

THE DREAMVISIONER— CHAPTER ONE

by S. Leigh Young

United States Senate staffer Jake Spencer saw the first message appear mysteriously on his laptop screen on a quiet Saturday in February. It was late at night at his home in Washington D. C. He was working on a very important presentation, undeniably the most important of his career. Vermont Senator Jane Weston, Chairman of the Finance Committee, would soon present it to the Majority Leader in a closed meeting. The deadline was only two months away and Jake had been working nearly nonstop for over six months. The senator had given him sole responsibility because she trusted him to maintain confidentiality and because he was extremely inspired to complete it. If word got out the pressure would be unbearable.

It was unlike anything that had ever been done by a sitting senator. Born from frustration and the observance of deep-rooted corruption, the idea was germinated between Senator Weston and Majority Leader Cameron as a way of instigating a transformation in governance; to bring an end to the corruption and put the country back on track. As the project evolved Jake became intimately involved in its creation.

After struggling for a solution to a particular problem, an idea emerged, so he started typing again. He was an excellent typist and always looked at the screen as he worked. This time he stopped short because the words were garbled. Quickly, he deleted the line and started over. Again, the words appeared garbled and made no sense. He assumed he must be so tired that he was seeing things, but tried again with no luck. Finally, he plunged back in his chair and cursed at the computer, “damn technology!” He stood up and stomped around the room, running his fingers through his hair, trying not to forget his idea. Maybe if he took a break, everything would be okay. After checking all the connections, he turned the computer off and left the room.

Twenty minutes later, after a trip to the bathroom and a visit to the kitchen for a soda, he sat down to try once more. After loading the document again, he scrolled to the bottom where he noticed a message slowly appearing on the screen.

YOU EXIST IN A DREAM

“What the hell....?” He cursed aloud, shaking his head to clear the cobwebs. Was he seeing things again? He didn’t feel drained anymore after drinking the soda, so he knew it wasn’t that. There had to be something wrong with the computer. “Okay, buster,” he mumbled, “one more time.”

After erasing the strange message, he began typing again and everything seemed fine. Two hours later the section was finished so he saved the document, turned off the laptop, put it in his safe and went to bed. Just before he fell asleep, he saw the strange message in his mind and wondered what it meant. Was it real? Had someone breached his security? How could that be?

The laptop was never connected to the internet because it was reserved only for this project and he took every precaution to be sure it was secure and safe. Each morning he would encrypt and copy the files onto a flash drive, with a second copy to another flash drive that served as a backup. He would then place the laptop and the second flash drive in his safe and bring the first flash drive to work where he would upload it to the laptop in his office and place the flash drive in the office safe. Before he left his office for any reason, he always put the laptop in the safe. The laptops and flash drives were never out of his sight unless they were in a locked safe and everything was encrypted and required a password. This was the procedure the senator had instructed him to follow. He was not allowed to take a laptop home in case it was stolen or lost. He wasn’t even allowed to upload data to a secured server.

Had someone discovered his security routine? He didn’t see how that could happen. No one except the senator and a few select others knew what he was working on. He and the senator were the only ones who had the combinations to the safes, the encryption data and the passwords. At last, he drifted into a restless sleep.

The next morning, awakened suddenly by the radio alarm blaring in his ear, Jake got out of bed, staggered downstairs and started the coffee. After showering he dressed and went into the kitchen where he poured a cup of the inviting brew. He put some bread in the toaster, punched the lever and turned around to see his daughter bouncing down the stairs.

Carey Spencer was a natural beauty. Her soft chocolate skin gleamed when the light hit it and her eyes were always smiling unless she was upset. On this particular morning he could see she was feeling well.

“Morning, Cupcake,” he said warmly.

“Morning, dad,” she replied, giving him a quick kiss on the cheek as she headed for the refrigerator. “What’s on your schedule today?”

“Same old thing,” he replied. “Still on that big project...stayed up ‘til midnight working on it.”

Carey lovingly chastised her father for working too much, mentioning the bags under his eyes. She swept past and took a seat across the table.

“I have bags?” he asked. “Really?”

“Yes! Really!” she replied. “And I don’t get to spend time with you anymore.”

He knew she was right. For the past several months they hadn’t done anything together -- no movies or bowling or walks in the park, like they use to do. Ever since his wife’s death two years earlier, they had become very close and the project was interfering with that. He explained that it would be finished soon and suggested they take a vacation to Hawaii at that point.

“Cool! I love the islands. Can we stay with aunt Tiki?”

“Who else? Of course, we’ll stay with her. She’d kill us if we didn’t,” he replied.

Carey laughed. “I really miss her. She reminds me so much of mom.”

Jake looked up and noticed a few tears forming in the corner of his daughter’s eyes so he reached across the table and touched her hand. “They were twins, Carey. Of course, she reminds you of mom.”

“I mean...it’s more than just their looks. Tiki has the same laidback philosophy of life that mom had. You know? They never let things get to them.”

“I know what you mean,” Jake replied. “With me working here in Washington, things do get a little stressful sometimes.”

“Sometimes? It seems like it’s never-ending!” Carey exclaimed. “Senator Weston relies on you too much, dad. Can’t you see that? I can hear you late at night cussing and shouting at the computer and stomping around the room.”

Jake worried about that. He often liked to think aloud and he’d walk around the room trying to work out a problem. “Sorry, Cupcake. I’ll try to keep it down.”

“That’s okay,” Carey said. “But I still think you should talk to Senator Weston. She’s too demanding.”

“Well, she has confidence in me. Nothing wrong with that, is there?”

Carey shook her head in frustration, drank the last of her orange juice, grabbed her bag from the back of the chair and stood up. “Well, I better go. I have a big exam this morning.”

After placing a kiss on her father’s cheek Carey swept out of the house leaving Jake to consider their conversation, wondering how he ever ended up working in

Washington. It was the most stressful job he could imagine, and yet he loved it. Large corporations were taking over everything and the average guy didn't stand a chance against them. Most members of the Senate were in the pockets of these big corporations, receiving millions of dollars in political contributions each year. How could a guy earning the medium income compete against that?

He hated the fact that the engine of politics was money, recalling the last big project he'd worked on for Senator Weston -- campaign finance reform. Of course, it didn't go anywhere; didn't even get out of committee. Too many Senators had been paid off. It all stunk to high heaven, but he believed in Senator Weston. He liked her ideology and admired her spunk. She wasn't afraid to take on the big boys and he had immense respect for her.

That afternoon the senator called him to her office for a private meeting to talk about the project. They spent about a half hour discussing it and Jake could see she was pleased. Just before he left, she told him about an odd phone call she'd received from Congressman Rick Belham. It was peculiar because he seemed to be concealing the true reason for the call, beating around the bush and stammering on about a bridge project in his District of which she knew very little.

"I told him I couldn't vote on his bridge amendment since I'm not in the House and I asked why he was mentioning it to me. Finally, he said he heard through the grapevine that I was working on something to do with corruption in government. I stopped him right there and asked him where he'd heard the rumor."

Jake squirmed in the chair, thinking about the strange message on his computer screen. He toyed with the idea of telling her about it, but decided against it. "What did he say?" Jake asked.

"Oh, he said he couldn't remember. Then he made some excuse and said he had to hang up."

"Do you think he knows any details about the presentation?" asked Jake.

“Who knows, Jake? You can’t stop the leaks around here. Are you following all those security procedures we discussed?”

He assured the senator he was following the security protocol exactly, then they discussed the project for a while until the Weston leaned back in her chair and rubbed her forehead, obviously wanting to change the subject. “Say, how’s Carey doing? Did she get accepted at Harvard yet?”

“She’s fine,” replied Jake. “We should be hearing soon. We both have our fingers crossed.”

The senator offered to put in a good word for Carey, but Jake declined, confident his daughter had the grades to be accepted. The Senator stood up, indicating the meeting was over, walked toward Jake and patted him on the shoulder affectionately. “Well, if you change your mind just let me know Jake. I’d be glad to do it.”

He thanked her and walked toward the door. “I’ll think about it.”

As he walked back to his office he considered the strange computer message, but shook his head and tried to forget it. Then he thought about the senator’s offer to call the dean. He had faith that Carey would do well no matter which college she attended. She was bright, enthusiastic and near the top of her class. She and her boyfriend, Mike Harvey, were both excellent students. Mike wanted to become an engineer and Carey was strongly considering constitutional law. She wanted to work for the ACLU fighting for civil rights. He was very proud of her.

After setting up the computer the bizarre message entered his mind again. What if it was just his imagination? The whole thing seemed too weird to even talk about. A shiver ran up his spine at the thought of it, but he shrugged it off and went back to work.

He was beginning to realize that the project in its present form would not be sufficient to get the entire picture across to those who read it. They had plenty of

evidence, but he needed to find a better way to present the affects of corruption on the economy and welfare of the people. His mind began swirling with questions. Should he include some testimonials from citizens with horror stories about the present system? Should he show how much the private companies were skimming off the top just to shuffle money around? And what about Wall Street? He could show how much the stock prices had risen over the last forty years and compare it to the income increases of the average citizen. He found this type of profit-taking to be immoral – making money on nothing more than casino bets so the CEOs could take their big bonuses and the stockholders could make a killing. It disgusted him, but he wasn't sure it was the best way to present the package.

That night, after he and Carey finished dinner, she went up to her room to study and Jake took the laptop and flash drive out of the safe. He set everything up on the desk in his bedroom where he always worked for complete privacy. He was starting a new section that would focus on the average citizen. After typing for about thirty minutes the screen suddenly froze up again. "Damn!" he shouted loudly. "What now?"

Slamming back in his chair he tried to calm down and regain his composure. What the hell was happening? Again, he touched the keyboard and looked at the screen. Nothing. He had written two paragraphs since it was last saved and didn't want to lose them, so he hooked up the printer and tried to print the page in case he had to reboot. The document wouldn't print; the computer was entirely frozen. Remembering what he did last time, he decided to turn it off and lose the last two paragraphs hoping he could remember what he'd written. Just as he was about to touch the power button the same peculiar message appeared on the screen:

YOU EXIST IN A DREAM

He stared at it for a few moments wondering what to do. Should he try to type something? Was the computer still frozen? With that in mind, he touched the keyboard again and punched the W. He watched the screen as the W appeared where it was supposed to. Thinking quickly, he decided to try and save the document before it froze up again and while the message was still on the screen. He clicked the Save button and

watched as the cursor turned into an hour glass, indicating the process was working. Good, he thought, maybe that damned message will be saved and I can trace it some how.

After a few minutes he loaded the document again and watched as it appeared on the screen. Scrolling down to where the message had been, he saw that it wasn't there! The W was still there, but no message. Scratching his head in frustration, he leaned back in the chair and thought about it for a long time. All sorts of fearful possibilities began to fill his mind. Was somebody spying on him? Was his computer being hacked? With no internet connection, he couldn't see how it was possible. He was the only one with the ability to input anything. Why wasn't the message included in the saved document? And what did the message mean? "You exist in a dream." What the hell kind of message was that? It didn't make any sense.

Aggravated and running out of patience, he slammed his fist on the desk and screamed, "What the hell is going on?" A few moments later, Carey walked in.

"What's wrong, dad?" she asked. "Who are you shouting at?"

"Oh, nothing. It's this damned computer. I guess I'll have to get it fixed or buy a new one. Sorry I made so much noise."

Carey laughed. "Yeah, I know what you mean. Sometimes this high-tech stuff can be maddening." She left the room after patting him lovingly on the head. "Good night, dad. I'm going to bed."

Again, Jake sat in silence contemplating the situation. What should he do? Should he tell the senator? How would she react? Questions and more questions filled his mind and then another message appeared.

DO NOT TELL HER

Damn! As his heart skipped a few beats he thought about asking Carey to come in and verify it was really there, but dismissed the idea in case he was hallucinating. He

didn't want her to think he was going nuts. This message scared him more than the other one. Was it a direct reply to his thoughts? Could this thing read his mind? Slowly, he placed his fingers on the keyboard and typed.

Who are you?

He waited for a response, but nothing came, so he typed it again using caps.

WHO ARE YOU?

Finally, an answer appeared.

CALL ME JOE

Joe? He didn't know anyone named Joe! Again, he let his fingers touch the keyboard.

WHERE ARE YOU?

About ten seconds later he saw the answer to his question.

WATCHING YOUR DREAM

Again, full of frustration and anger, Jake responded.

I'M NOT DREAMING! I'M ALIVE HERE IN WASHINGTON DC

He watched the screen closely, waiting for another response, but nothing happened. After about two minutes, when he was about to give up, the response finally appeared.

IF YOU SAY SO

“This is ridiculous,” he said aloud. “I must be out of my mind.” He pinched his arm to be sure he wasn’t asleep and pinched it so hard it caused him to squeal in pain. Surely, he thought, I wouldn’t feel pain if I was dreaming. And if I did, it would sure as hell wake me up! Then another message appeared.

YOU’RE DREAMING BUT YOU DON’T KNOW IT

Right! This is impossible, he thought. *I’m dreaming but I don’t know it?*

WHAT DO YOU MEAN?

He waited for a response which finally appeared, and this one was even more baffling.

IT’S NOT THAT IMPORTANT RIGHT NOW. YOU’LL FIND OUT LATER.

Jake stood up and shoved the chair across the room in anger. In a loud whisper, so Carey wouldn’t hear, he began talking to himself.

“I’m not asleep. I’m wide awake. I’m communicating with a god damned computer phantom!” Then another message...

I’M HERE TO HELP. DO NOT BE AFRAID.

As he paced the room in frustration, he looked back at the computer and all of the mysterious messages suddenly disappeared. The only ones that remained were the messages he had typed. He stared at the words in amazement as they stared back at him, mocking him. All of it was so unreal. The words seemed to shout back at him, causing him to feel faint. As he paced around the room, he began to lose his balance and almost fell over, but was able to stop his fall by reaching for the desk. He took a few deep breathes and slowly stood up straight. When he regained his composure, he quickly went through the usual security routine, placed the computer back in the safe and left the room.

He stumbled down the hallway and stopped in front of Carey's room. There was no light under the door so he knew she was asleep. Some how, he made his way downstairs into the living room and fell onto the couch. Obviously, he was working too much. He knew one thing for certain -- there was no way he would share any of this with anyone. He was sure they'd think he was going crazy or having a nervous breakdown. Maybe he WAS going crazy, he thought. Finally, he decided to take the following weekend off and get away from the city. Yes, then he could get some rest and feel better, he thought.

The remainder of the week proceeded as usual with no messages from Joe. Jake was able to complete the section and when Friday arrived, he asked to have a quick meeting with the senator. As he walked into her office she looked up from her desk and shook her head as she glared at him.

"God, Jake. You look exhausted."

He glared at her for a moment and dropped into the chair. "I am," he said. "I'm taking the weekend off and getting the hell out of town."

"Good," she replied. "I'm leaving too. I'm heading back to Vermont."

"Lucky you," he muttered.

Suddenly the senator stood up and waved her arm in the air. "Why don't you come with me? I have a huge place with lots of space and you can bring Carey along. Does she like to ride horses?"

"I don't know. She's never been around horses," Jake replied.

"I know she'd love them. They're great therapy. I ride all the time whenever I'm home."

Jake thought about her offer but finally told her he wanted to be alone.

The senator looked concerned. “Are you sure you’re okay Jake?”

“Yes, I’m okay, just tired. This project is causing me to have sleepless nights. That’s all.”

“Listen, I can’t afford to wear you out! You take as much time as you need. Take a week off if you need it. You hear?”

“I won’t need that much time,” he replied, placing a flash drive on her desk. “Here’s the latest version. When you finish reading it, I’m sure you’ll want to meet with me again.”

They shared a few more pleasantries, then Jake left. As he passed the travel office he stopped, turned around and went inside. A young woman was sitting at the desk so he cleared his throat to get her attention. “Hi Sue.” The young woman who wore a short bob hairstyle and donned way too much jewelry, responded with a smile.

“Oh, hi Jake. Can I help you with something?”

“Uh, yeah. You got any good ideas about where a guy could hide out near the beach for a few days and not be disturbed?”

“You bet I do,” Sue replied, quickly typing on the keyboard. “The Jackson Inn on Chesapeake Bay, it’s wonderful” she said. “I’ve stayed there myself several times. Really quiet and peaceful and great food too. You can take long walks on the beach, and no one will bother you. I promise.”

“Great,” he replied. “Can you reserve a room for me for this weekend?”

“Consider it done.” She replied.

Once the reservation was made and he got directions to the inn Jake went back to his office and shut the door. He picked up the phone and called Carey's cell phone. As usual she answered right away. "Hi Cupcake. How's your day going?"

"Just fine, dad. How about yours?"

"Much better now," he replied. He told her about his plan to escape alone for the weekend and she reacted with joy. She wanted him to take some time off.

"It's not that I don't want to spend time with you Carey..."

"Hush up! I know that," Carey replied. "Just go!"

"Okay. I probably won't see you before I leave so I'll put the phone number of the place I'm staying on the frig door. My cell phone will be turned off so you'll have to call the hotel to reach me."

"Right dad. Have a good weekend, and get some rest."

"Will do Cupcake. You have a good weekend too and stay out of trouble, you hear?"

Carey chuckled. "Do I have to?"

At that, they laughed and said their good-byes. Jake cleared his desk, made sure the computer and flash drives were locked in the safe and left his office. After going home to pack, he left the house, gassed up the car and headed toward the freeway. As he crossed the city limit line he glanced in the rearview mirror, waved good bye and smiled. Hoping to get everything off his mind, he looked forward with great anticipation to the next two days.