



Chapter 1

A visionary lies to himself, a liar only to others.

Frederick Nietzsche

Being awakened from an erotic dream at four A.M. by a ringing telephone no longer surprised Laura Greggor, which is not at all the same as saying that it made her happy.

Curled up contentedly in pale pink satin and lace pajamas, her long auburn hair a silken drift across a soft nest of plump pillows, she sighed, reluctantly pried open her eyes and groaned. The space around her bed--all soothing tones of muted peach and elegant art deco curves--was lit only with a delicate wash of moonlight. As she reached for the jangling phone, the cool night air that had poured in the wide-open windows overnight chilled her bare arm.

"Jack? Damn it, it's--"

"You need to send me cash," he said, "maybe five hundred, six actually, or seven--seven would be better, that's about right--and cancel all my credit cards right away, immediately. You have to do that now. That can't wait. I mean right now."

Jack Marin was pacing as he spoke rapid-fire into the phone, back and forth and back and forth again, weaving a compulsively repetitive path in the cluttered hotel room. His words beat out a staccato as relentless as a nail gun:

"Not all my cards, only the ones I carry. Then get me on a later flight. Three o'clock would be awesome. Nothing earlier than noon. Four might be better. Unless that's really expensive. Email me some airfares. As soon as you get in the office, call Hal and tell him I need to get in that buyer's face in Columbus. He's the broker on the account, he's supposed to get me an appointment, damn it! Tell him to get off his ass and do his fucking job. Hey, and while you're at it, tell him to read his damned email! And call my guy, my appointment. In Dallas.

That guy . . . you know, John . . . something. The Dallas guy. Ask if I can take him to dinner, not lunch, because--"

"Jack! It's, like, three o'clock here. As in, three o'clock in the morning."

"Actually, it's four your time," he said, sounding delighted by that fact.

"Do you really think that extra hour makes a huge difference? Because I'm not thinking so."

"Well, you're always talking about how you just love the morning and love getting up early. You're this perky little early-riser freak. So what's the big deal, dude? It's morning. Get up." His voice remained astonishingly cheerful.

"Four o'clock isn't the morning," Laura said, and her voice was distinctly not cheerful. "Four o'clock is the middle of the freakin' night. Dude. Where are you calling from, anyway?"

"You booked the trip, you airhead, I'm in Phoenix. Phoenix is amazing! Phoenix is totally awesome."

Her comments hadn't dimmed his buoyancy, not one bit. There was a sound in the background that Laura could barely decipher. She sensed that he was opening a bottle of beer.

"Fine. Phoenix. Where in Phoenix are you, exactly, and where is your wallet, which clearly is no longer in your possession?"

This was greeted by a thoughtful pause. At least, what passed for thoughtful when it came to Jack. Laura suspected that he was actually choosing a story, and trying to decide how much of the truth and how many lies he wanted to tell her this time. She heard the unmistakable sound of swallowing; he was definitely drinking something.

"I'm in my hotel." His voice sounded wary.

"Fuck it, Jack! It's fucking four A.M., you need cash and to have your cards cancelled and all you're willing to tell me is, 'I'm in my hotel'? I don't think so, pal! What's going on? Why not, just this once, surprise me, tell me the truth--"

"Yeah, yeah, yeah." He cut her off, then laughed. "For one thing, the truth is highly overrated. And I forgot, you hate anybody waking you up. You were dreaming, right? That's why you're so pissed off, I interrupted some hot sex dream. Were you dreaming about getting laid? Were you dreaming about me? You were dreaming about sex with me, right?"

Laura shook her head, not fully believing she had heard him correctly, and put the phone out at arm's length, looking at it pleadingly, as if begging it for some sort of sensible response. It

was a patently silly gesture, but she found herself doing it often when she spoke to Jack on the phone.

He was right, of course, but that was a fact she had no intention of admitting; she had been dreaming, and it had been a sex dream and--the part she especially didn't want to admit--it had been about him.

"It's not always about you, Jack," she said. "Life. Life is not always about you."

"No, but sex, sex is often about me. Women all want me. You know that." She could almost hear him shrug, and she could certainly hear him laugh. "You do, too."

"Yeah, yeah, in your dreams, pal," she said, and--finally--she found herself laughing, as well. "In your dreams you are desired by all females, including me. By the way, which female desired you so much that she stole your wallet?"

"Well, if you've already figured out that much, then you also know I really need you to help me out," he said. "Because--if you don't--I'm totally dead."

"What did you just say?"

"You want me to start from the top?" he asked. He suddenly sounded exhausted.

"No, forget it. I understand what I need to do. It's just . . . that part about my having to help you, or else you'll die. Someone said exactly the same thing to me in the dream you interrupted just now."

"Dreams!" he said. "Who knows what they mean?"

A continent away, she sighed, wishing she knew exactly that: what her dreams meant.

She was correct about how he lost his wallet, although it was several weeks before Jack filled in all the details. It became one of his stories--one of his awful, erotic, scary, pathetic, funny stories.

However, on that particular morning, all she got from him were orders and innuendos. She gave up trying to get any sensible explanation and, instead, she simply did most of what Jack

had asked her to do, including wiring cash to him from her personal checking account. Then she tried to get back to sleep, but fruitlessly.

She had breakfast and took her elderly Airedale, Harry, for a brisk walk. Actually, it was a briskly started walk followed by an increasingly slower walk. Laura kept forgetting that Harry was twelve and needed to take life at a slower pace. By the time they climbed back up her long, steep driveway from the sparsely traveled country road below, Harry was exhausted.

She could remember when he had dragged her along on their walks; now she practically had to drag him.

Harry took the dog biscuit she offered, politely wagging his short stump of a tail, and then retreated to his bed, content to begin his morning nap.

Laura dressed for work--a bright yellow, close-fitting sweater, short khaki skirt and a pair of leopard print high-heels--slapped on a little makeup, brushed her hair and pinned it in a loose knot on the top of her head with a big plastic clip.

There were two framed photographs on her dressing table. She picked one of them up, looked at it and sighed. She and David were standing on a beach in California, their arms around each others waists, smiling for the camera while the sun set over the Pacific. Laura stroked his image lightly with a fingertip, gazing at his happy face, and then placed the photo wistfully back on the table.

She smiled broadly when she looked at the photo beside it. In it, she was wearing a black vinyl g-string and the skimpiest of see-through black lace bras, a cop hat and black vinyl knee-high boots with towering chrome platforms and stiletto heels. Her hands and legs were wrapped around a silver metal pole and she was leaning back, sliding and twisting down it, descending from the ceiling.

Quickly, she straightened both photos, applied a slash of red lipstick and picked up her dream diary. Years before, she'd read that writing about dreams will help you remember them, and as soon as she'd started keeping a journal--trying to write down as much of her dreams as she could remember each morning--she began recalling more of them, and in much better detail, than ever before.

The cloth-bound journal occupied the place next to her bed and she found adding her entries to be a reassuringly routine way to begin her days, especially since recent changes in her life had made it anything but routine.

All she had was an abbreviated entry for the book that morning, only the few brief details that she remembered from the dream Jack's phone call had interrupted. It hardly seemed worth writing it down, but she did:

April 6

I was in a kitchen that had very high ceilings, and there was some cool stuff in the room, but it was all way over my head. It may have been Christine's kitchen. I'm not sure. There were big bowls in bright, crayon colors, with handles, and I liked them a lot. I wanted to play with them. Yellow with a blue handle, green with a red handle. They were all up high, so high I couldn't reach them.

Christine was there, and she smelled of cooking, of chocolate and sugar. She was very tall. I realized then that she was her normal height, but I was very short, perhaps only two feet tall.

Christine reached up and took down a red bowl with a yellow handle. She said, "I brought cupcakes!" She reached inside the bowl, but when she took her hand out all she had was a handful of small white pills.

Travis was there, too, and he said, "I like your dress." I was wearing a bright, cherry red dress with a short, full skirt. Just then, there was a gust of wind and it blew the skirt up around my waist.

Having the skirt blow up was very erotic.

Travis grabbed me from behind. We were naked, and his body was young and hard and slender. Like Matthew's. In fact, suddenly he was Matthew, the way that happens in dreams.

I said, "You're too young for me." As soon as I did, Matthew turned into Jack, equally naked and much more beautiful. If anything, he was even more handsome in my dream than in real life, and that's saying a lot.

He turned me around, holding me out at arm's length, and said, "Look at you in this light."

We were on a bed together, then, in a room where there was a party going on. Everyone was dressed in black, so it may have actually been a funeral. Not sure. I think

Christine was there, in the crowd, watching Jack and I. She was carrying a big handgun, although from the way she was holding it--sort of tucked against her midriff--it may have been a handbag that was shaped like a gun.

Jack and I were both naked and he was kneeling between my thighs, running his hands over my body and telling me how nice I looked. He said I looked like I was seventeen. I actually blushed.

Maybe it was a hot flash, now that I think about it.

I told him I was glad we were finally going to have sex together and that I was frustrated by our flirting. He kept insisting that we would never have sex, even though we were right on the brink of doing so. It was a typically illogical, circular argument, the kind he and I get into all the time.

The bed was outdoors, in a place that was all red and yellow--oddly lit, oddly colored. Some other planet?

He said something about how we were never going to do this--once again, telling me we will never become lovers--and then started telling me what he would do when we did.

Then David was there, watching us, which was okay--it didn't upset me, since David is dead. In the dream, that meant he wouldn't be angry that I was in bed with another man. The logic of dreams! Go figure.

Anyway, David said, "They're going to kill him unless you help. Pay attention, we'll work it out together."

I wanted to ask David who "they" were and what exactly we had to work out, but I was awakened by a phone call from Jack at that point.

Laura sighed. She was as frustrated by the truncated diary entry as by the interrupted dream. It irritated her, as well, that Jack had somehow guessed that she had been dreaming about him when he called.

She pondered that while driving to work, but more than anything else, her mind was on Jack's latest . . . she wasn't sure how to characterize the situation. His "latest fiasco"? His "latest

exploit"? His "latest really dumb-ass thing that he got into while stupidly drunk and allegedly on a business trip"?

He was a smart man who did stupid, borderline self-destructive stuff. His life appeared to her to be as twisted and convoluted as a complicated piece of origami, and she stood by, watching, a passive witness as it slowly unfolded itself.

She wasn't sure which part--if any--was going to unfold next, and remarkably little was revealed in the process anyway. Nor did she have any clear faith that--at some point--she would ever have the whole enigma in front of her, which she could then flatten out, and look at in its entirety. It seemed just as likely that the procedure would simply stop at some point, or possibly reverse itself, leaving her back where she started, with a mystery wrapped in a puzzle inside a conundrum named Jack.

Each small part of the puzzle, however, intrigued her so much on its own that she didn't agonize over whether she'd ever see the pattern beyond the pieces. In one memorable instance, a few months into her working for him, Jack had arrived back from a sales trip with a photo he opened on his laptop, calling her over to see it, saying, "Hey, Laura, look at this!"

It was a shot of Jack, on a beach somewhere, lying in the sun between four young women who were wearing the skimpiest of bikinis. He had a mega-kilowatt smile on his face and a bottle of beer in his hand.

They were all smiling for the camera, and the girls were pressing their smooth, tanned young bodies up against him, their long, lean legs draped over his, their lithe arms around his shoulders and chest, so inter-mingled that it was difficult to sort out where one girl stopped and another started.

"That's Panama Beach," he said, "that extra day you added onto the Florida trip for me. I'm of course not actually drinking a beer. You know that I don't drink. Ever. Right? That's my story--it needs to be our story--and we need to fucking stick to it, okay? Aren't the girls sweeties? The one in the orange bikini"--he pointed out a smiling blonde who appeared to be no older than twenty-five--"hung out with me that night at the club.

"She got totally wasted, and kept flashing the crowd. Great tits!

"She was with the one in white, but that one wasn't any fun, got sick and wanted to leave early, so I offered to drive my sweet little orange bikini home.

"I did, but not until the next afternoon.

"She was sweet," he said. He was looking at the photo wistfully. "Had a cute little ass, too."

The story had jolted Laura, in more ways than one. Her immediate response was completely visceral, and it was such a powerful wave of eroticism that it caught her off guard. She could picture Jack with that young, beautiful girl, his hands on her tight little body, her mouth all over him, their bodies entwined together . . . and the image was inexpressively arousing.

What she wanted, more than anything, was to watch. And then, to participate. The girl was stunning, and Laura could almost feel her mouth against her own, with the charming softness of a woman's lips, so different from a man's less yielding flesh.

Laura could imagine the tender warmth of the girl's body, all soft, rounded contours, with the quivering undercurrents of female flesh, the delightful shimmy and jiggle of breasts and buttocks, the gentle curve of a flat tummy, the seductive indents at the inside of her thighs.

She pictured all of that, and Jack's maleness as well, his hard muscles beneath firm skin brushed with just the right amount of hair, the flat planes of his body, the incredibly exciting tensing of sinew, the erotic smells and tastes of a man's body--of Jack's body, which was undeniably a very desirable object. She wanted all of it, she wanted to be there, sandwiched between them, not merely looking at a photograph.

Her secondary response to the photo was equally instinctive and reflexive. When he described the events of that night to Laura, she noticed that he didn't grace the young women involved with names. It was, "the one in the orange bikini," and, "the one in white." They aren't fully formed human beings to him, she sensed, he sees these girls as things, objects, and nearly interchangeable ones at that.

He pursued their attention and sought validation through their sexual compliance. In almost all cases, he returned home with photos. In addition, with increasing frequency, he proudly showed them to Laura, his compliant co-conspirator, who booked the trips during which he met his conquests.

She knew he lied to these girls. The young ones probably didn't care about it all that much. Laura vividly recalled being that age. They were looking for adventure and experience, and, in some ways, they were using Jack--who they perceived as a charming, handsome and sophisticated older man (he was forty-five)--as much as he was using them.

She worried about the older women more, the single moms in their mid-thirties or so that he often targeted. "Desperate" is how he described them, telling Laura that they were so obsessed with finding a new husband that they'd do anything--absolutely anything--he wanted, sexually, to get his undivided attention. His lies could potentially destroy their fragile remaining shreds of faith, the slim hope that there were still "good men" out there.

Laura knew. She'd sat on bar stools and had men send her drinks, and then saunter over to her with mock-casualness, rehearsing their lies as they approached.

However, Laura knew they were lying to her, she knew why and--unless they were unusually tasty and desirable--she waved them away disdainfully.

Did the women Jack set his sights on share her level of experience and her uncanny sixth sense regarding male lies? She doubted it. Most of the women she knew had deeply embedded romantic dreams; they were still yearning, deep in their hearts, to find True Love and a Soul Mate. Jack was playing their deepest fantasies against them, and he appeared to be very good at it.

Or perhaps not. Most often--in his version of events--it was he that was pursued, and the women who were the pursuers.

It was that damned lure of the Alpha male, Laura thought, the primordial response of nubile females to the thing that Jack was, to his good looks and confidence, to whatever it was that set him apart: charisma, sex appeal, charm. Call it what you will, it clearly triggered the same reaction in other women that it did in Laura. She simply wondered if those other women were aware of it on an intellectual level, as she was.

Of course, being aware of it did nothing to diminish its power over her, and she increasingly felt balanced on the razor edge of desire.

Moreover, Jack kept ratcheting up either the degree to which he sought female conquests, or the extent to which he was willing to share the details of his adventures with Laura--or, possibly, both.

Adding yet another layer of eroticism to the mix, she was also quite sure that he was getting off on telling her about it. Her job had therefore come to include providing erotic stimulation, on many levels, to her boss. Moreover, perhaps, her role as an audience, anticipating his return and the stories he would tell, was fueling his pursuit.

It wasn't a job skill that readily lent itself to inclusion on her resume.

Before she had married David, when she had needed to support herself, Laura had had many, many bad jobs. Nasty jobs, disappointing jobs, jobs that had emptied her soul of hope and filled her life with a sense of futility. She had worked with morons, pinheads and outright lunatics. Occasionally, she had worked with all three, at the same time.

She had multi-tasked until her head hurt and all she wanted was to self-medicate into sweet and blissful oblivion. She had wrestled with balky office equipment of every type: computers that froze up at the worst possible moment, printers and faxes with devious, unpredictable temperaments prone to randomly spewing paper all over the floor, insidious and sadistic networks, phone systems so complicated that some callers were probably still out there, lost in the ozone, still struggling after years on hold to get back to Planet Earth.

She had extensive experience in the horror and tragedy of When Bad Software Happens to Good People, and she knew what it felt like to begin and end each day with soul-numbing commutes in ridiculous traffic going back and forth to a place you really, really didn't want to be. On balance, her present job, albeit odd, was not--not by a long, long way--the worst job she had ever had.

Jack could be very generous, when it suited his purpose to be so. He paid her well--he put her invoices on his expense account, of course, and was reimbursed for them--but the hourly rate was still liberal. The work she did for him was interesting. In addition, she had other reasons for staying. Complex reasons, which she had not yet faced fully and openly, reasons much tangled up with her recent past as well as her primitive, visceral response to Jack.

A response that made her feel exactly the way she had in her dream, when her skirt had blown up around her waist.