wine. Their sacrament sweeps away the desk, the room, and the world. Common reality is shredded. My eyes become a camera, a witness to what I don't want to see. My body becomes a dream in a mind I cannot comprehend.

They lead me to a barren landscape where rust-red clouds reflect the color of the sun on a world that is not my own. A creature stands on the edge of a bottomless chasm with vertical walls of jagged stone. Its eyes blaze yellow, head large and ovoid, arms almost skeletal, a mutation of what I know as human. In its emaciated hands, an infant dangles over the void. The child squirms, one foot human, the other with a clawed toe; its eyes are deep green. It is a scene of irrational madness. No mother would drop her child into an abyss.

Stop! I shriek, but the being releases the infant from its grip. Reaching for the child, I leap off the ledge, dropping into hollow darkness. It is a sickly feeling as my stomach rises to the base of my throat. Wind lashes my hair, rain stings my body, and my clothing flaps in the updraft. Swaddling blankets fly by me like butterfly wings. The raw sound of death comes from my throat when we plunge downward into another world. Flashes of lightning jump between clouds, yet not a sound from the infant's mouth. His dark eyes stare into mine as his body transmutes into a golden raindrop.

On a wide ledge far below, a woman stands with arms raised, head tilted upward, her face pelted by the rain. "*Strike me,*" she implores thunderbolts crackling above. But it is not the lightning that strikes, it is the golden raindrop that splashes on her tongue, becoming a glowing ember passing through her body, entering her sacred womb. Shrieks of agony echo off rock walls as her belly swells. I am watching a miracle and a curse twist around each other.

“*We have arrived,*” the Voice says. “*You may begin.*” I have fallen an immeasurable distance, vomit is in my throat, and I am suffocating from the image of this shrieking woman. From one horror, I enter another.

With this single, unmovable image within my mind, I obey the command, pick up the pencil, and draw. Heavy lines of black and shades of gray become the outline of her figure. Finger smudges across white spaces describe a solitary form squatting upon the rock. The veins in her neck stand out as though lifting a weight she cannot bear. But the baby won’t come, and I draw the incalculable pain on her face. I prick my finger and use the red drops to paint blood gushing from between her legs as she attempts to push the child out.

Sweat streams over her body. I would rather stab myself with this pencil than continue, but it’s not my choice to stop. Suffering contorts her bow-shaped lips, wet curly hair frames her face, a mole on the left cheek. A second figure appears on the paper... it is me. I am holding a knife with a long, sharp blade.

“*Cut me open!*” she bellows.

My hands are slippery, neck and chest perspiring. I curse my artistic talent. I curse the Voice that has forced this image from me. It is the harbinger of a future I do not want to see. It is a delivery no woman could survive. I am not here to kill her. I am here to... oh my god!

Drained and exhausted, I finish the picture. It is not beautiful. It is revulsion, yet the Voice says, “*We thank you.*” Always, *we* thank you, as though I have done a favor. Drawing their terrifying dreams is no favor. I wish this birth upon no woman, yet my future with her seems all but certain.

With mind and body beyond exhaustion, I drop the pencil. My forehead lowers to meet the soft flesh of my forearms. I am shattered.

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A cramped neck and sore back wake me. My body throbs from the nightmare. The chair is hard, the drawing lays before me. I wonder if I am a freak of nature. It is not a new thought but one I must hide from myself once again. Morning sunlight seeps around shuttered blinds, beckoning a new day—it is a moment of beauty brushing against my senses that helps cleanse my mind, but not entirely.

Memories of yesterday filter back in. The helicopter, the armed men wearing FBI jackets, an injection in the arm. Willi was there, and my baby, Genesis, when they took me from the van. But where did they take me? The room, the desk, even the pajamas I'm wearing are unfamiliar. *Where are my clothes? Where is my sketchbook? Calm down, Madison, breathe.* Weeks ago, the Voice warned I was in danger but never explained why. I didn't expect to be kidnapped. Although their jackets had FBI printed on them, were they really government agents? It's a nightmare that is now tangible. I look at the image of this woman giving a messy, raw birth and realize I have drawn her before in a far different setting. All of this is too real and, yes, frightening. The tidal wave on the horizon moves toward me, and there is no escape. A soft knock at the door distracts my cascading thoughts.

A triangle of light forms on the floor as the door opens. My chest tightens.

“Are you awake?” a woman calls out.

“Awake,” I respond.

The stranger enters. She is a shadow figure until she walks across the room and raises the blinds.

“Hello, Madison. Time to get dressed.”

I am so stunned I can hardly talk. The visitor is slender, pretty, no pregnancy, but there is no mistake—the curly hair, a mole on her left cheek, and bow-shaped lips are the same woman I drew last night. She is the beginning—a puzzle piece with no visible master blueprint. Already we are an entanglement, and she does not know it. And I wish I didn't.

“You slept at the desk?” She seems surprised.

“I... I guess so.”

“You've been drawing?”

I close the pad and will not let her see this, but... she knows her condition, doesn't she? Words swell in my throat. The urge to speak rises. The discerning mind attempts to hold a wild horse in place. *Say nothing, Madison! Stop. Shush!* it warns. But the question I must ask is already forming.

She holds out her hand. “My name is Stacey... Agent Stacey Wise.”

I take her hand. Her grip is solid and muscular.

My words rush out.

“You're pregnant, aren't you?”

Within her pause, a lifetime passes that she quickly conceals. I know what it's like to keep secrets. The lockbox opens, and one must shut it before the demon escapes. A slight smile crosses her lips.

“Pregnant?” Her voice is light and manicured. “Wrong person, I'm afraid. What makes you think I am pregnant?”

“Your skin,” is my quick reply. There's no way I'm telling anyone that a voice comes to me out of nowhere and reveals things I should not know.

“My skin?” She laughs. “What about my skin?”

“It is smooth, toned, and luminous, perhaps a hormonal change.”

“Well, how about a smooth, dark-roast coffee?” Steam rises from two large cups she brought with her and set on the dresser. She brushes the question aside like lint off her shirt.

She has a reason for keeping her secret hidden, and I'm sure it will be revealed.

“Coffee sounds good.”

She grins at my response.

“Don't suppose you have anything to make it a bit Irish?” I ask, while examining her every feature.

“Hmm, I suppose we can liven it up.” She opens the bottom dresser drawer, pulls out a bottle of Woodford, and pours a shot of liquid amber into each coffee, handing one to me.

I get up and we raise our drinks.

“Cheers.” It is an odd beginning between strangers. I dismiss any doubts about who is in the drawing. It is her secret... and now mine as well. It is a future that will play us out as it will.

My eyes wander around the room. I easily absorb visual images and store them for later use. The desk is faux wood, same with the dresser, three drawers with brass knobs, the throw rug is big-box quality. Pictures on the wall are manufactured reproductions, and tucked away on a small bookshelf, a pair of men's black Oxfords, polished and perfectly set side by side with white-tipped laces neatly tied in a bow. Next to the shoes is a pair of handcuffs and the bottle of whiskey now on top of the dresser. Odd.

“Stacey, can I ask a question?”

“I may not have the answer, but sure, good ahead.”

“Why did the FBI bring me here? Am I under arrest? What do they want? How long will they keep me? Where is the large sketchpad I brought with me? And where in the hell am I?”

She walks to the window and points. “That tall narrow obelisk in the distance is the Washington Monument. Look, Madison, you have questions, but... I have few answers.”

“Washington, D.C.?” My heart pings. That’s two thousand miles from my home. I have no memory of the trip.

“How do you know my name?”

“It’s part of my mission to know who I am serving.”

“And my large sketchpad?”

“That, I didn’t see. What I have of yours is in that closet. You asked for a pad and pencil before you climbed into bed last night. My job is to get you what you need and make you comfortable.”

“You’re my minder?”

“In China they have minders. Here, I am just a helper.”

“Where’s my cell phone? Can I at least call my husband?”

So strange to call Willi my husband. Yes, we live together, share a daughter, and have been through experiences that would shatter a normal relationship. Husband seems a cheap word. Wife more like chattel. We are not married in the usual sense.

“We will contact Willi.”

How does she know his name?

“I’d like to talk to him myself.”

“I’m sorry, but Langley is a secure facility. If you’re here for a while, they’ll issue you a phone that can call anywhere. When you leave, you’ll get your cell back.”

“Am I... under arrest? The men who kidnapped me wore FBI jackets, and the pilot had a PDCO patch on his shirt. Who brought me here?”

“PDCO is a division of NASA. You’re not under the authority of law enforcement. It’s the Planetary Defense Coordination Office that wants to see you.”

My head is spinning. Planetary defense? I walk to the bed. “Why me? Why here? Am I a guest or under investigation?”

“That’s above my security grade, Madison. I’m a shepherd, not a wolf. Maybe the answer is in that missing sketchbook.”

Yes, the missing sketchbook with... I remember, a picture of her, a lewd picture provoked by the Voice, but I’m sure it wasn’t her compromised pose that got me here. The drawing of a wedge-shaped entity floating somewhere in our solar system was a mystifying oddity I didn’t understand, another ‘gift’ from the Voice. It was a craft of enormous size with a cratered metal surface hiding in an asteroid field, a difficult assignment to draw. I’m not sure what the object was or who it belonged to, but now I’m certain it’s the key to my kidnapping.

Stacey sits on the bed next to me.

“Who undressed me last night?” I ask.

“You undressed yourself.” She points at the closet. “I hung your clothing there and gave you the sleepers you’re wearing. They starch the standard guest PJs stiff, so I lent you a pair of mine. This is a rarely used room. I use it to catch an hour or two of sleep between shifts.”

“Thus, the Woodford in the bottom drawer.”

She smiled. “We all need comfort and relaxation, don’t we?”

“Stacey, you must know something about why they brought me here. Am I staying tonight also?”

Questions spark from my overactive brain. *If I am a prisoner, why give me a hotel room for a cell? Willi, did you feed Genesis a full eight ounces of milk? Are you drinking your dark-*

roast coffee this morning? Are you thinking of me? And will someone please tell me what's going on?

I cover my face, and my eyes water. My emotions arrive like an artillery shell.

Her arm around my shoulder is comforting. "You are safe, Madison. No one wants to hurt you."

"You have kidnapped me from a county road in Iowa and flown me to... wherever. I'm in a strange room, wearing clothes that aren't mine, talking to a stranger who knows less than I do, and I'm supposed to believe no one wants to hurt me? Can I call a lawyer?"

"I don't think Planetary Defense would kidnap you, nor will you need a lawyer. The colonel is fair and a good listener. I bet you're famished. How about you clean up, and I'll order some breakfast?"

"Colonel who?"

"Jack Samuelson, my boss, and director of the PDCO. He's a good guy."

Maybe it's Stacey's sea-green eyes, her calm voice, or the bow shape of her lips that eases my panic. I am still suspicious and wonder what kind of agent she is.

"You're not FBI, right?"

"Definitely not FBI or CIA."

There is something genuine about her. If she's just doing her agent thing, she's good at pretending. Something about her is trustable.

"Okay, I'm famished. Breakfast sounds good."

"How about blueberry pancakes with real maple syrup?" She picks up the phone and orders. "Ten minutes."

How does she know I love blueberry pancakes? Have they studied me? This ‘agent’ has the amazing ability to make me feel that a very abnormal situation is perfectly normal.

I see my ragged reflection in the mirror on the dresser—hair disheveled, eyes blood red, lips pale. “Oh God, I’m a mess.”

“Why don’t you freshen up? I’ll wait for your breakfast.”

I take the sketchbook with me into the bathroom. The shower is a gentle rain pouring down from an overhead saucer-shaped spout. On my shoulder is a red spot that’s sore when I touch it. Cascading hot water and luscious lavender shampoo are soothing. Why heart-shaped soap? Its white ginger scent lights up my senses. Under my left breast, there is another red spot. What the hell! What did they do to me? As I rinse, water dripping from my nipple forms exquisite droplets. Without nipples, humanity wouldn’t have made it this far, and that includes all mammals. I make a mental note and will paint a five-foot canvas of this when I return to the studio.

I step out of the steamy shower, feeling more relaxed, and grab a cottony towel. A small teardrop perfume bottle sits on a shelf above the sink, white ginger on the label, and a tube of lipstick next to it. Hope she doesn’t mind if I… hmm, nice color. Wait! What’s this? A man’s wedding ring. Willi and I never exchanged rings, but why would Stacey have this in her bathroom? When I tuck the sketchbook under my arm, the picture of this woman giving a horrible birth floods my mind. I stuff the image into a mental lock box for a later time. The future is not always kind, and I do this to protect both of us.

Stacey has laid out my clothes on the bed. “Looks like we wear the same size. You can borrow one of my shirts.” She holds one up.

It’s a red logger shirt. Yuk.

“I’ll stick to my safari blouse.”

“I’ll give you some privacy to get dressed.”

“You don’t have to leave.” I put on the blouse and let the towel drop to the floor, then slip on my pants. I have modeled for advanced drawing classes, naked is no big deal.

Her eyes scan my body, and a memory sacks me. A tingling sensation runs up my legs and through my thighs. The surprise surge of adrenaline is about Kim, my onetime lover, who used to watch me dress... and undress. It’s Stacey’s sea-green eyes, the same as Kim. That’s the connection. When I glance over, Stacey’s stare tumbles to the floor, but its impact lingers.

Circumstances? Maybe. Move on, Madison.

“Stacey, was I conscious when I arrived?”

“Yes, and exhausted.”

“Why don’t I remember it?”

“I gave you a pill to help you sleep. Apparently, it didn’t work.” She points at the desk.

“You drew something last night? May I look?”

“Just some doodles.”

The drawing is shocking and not meant for her eyes...yet. Her squatting legs are muscular, her pregnant shape sculptural, skin smooth, and her lips luscious.

“Have you seen a gynecolo...” A knock on the door interrupts my question.

Stacey slips off the bed. “It’s your breakfast. I’ll get it.”

When she returns, she carries a tray. “You were saying?”

“Oh, nothing. It’s just... well, the whole situation is unnerving.”

She takes my hand and squeezes. “Of course. I would be upset too.” When she brushes strands of my long, auburn hair away from my face, she comes close, too close. It’s her lips. I

have this strange impulse to kiss them. I attribute my feelings to a bizarre situation, but they're not easy to disregard.

"You're safe, Madison. They just want to talk to you."

Her cell buzzes. The conversation is short and one-sided. "Yes, sir." There's a pause.

"Right away, sir."

Stacey stands. "So much for breakfast. The colonel wants to see you now."

"Stacey, are you a friend or my jailer?"

"Listen, Madison. You can trust me."

I admit, she has won me over. Intuition says to trust her.

"There are difficult things about me to understand. I hope you trust me, too."

"We all have our secrets, don't we? I am curious, though. What really made you think I was pregnant?"

"The future is like a puzzle. You and your son are a big piece of what's coming."

"Son?"

Oh god, did I say that? Shit. Madison, shut up!

A wry smile crosses her face. "Okay, puzzle meister. You're in demand."

"Stacey," I grab her muscular arm, "how much trouble am I in?"

She stares at me with practiced poker-player eyes. "They don't fly someone to D.C. by helicopter unless there's a good reason. Time to go."