

Chapter 1

DAY 1

Keith rolled his head from side to side on the pillow until he awoke from the bad dream. Sweat beaded his upper lip. He ran a hand over his clammy forehead and through his hair. Although he forgot what had happened in the dream as he became fully conscious, a feeling of dread lingered. He had to calm down, but how? He held back tears and tried not to think about what could happen next. He feared the system would recognize his emotional peak. He stared at the ceiling for a few minutes, then closed his eyes to see if any part of the dream emerged. If he knew what the feeling of dread concerned, perhaps he could shake it. No luck.

After lifting his head from the comfort of his pillow, Keith swung his feet over the side of the bed and let his toes enter the plush softness of the warm carpet. He rubbed his face, pushed the heels of his hands into his eyes, rolled his neck, sat up straight. He stretched his back until a small snap brought relief from the night's immobility. A sound sleeper, he moved very little throughout most nights.

When he glanced toward the clock it shifted into the next digit and a sweet voice said, "Keith, it is time to awaken." He stared at the clock a full three minutes until it repeated the message, this time raising its voice as it said his name then dropping back to normal for the remainder of the sentence. He ignored further attempts to recall the dream and continued his morning routine, stretching his arms

over his head, twisting his back, and rising to a standing position. The third time the clock sounded its voice was raised for the entire sentence. Keith reached over and flicked the alarm off even though he liked hearing the pleasant voice.

He trudged into the bathroom to relieve himself. Passing the mirror, Keith noticed how he had plumped over the past year. A slightly rounded stomach had appeared where it used to be flat. He knew he should expand his morning exercises beyond stretching while seated on the edge of his bed, but there was little reason to do so. There was no woman in his life to impress. Perhaps if there were he would have more incentive to stay fit.

He reached over and pushed the shower button, then stripped away his pajamas and stepped into water spraying toward him from several directions. Set at the perfect temperature, Keith experienced a familiar relief while standing there.

When the feeling of dread swept over him again, he poked his head out of the shower to see if something in the bathroom was amiss. His own face looked back at him from the mirror over the sink. He smiled at himself and noticed the way his wavy hair fell flat against his head. He had full lips and strong cheekbones. Even his eyes drew you in, he thought. He was handsome enough. Perhaps he needed a girlfriend. Maybe he should put in for one? Again he thought that a woman might provide incentive for him to stay in shape, give him a reason to exercise more often. He was getting used to the idea.

He finished in the shower, shaved, and brushed his teeth. He dressed comfortably for work. The sense of dread had waned, but he knew it would be back. The trick was to hold it at bay, not let it grow too strong. Not allow a dream, which he couldn't remember anyway, to cause the police to show up at his door. That would only perpetuate more dread feelings, which could transfer into more dreams like it had before, months ago. He still didn't recall where the police had taken him or what happened while there. He only remembered waking in his own bed on a Tuesday, just in time to prepare for work.

Breakfast for Keith was a quick cup of coffee and an egg sandwich that made its way from the refrigerator into the microwave and onto a plate without much thought or fanfare. He ate the same, or similar, breakfast every day. Few of the ingredients were changed and the flavors had become comfortable if not tasty.

After placing the dishes into the cleaning receptacle, Keith went to open the door to his apartment when a knock surprised him. He stepped back, "One moment."

"It's the police," a man said in a gentle, non-threatening tone.

Keith put a hand over his heart as though to still it. He stepped backward. The door was unlocked. They all were. He couldn't stay the inevitable. When the second polite knock came, he advanced and opened the door.

The officer in front of him looked familiar in the way that a man looks familiar if you met him only once at a gathering. His uniform was stiff and creased in all the right places. His hands were folded in front of him. They were soft hands, which made Keith wonder if he shouldn't put in for a man instead of a woman. The nametag over the officer's breast pocket read, "Hello, my name is Richard." He had a nice smile, as though he were about to deliver wonderful news. Two officers stood behind him and smiled as well. They were all very pleasant and kind. Very proper.

"May we come in and talk with you for a moment?"

"I was just heading to work."

The familiar officer, Richard, glanced over his shoulder and one of the other men began typing into his wrist computer. "Taken care of," Richard said. "You'll receive full credits."

Keith stepped back and allowed them passage.

"You are feeling something..." Richard paused for a moment to emphasize the next word or to consider exactly which word he would use and then said, "unusual this morning?" A smile plastered across his lips, Richard continued to look into Keith's eyes. He didn't look around the room or glance away for a moment.

"Nothing like before," Keith said, knowing that there must be records of his episode. "I had a bad dream. That was all. I had no recollection of it when I awoke this morning. Nothing to worry

about, I'm sure." He hoped that Richard did not sense the shakiness in his voice.

Richard opened a wrist computer and glanced over some information. He typed and spoke at the same time, "No recollection," he said. He looked up at Keith. "We received a very slight reading, and wanted to be sure that you're feeling all right." He hesitated as he had earlier in their conversation, as though he had to think of what to say. "May I ask, is this the first time since several months ago? Have you had other feelings that seemed odd or unusual in any way?"

Keith thought back, but didn't put too much effort into it. His biggest concern at the moment was to get through this confrontation, no matter how pleasant, and to get on with his normal life. "This is the first. And I had all but forgotten it until you visited." As he said this, the feeling of dread made itself known, like a shadow slipping across the floor in the corner of the room. Keith hoped that Richard could not detect the wave of emotion on his wrist computer, if, in fact, that was what the data portrayed.

"We are very sorry for bothering you, but it is our duty to make sure that every resident is completely happy with his or her life, is satisfied with accommodations, and has no reason to strike out at anyone in any way." Richard reached to shake Keith's hand.

Keith accepted the gesture. "All is fine here. I appreciate your concern."

"It is the concern of all of the Newcity Police, young man," Richard said.

The use of the words "young man" reduced the handshake to official business and far from friendly. Richard, if familiar, was now a member of the Newcity Police force just doing his job. Keith sensed a separation of emotion between them whether real or imagined.

Richard's two associates never came very far into the apartment, and now they backed into the hall. Other people walked by, residents. Keith nodded to the ones he recognized. Everyone was on his or her way to work, as they should be.

As though Richard knew Keith's thoughts, he said, "You have an additional thirty minutes due to this inquiry. Relax." The men

turned sharply to leave, then stepped away as though they had another important call that they were already late for.

Keith thanked them for their concern as he closed the door.

The room enlarged now that it was empty. Being a rather bulky man, Richard had taken up a lot of space. Keith glanced around in an attempt to find something to do for the extra time he had available. He could switch on the news, but disliked the noise in the morning. No music either, for the same reason. He sat on the sofa and crossed his legs. What was that dream about? Closing his eyes brought nothing into view, no change in emotion, thank God.

He got up and paced to the kitchenette and pressed the coffee button. A cup slipped into place and coffee and creamer entered the cup simultaneously, in the exact amounts that he liked it. He took the cup back into the small, efficient living room and sat down again. It was curious how he thought about the police a little while before they arrived. Did that happen to anyone else? He couldn't have known about them arriving. He set the cup down, then picked it back up and sat holding it in his lap. He hardly drank any of the liquid.

He decided that he didn't know that the police were coming, but naturally feared that they would arrive after his dream. It was coincidental that they arrived just as he was leaving for work. He nodded to himself, satisfied with his conclusion. Still he wondered, why must he make more out of things than what they are? He never used to do that.

It was times like these, no matter how few they were, that Keith wished he had a close friend—or a woman—to talk with. He could contact a neighbor, and there were workmates, but no one who lived with him.

Time moved so slowly when he sat alone. He opened his mouth to start the television, but nothing but an "Oh" came out before he changed his mind and clammed up. No noise.

Could he request a woman that was not noisy in the morning? The women he had requested in the past talked too much when they first woke up. And, there was that one time when he was requested and stayed at that woman's residence—what was her name?—no matter, she talked almost constantly. That is what prompted him to