

Dreamwalker

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ISBN:9798630256096

DEDICATION

To the great Creator, the source of all my imagination, inspiration, and creativity.

To my husband, my best friend, and forever love.

To my parents, who have always believed in me.

To my four beautiful children, because I believe in you.

CHAPTER 1

“GET OUT!”

It was so loud, I instinctively covered my ears. I didn't even know whose voice I was hearing; was it mine? I just knew I had to obey that command. I had to get out of there.

It was dark, not pitch black, but dark enough that my eyes strained to see. Only the slash of white from the teeth of an evil smile cut through the bleakness and sent waves of ice water through my veins. Standing before me was a sinister figure – and I was terrified. I'd been trained to face ... difficulties... but this was never covered in any training I'd ever received.

His skin was taut on his bones, as if there was too little to cover his skeleton. His eyes were sunken back in his skull, making it appear as if there were only dark shadows instead of eyes. I knew they were there though; as he turned his head from side to side in a slow swaying motion, the whites of his eyes, never shaking their hold on me, would occasionally catch just the tiniest bit of light and cast an eerie glow. He was tall, and the longer I stood, the taller he seemed to grow. Long, gangly arms reached out towards me and his stringy black hair started to blow in some imagined wind.

He moved towards me slowly, his icy fingers always stretching, reaching, and desiring to close in around my throat.

“There you are...” he whispered. He was still far away but I heard it as clearly as if he had been standing right next to me. I even felt the cold of his breath on my ear. “I've been looking for you.”

I felt a strange sensation in my brain, almost like I was drugged. My will became weak and I felt an uncontrollable urge to do exactly what he said. It lasted for just a second and slid right out of my mind as quickly as it had arrived. I stood frozen at first, but when the chills finished their course that ended in my head, my brain immediately sent subconscious commands to my limbs and I began to move.

As I turned to run, I saw a flash of some type of emotion spread across his face. Confusion? Frustration, perhaps? I didn't stick around to find out. It wasn't a let's-start-out-slow-and-speed-up-if-we-need-to run; it was a full-on, all-in sprint. I knew I had but a few seconds of solid ground to put some distance between us before my luck would run out.

I was in the mind of a madman. His mind was putting up dangerous barriers trying to keep me out; or maybe trap me inside. He was both pushing me away and pulling me in at the same time.

He began to laugh – if that's what you would call it. With each nerve-grating cackle, the ground beneath my feet began to crack and open, revealing crevices so deep I couldn't see the bottom. I felt the panic rising in my throat and the sting of tears on my eyes. I wanted to stop, to curl into a ball and hide until the danger passed.

No time for that, Andy! I chastised myself and pushed the panic back down, focusing only on the escape.

I could hear him; he was just steps behind. I thought I felt the tingle of his rigid fingers almost touching my back. My fear pushed me forward. If I slowed, those fingers would soon be hands tearing and grabbing my clothes, my flesh.

I headed towards the tiny orb of white light ahead – my only means of escape – but with each step, new obstacles appeared. All around me, trees were shooting up from the earth, fully grown and complete, with long curling branches that grabbed for me as they grew, as if they were manifestations of his evil hands. I stumbled across the rolling ground, fighting to keep my eyes on the light. My lungs and throat were dry, burning from the icy air and I fought back the desire to burst into sobs of panic.

Hills suddenly rose up beneath my feet, causing me to continually trip, but I never stopped moving forward, crawling and clawing my way along. I didn't have to look behind me to know that darkness was closing in. I could feel it. It was ice, danger, fear, and all manner of evil in the ghastly form of a man. I had to move faster; my body still wanted to panic, but I focused solely on my goal – reaching the light.

Branches and leaves scratched my face and arms as I fought through the tangled mass of forest that was appearing almost instantaneously around me. I ignored the pain; none of it mattered. Even if it tore my flesh and broke my bones, nothing mattered but the light. It was calling me. The light was life, and behind me, death. I was almost there. I could feel the sharp fingers of icy blackness on my back, cramping my muscles and slowing me down. I fought the urge to turn around. It wanted me too; the darkness was reaching for me. All I had to do was steal but one backwards glance and I would be taken.

Despite the pain of the growing forest whipping and tearing at my arms and legs, I continued to push forward, still able to see the glowing freedom ahead. I was just a few steps away, and with a complete lack of respect for my body, I reached out and started ripping through the razor-

sharp branches of this evil forest, inching forward. I finally broke through and felt myself falling. I heard his frigid whispering in my head as I fell.

“I will find you.”

A sharp ringing began to pierce through and echo loudly in my head. I became slowly aware of warm hands on my shoulders, my body being gently shaken.

“Agent Stone...” A whisper became clear.

I gasped and sat up so quickly that the man who had been calling my name jumped back in surprise. He recovered quickly and stepped to the side of the white wooden bench I was now sitting on.

White walls, white floor, bright lights. My eyes darted around the room frantically. Bright metal lockers, a wall-sized mirror and counter. Clean, shiny tile floors. This was familiar. I knew this place. The preparation room. I felt myself still afraid to look behind me, just in case I was still in the dream and this was a trick. My wild eyes came to rest on the agent in the room.

The man who had been shaking me, a tall blond agent with fierce blue eyes, now stood with uncertainty to my left, his hands still out in front of him, positioned to catch me if I suddenly fell.

“Are you all right?” he said hesitantly, bending to retrieve the operation folder and mission papers scattered on the floor at my feet. He placed the papers back in the folder without reading them and gently set the folder on the small desk that was positioned against one white wall. “I apologize for entering, but I became concerned. I rang the buzzer...”

I closed my eyes and focused on bringing my breathing back to normal. Unable to verbally answer, I simply nodded. He respected my

efforts and remained silent as I calmed myself down. We remained there in silence for what seemed like hours. I'm sure, in reality, it was less than a minute.

Vivid flashes of the ordeal kept overtaking my conscious thoughts, causing me to continually try to blink them away. I repeated to myself over and over-

My name is Agent Andromeda Skye Stone. I am twenty-two years old. I live at 417 West Monroe Street. I am at the research facility of sector 12, room 5A.

I didn't like my full name and preferred that people call me Andy, but in moments of severe disorientation I thought it best to remind myself of who and where I was. I had learned this technique at The Academy. It was meant to ground oneself in times of distress.

I was a special kind of agent; the only one of my kind, as far as I knew. I guess you could call me an interrogator. I worked for a group simply named The Agency, a complex and completely anonymous branch of the government, which, as I had come to learn, was the obvious career choice for most people with "unusual" abilities. As long as I could remember, I had been able to visit people through their dreams. I could interact with almost anyone as we both slept. As you would expect, people are very forthcoming in this state. It's impossible for a person to lie in their dreams, at least as far as I knew.

Most of my assignments were uneventful; I merely visited the dreams of someone The Agency was searching for and became a silent observer, looking for clues to their whereabouts and reporting back to my supervisors. I had the ability to question and manipulate dreams to obtain the desired information, and usually my subjects were none the wiser,

waking either having forgotten I was even there, or passing my presence off as just some obscure part of their subconscious.

I had been working fairly infrequently the last two years since completing my training – mostly locating captured Agency operatives and foiling the occasional terrorist plot – but I spent most of my time in language training. Even in dreams, I don't know how to speak Russian, the very language I would need for my next mission.

That assignment was what had brought me to the preparation room. As usual, I spent time alone preparing for each mission, but this time, I had slipped off to sleep, ending up in that horrifically real nightmare. I tried to shake it off as the result of overworking and studying, both of which I had been doing a lot of lately.

"Agent Stone?" I heard the agent's soft voice shaking me out of my thoughts. "I don't want to rush you, but they are ready for you."

When I opened my eyes, I saw that he had now shoved his hands in his pants pockets. He was dressed in a sharp, dark navy-blue suit, standard issue for agents. The jacket remained buttoned over his crisp white dress shirt, and a matching navy-blue tie. I couldn't see it, but I knew there would be a holster and firearm under that jacket, and from the looks of him, quite a bit of muscle as well.

Internally rolling my eyes at my own girlish observation, I stood up quickly, finding myself suddenly overcome by an unexpected wave of dizziness. He must have seen my knees give, because he was instantly in action, grabbing my upper arms to steady me.

"Whoa..." I breathed, gripping his forearms.

"Thanks," I muttered, a little embarrassed at my weakness.

“Sure,” he quietly replied, not wanting to further add to my embarrassment, a gesture I silently appreciated.

When he was certain I was steady, he quickly released his hold and took an overly obvious step away.

“After you, Agent Stone.” He nodded towards the door, partially because he was a gentleman and partially because he wanted to make sure to catch me if I suddenly passed out.

I caught a glimpse of myself in the large mirror as we passed, and gasped a little at my appearance. My long red hair was tangled, my uniform wrinkled, my blue eyes bloodshot and tired looking. I was a mess.

“Um...” I said to the agent. “Can I have a minute?”

He looked at his watch and considered my request.

“Sure,” he said, and stepped into the open doorway but didn’t exit.

Ok, I guess I would have an audience. I grabbed a hairbrush from the duffle bag in my locker and tried to pull myself together. I splashed water on my face and pulled my hair up into a floppy ponytail before following my bodyguard out the door.

My bare feet made little clicking sounds on the cold tile floor and I was grateful for the soft slipper socks a plump little nurse handed me with a smile as we exited the preparation room. Once again, I was greeted with stark white décor. The only color breaking up the vastness of white was the agent’s dark suit. He nodded politely at the nurse who quickly returned to her station – which was, of course, a white desk just down the hall.

“Agent...” I started to say, realizing I didn’t know his name.

“Cody,” he answered.

“Agent Cody, how long was I in prep?” I asked, sliding on one white slipper and then the other as I braced myself against the wall, welcoming the warmth they brought to my frozen feet.

“About three hours,” he said matter-of-factly.

That long?

“Oh,” I replied, feeling troubled. It wasn’t unusual to spend up to an hour or two in the preparation room, quieting my mind and reviewing the mission objectives, but I had never fallen asleep before. I certainly had never had an agent come in looking for me.

I followed Agent Cody as he led me down the long white hallway to our right. Passing countless unmarked doors and corridors, I felt myself relax with the familiarity of my surroundings. Despite its lack of personality, I was thankful for the brightness, for the light. Images from my nightmare continually replayed in my mind, and I felt a shudder run through me. I rubbed my arms with my hands and noticed the blond agent walking beside me cast a quick sideways glance at my movement.

The memories from this particular dream were so vivid, I almost thought I felt raised welts on my arms from those twisted, grabbing branches. *Impossible*, I thought as I looked down to see that the marks on my arms were actually there. Coming to a sudden stop, I quickly pulled the long sleeves of the white shirt up to examine my arms.

Agent Cody noticed I wasn’t following him and turned to see what the delay was. He saw me staring wide-eyed at my arms, which were covered in deep red scratches. Bruises were beginning to form in a few places, and my skin was raw and tender.

He stopped without moving closer, and as I met his eyes, I saw confusion and concern that mirrored my own.

“Is...is that...are you okay?” he stammered.

“I think so...” I whispered, looking back down at my torn skin. He started to step closer which, for some reason raised an alarm in my head. I shoved the white linen sleeves of my scrub-like shirt back down and walked towards him.

“I’ll have it checked out later,” I said with as much authority as I could muster and motioned for him to continue on.

He simply nodded and we briskly walked the remainder of the hallway in silence. I tried not to glance back down at my arms as we walked, and I could sense Agent Cody was struggling with the same urge.

It was quiet as we walked. The only sound came from the swishing of my linen pants, which were almost like pajama pants, with straight wide legs and a drawstring at the waist.

I desperately wished I could talk to Agent Hawthorn. He had been my advisor at The Academy and really my only trusted friend. Even though I worked as a dream-walking spy for a secret government agency, I still felt like my superiors would have a hard time believing what had just happened. I found it even harder to believe they would let me go on with my missions. As strange as it was, I needed this in my life.

As we walked the seemingly endless corridors, I thought back to the day I finally shared my unbelievable history with Agent Hawthorn, or Thomas, as I would come to know him later.

I had been at The Academy, a small school housed inside an old plantation home on the coast of South Carolina, for about a month. It was

filled with students of exceptional abilities. Despite my special talent, I didn't feel like I belonged. Most of the students had been recruited out of high school because of their intelligence, computer skills, or extreme giftedness in a specific area. As far as I knew, there was no one else like me.

Agent Hawthorn had asked me to stop by his office after classes one day. At that point, I hadn't really made any friends, or even really spoken to anyone. I was afraid this meeting would end in me being asked to leave.

"Andromeda..." the middle-aged agent slowly spoke my name as a question.

"Andy," I corrected him, adding quickly, "please."

"Right... Andy," he repeated with a smile. His dark red leather chair creaked as he sat back and hooked his hands together behind his head.

His office was on the second floor of The Academy. It was exactly the kind of room I would have imagined for myself, if I were ever to have an office. Rich dark walls on two sides that were mostly covered with bookshelves from floor to ceiling made it feel almost like a library. Bright sunshine flooded in from tall skinny glass windows accented with painted white oak trim.

"What's there to know about you, Andy?" he asked.

I answered with a shrug. No one would believe me if I told them I could go to sleep and pay them a visit in their dreams. No one would ever want to know that I could ask them anything and they would tell me the truth there. He would think I was crazy; or even worse, he would believe me and think I was dangerous. I liked it there at The Academy. There

were walls, boundaries, people who cared if you came or went. I had a bed that stayed in the same place, and professors who had expectations. I wanted to stay – with all that was in me, I wanted to stay there forever.

I had been studying my fingers as they twisted and untwisted the drawstring on my sweatshirt hood and he carefully studied me. We sat in silence, but it wasn't uncomfortable.

"We found Lily and Sabastian," he finally said, drawing my eyes quickly to meet his.

I didn't know how to feel about this knowledge. I was equally relieved and terrified at the same time.

"Do I have to leave?"

His eyes glanced down at my hands, which were clenched into fists so tight they were turning white. I was sure he could hear my heart pounding even as he sat across the room, and my face flushed.

"Not if you don't want to," he said.

I relaxed slightly, but still felt uneasy. "Are they...my parents...are they okay?"

"They're fine," he said, clearly observing my reactions. "They're worried about you."

I felt my eyes roll before I could stop them, and I tried to look away before he noticed. He noticed, and the corner of his mouth jerked up in the tiniest of smiles. I didn't know what to say and he must have sensed my unease, because he continued casually.

"They came to town when you didn't show up with the rest of your group. Sheriff Mills heard them asking about a young girl matching your description, and told them what happened. I've contacted them through the Sheriff and explained that you are safe, and you are free to leave if

you wish. They agreed that you should decide what you would like to do.”

Of course they did. I was embarrassed to find myself a little surprised they had come looking for me, and even spoke to the Sheriff, given their distaste for law enforcement and government agencies of any kind. Lily and Sabastian – they’d always wanted me to call them by their first names – were as old-school free-spirited hippie-like as you could get. Thinking back on their weathered faces, long unkempt hair, and stereotypical tie-dyed garb made me less bitter and more sad. I wasn’t entirely unindebted to them; they were kind, generous, and loving people. While I didn’t understand a lot about their lifestyle, they were my parents, the only family I knew.

“Did Sheriff Mills tell them how... how I got here?” I asked, unable to meet his eyes.

“I think he gave them an abridged version,” he said with a knowing smile.

Although I knew they wouldn’t give a second thought to the circumstances that brought me here, I found myself relieved at his answer.

“Will you tell me about them?” he asked, leaning forward in his chair, interested.

“Um...ok... I guess,” I stuttered, but as I began to speak, the words flowed freely, as if I had held this story inside for so long, just waiting for someone to ask.

I told him of our life as wanderers. I grew up in a caravan of sorts – mostly off-grid living. There were always people coming and going.

Sometimes it was great when people would leave, other times, it was awful. My parents didn't believe in any kind of organized education, rules or discipline. I learned what and when I wanted. We traveled all over, and they did teach me, whether they knew it or meant to.

I told him of how they taught me all about growing food from the earth, about how to listen to nature, find my way through the world using stars and the sun. They taught me how to drive when I was eight and how to build a mean campfire well before that. I learned the meaning of community and what happens when you have those living amongst you who don't share that value. I learned how to hide from the cops who would raid their camp looking for drugs. I learned how to stay away from the ones who used those drugs. I learned how to pick up and move on at a moment's notice. I experienced all manner of music, song and some very entertaining dance techniques from the many different people we traveled with over the years. Mostly they just let me be, and I had to learn what I needed to learn on my own. I did appreciate the self-preservation and independence I'd developed through that experience though. It had served me well during my short time at The Academy, while the lack of self-discipline and only ever having to do what I felt like doing made adjusting to this new life harder.

He listened quietly, letting his eyes wander over the endless wall of books, as if enjoying an old, familiar story as I rambled on. When I finally grew quiet, he turned his head towards me, leaning casually back in his chair.

"But..." he seemed to understand that there was more to my story.

"I never felt like I belonged there," I said quietly, surprising myself by saying aloud what I had always thought but never wanted to admit.

He didn't speak but looked back at the books, expecting me to elaborate. So I did.

I told him how I didn't understand their careless ways. While I completely appreciated their "everyone contributes to the community" ideas, I didn't go along with the "do what feels good" mentality to which they also subscribed. I'd seen too many people get hurt, too many children lost and neglected, and too many friends end up in jail. I grew up surrounded by people who lived without laws, without any kind of boundaries. Lily and Sabastian were good people; they didn't mistreat anyone. But they also didn't have any expectations of me, and I spent most of my life feeling lost.

I don't know how much time had gone by, but I felt like I had talked forever. I'd never told anyone my story before – of course, I'd never been around anyone to tell. I felt a little guilty sharing my disappointments about my family.

"You know it's okay to love them and still want something different for your life," he said, taking me by surprise.

I didn't know how to respond and felt a large lump start to form in my throat. He was kind though and saved me from the discomfort by standing and walking around the large, dark oak desk he had been lounging behind.

"Okay Andy, I'll show you my hand," he said, shoving a stack of papers carelessly aside as he leaned on the front edge of the desk.

He looked casual enough as he crossed his straight legs in front of him and leaned back with both hands on the desk behind him.

"Okay?" I said cautiously.

“I know you want to be here. I want you to be here. I know there is something... special... you can do, and this is a safe place for you to learn to use your gifts. You belong here... with us.”

My heart began to pound again, but I hung helplessly on every word. He was saying the words that I never knew I wanted to hear, but as he spoke them I felt something I hadn't felt in a long time, maybe ever. Purpose.

“I also know this is hard for you,” he continued. “This...life. But I'm here to help you – and I promise to do that if you'll let me.”

“I really can stay?” I finally said, my eyes burning a little from tears that threatened to spill.

“You can stay; but I have a requirement.”

I was willing to do almost anything. Almost.

“You have to always tell me the truth. No matter what,” he said bringing his hands around and clasping them together in front of him.

No one had ever required anything of me before, until I arrived at this strange school anyway. It was so new, kind of scary, but also so fulfilling. I mattered.

“Okay,” I nodded.

“No matter what?” he asked.

“No matter what,” I answered.

“Ahem.” A soft cough from Agent Cody brought me back to the present and I smiled apologetically. I noticed he was waiting for me to slide my security card on the right side of the door as he simultaneously slid his on the left.

My quick trip down memory lane had done a good job of distracting me from a growing worry that was forming a tight knot in the pit of my

stomach. In some tiny part of my brain an alarm bell was ringing, a soft, quiet, yet constant wail, and I felt my body grow cold and then suddenly hot with a flash of fear. I shook it off and slid my card.

I had noticed his demeanor had stiffened even more than before upon seeing my injuries, and I secretly wished I had the forethought to keep it to myself. This could not possibly be a good thing and I didn't know if Agent Cody, though kind, was trustworthy or not. I stepped through the door he held open. He glanced at me without emotion as I passed, and quickly caught up with me in two long strides. Winding through several hallways, all white, we finally reached the briefing area.

Nothing to worry about, Andy, I told myself. Just a part of the job. You're a valuable asset; they need you.

I did a good job of convincing myself of that and felt the blaring mental alarm grow quiet until I almost couldn't hear it anymore. We approached our destination, which was an unmarked white door in a seemingly endless hallway of unmarked white doors. I was reaching for the door handle, prepared to begin pre-mission check, when Agent Cody suddenly stepped in front of me.

"I need to make sure they are ready for you," he said. "Excuse me."

He disappeared behind the solid white door, leaving me standing in the hallway with my mouth slightly open. They'd never not been ready for me before.

I glanced around nervously, then leaned close to the door, trying to hear what he was saying. It was quiet in the hallway, but the thickness of the door kept me from hearing clearly. I only made out a few words, mostly from Agent Cody. He sounded concerned.

“Not sure she is feeling well,” he said followed by something about, “Postpone the mission.”

Indistinct, muffled voices answered him and what sounded like a polite argument followed, when finally I heard Agent Cody mutter an aggravated “Yes sir,” before swinging the door open quickly, almost knocking me down.

Agent Cody stepped out and smiled formally although no emotion reached his eyes. “They are ready for you now, Agent Stone.”

I hesitated. Something... something was bothering me about his expression.

He held the door open for me, still standing slightly in the doorway. I had to turn my body to face his for both of us to fit in the door’s frame. As I passed, I looked up to meet his bright blue eyes. The emotion in his eyes was sad, apologetic. He held my gaze for just a moment and quickly looked away at the floor.

“Thank you,” I said softly.

“You’re welcome, and have a ...” *Nice day*, he started to say, but cut himself off and looking back, he whispered, “Good luck to you, Agent.”

I’m sure he saw my face fall as he stepped back into the hall and let the door close behind him. Good luck? Why did I need luck?

I stared at the closed door he’d just exited from for a few seconds. The rustle of papers and small swishing sounds of fabric from behind me drew my attention from the door. As I turned, I expected to see the usual panel of white coats and navy-blue suits that normally attended my debriefing sessions. I expected to see the familiar faces of my colleagues.

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But what I saw before me sent the biggest wave of freezing ice water through my veins that I'd ever felt, and I suddenly was very, very aware of my need for Agent Cody's wish of good luck.

Seated at the table before me, along with a two doctors and a general, was the man who had just chased me in my dream.

