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## CHAPTER 1

James Thompson had rehearsed the words he was going to say a hundred times over the last few days. Now, while those words were pounding inside his skull for release, he couldn't get them past his lips.

He shifted nervously in his chair and unconsciously ran his hand over his short-cropped black hair. He scanned the bar they were sitting in, stalling. Garraty's Tavern looked the same as it did every Friday, full of people shedding their Minnesota reserve and getting a little freer and a little more raucous as the well-earned Happy Hour flowed into hour number two. The first time he'd set foot in Garraty's fifteen years ago, if the bartender had said to the waitress, "Bring this beer to the black guy," she'd have known exactly where to take it. Now he was one among at least a dozen, and there were many others in between his dark skin and the standard Minnesota pale. In fact, a couple of businessmen from India were at the next table over, giving the waitress a hard time about why there wasn't any Indian food on the menu. He had to agree with them; he'd developed a real taste for curry lately.

Pennants of every Minnesota sports team, even the defunct ones, adorned the walls. The lighted case behind the bar displayed autographed memorabilia: a jersey signed by Kevin Garnett when he was the MVP in 2004; a Vikings football signed by the legendary quarterback Fran Tarkenton; a hockey stick signed by the Wild's Manny Fernandez; and spotlighted in the center, like the Hope Diamond, a baseball signed by the

entire 1991 Twins World Series team. Any sports fan would feel comfortable in this place. James watched the owner, Michael Garraty, wearing his standard University of Minnesota Gophers maroon and gold sweatshirt, laughing with a customer at the bar. He was probably telling another of his endless supply of Ole and Lena jokes in his mangled attempt at a Swedish accent.

James forced himself to look back across the table. He watched Danny drain the Guinness he always drank and slam the glass down on the table, the same table they always sat at, every Friday at five. They'd been talking about the Timberwolves, they'd been talking about their jobs, same as always. Yet everything was different.

Danny looked impatiently at James. "Look, man, just spit it out."

James stuffed another French fry into his mouth, and gave his friend a carefully blank look. "What?"

"Ever since you came in here, you've looked like you're trying to say something," Danny said. "Listen, if you've secretly been in love with me all these years, just say so."

James burst out laughing. "Damn, Danny, I thought I was keeping it hidden so well."

"Yeah, well, I know I'm so cute I appeal to both sexes. I can't help it." Danny puckered his lips and smacked them in an exaggerated air kiss directed at James.

James laughed again. "Now I'm gonna have to sue you for sexual harassment."

"Bring it on, my friend. But, seriously. What can't you say to me, your best friend since second grade?"

Yeah, he was right. An unlikely pair of friends they were, too. James was always, even as a little kid, a fairly quiet guy. Maybe it was because his father, a minister, was the

opposite. His father sang louder than anyone in the church, not caring that he was off-key most of the time, and preached enthralling sermons in a deep booming voice. He was renowned for the theatrics and gimmicks he employed in his sermons, like the time he actually pulled a rabbit from a top hat. His dad could walk up to any stranger, extend his hand, and make him feel like they were old friends within two minutes. When James was a young child, people were always saying things like, “Where’d you get this shy little rabbit, Reverend? You pull him out of that hat of yours?” His father would burst out with his rafter-shaking sonic boom of a laugh and say something like, “Oh, you just watch out. This boy’s a thinker. One day this little rabbit will be standing in front of television cameras giving a brilliant acceptance speech for the Nobel Prize he just won.”

Then Danny Friedman’s family moved next door when James was eight year old, and within two hours, this wild, funny Jewish kid from New York had James doing wheelies in the alley off a bike jump they threw together from some discarded wood and boxes.

Danny was right. What couldn’t he say to him, his best friend since second grade? Well, maybe this: I’m pretty sure I was contacted by aliens. He’d said a lot of things to Danny over the last thirty years, but nothing remotely as bizarre as that.

James looked Danny straight in the eye. “Okay...” He paused, working up his nerve. But his nerve went south. “I’m sorry to have to tell you this, Friedman, but that pink flamingo tie just doesn’t go with that green shirt. Apparently, no one’s mentioned it to you yet, but it’s the truth. Better you hear it from me.”

Danny laughed. “Coming from a guy who owns the exact same sweater in six different colors, I’ll take that sartorial criticism with a grain of salt.”

“What can I say? Emily said I looked so good in the yellow one, she made me go back and get all the others. You’re just jealous because you have to wear a noose around your neck every day. There are three important benefits to being a teacher.” James held up three fingers, counting off. “One, you get to mold young minds, sparking a lifelong passion for learning and possibly influencing the next Albert Einstein. Two, and no less significant, you get summers off. And three, you can dress comfortably for work.”

Danny sighed. “You know, I’ve tried and tried, all through the years, to impart to you a sense of style. Some semblance of panache. Now, I know that science teachers aren’t renowned for their fashion sense—absent-minded professor and all that. But really, if you can’t appreciate this flamingo tie set against the perfect shade of lime green, clearly I’ve failed.”

James smiled, and chewed on another French fry. Maybe he’d let the thing go for now. Try to figure it out himself, maybe hash it over with Danny next week.

“Okay, so what’s up? What’s bugging you?” Danny eyed him suspiciously. “You got some parent threatening to sue you for failing her kid or something?”

Or maybe he’d just have to face it now. James closed his eyes for a moment, willing himself to just say it and get it out there, on the table and in the open. He was disturbed to hear himself exhale loudly, nervously. So he looked straight at Danny again and forced his voice to be calm and steady. “No, it’s nothing like that. Nothing normal. That’s the thing. I don’t know how to say it ‘cause I don’t know how to say it. So you understand it, I mean.”

“I’m not an idiot, James.”

“I know, I didn’t mean that. Listen, let me buy another round.” James signaled the waitress. “At least I know you won’t walk out on me if you’ve got a full glass of beer in front of you.”

“You got that right. Man, I hate that in movies, when a guy is at a bar with someone and he’s just ordered a drink, and then they have their significant one-minute conversation to advance the plot, and then he just walks out after taking one sip of his drink. Who would do that? Anyway, you were saying?”

All right, time to jump off the high dive. “Okay. Here it is. I had a vision.” James paused for his words to sink in, but Danny didn’t look too impressed.

“A vision, huh? No, don’t tell me.” Danny held up his hand as James was opening his mouth to explain. “Let me guess. Okay, knowing you, you probably had the revelation that you should sell everything, move your family to a small island in the Pacific, and live a simple life at one with nature.” He grinned. “Did I nail it, or what?”

“No. Not even remotely close.”

“That’s a relief. Although it would have been nice to have a buddy to visit in Tahiti.”

“C’mon, Danny, be serious for once in your life, would you? I think I’ve had something really important revealed to me.”

“Like, God spoke to you?”

“No, I don’t think it was God, although I suppose it could have been. But it was like this vision was being given to me by someone. Like they were telling me something really important that no one in the whole world knows about, something that could change everything.”

Danny leaned back, stretched out his five-foot-nine frame, clasped his hands behind his head of wavy dark hair, and said, “All right, enlighten me, O Visionary One.”

James fought down the irritation that welled up at Danny’s flippant attitude. That’s just the way Danny is, he told himself.

“It happened on Monday night.”

Danny laughed, and raised the fresh glass of Guinness the waitress had just set down in front of him. “Oh, I get it. You had a few too many beers, maybe, while you were watching the Packers beat the crap out of the Cowboys. Did your revelation have anything to do with the Cowboys needing a new head coach? One time while I was watching the Vikings game, I realized with absolute certainty that the Vikings needed me to be their idea guy. I actually called their fan line to tell them I had a great idea for tying in with that Norwegian Independence Day that Minnesotans love to celebrate, what is it, Sit-in-the-Mai Tai or something, right?”

“Syttende Mai, May 17<sup>th</sup>,” James said, but Danny didn’t pick up on the annoyed tone in his voice.

“How’d you know that?”

“Emily makes a traditional Norwegian Lutheran dinner every May 17<sup>th</sup>—meatballs, herring, green jello and lefse.”

“Man, you poor guy. Anyway, I thought, the Vikings are from Norway, so everyone should celebrate the day with purple beer, like everyone drinks green beer on St. Patrick’s Day, you know? I spent an hour messing around with food coloring trying to get my beer the right color of purple. You know what my problem was? Beer is kind of yellow-colored, right? And when you mix in blue and red, you get this ugly greenish-

brown color that looks like you just dipped the glass in swamp water. Anyway, the next day, I decided to lay off drinking for a while.” Danny tapped his beer glass and grinned. “Maybe your vision means, switch to Coke.”

James stared at Danny in disbelief. Most of the time, he enjoyed his friend’s ability to pull out an amusing story to fit any occasion. Not now. “I had one beer. One. And this thing was way wilder than anything I could have thought of myself, drunk or sober. Besides, the last time I got totally hammered was at your wedding, and that was, what, seven, eight years ago? Look, I’m not just talking about a good idea here. I’m talking about something from so far out in left field, it’s in right field.”

“Okay, okay. So it came to you, what, when you were just sitting around your house watching Monday Night Football?”

“No, I was asleep. I’d just gone to sleep maybe fifteen minutes before.”

Danny exhaled, relieved. “Well, then you had a weird dream. Give me my fifty bucks, kid, I just saved you a visit with a psychiatrist.”

James leaned forward urgently, almost desperately. “No, see, that’s just it! It wasn’t a dream. I know it seems like it would have been. But dreams are surreal, you know what I mean? This was hyper real. When it was over, I woke up drenched in sweat, even though it was freezing cold in the room. And I could still feel this... presence. Danny, this is the weirdest thing that has ever happened to me in my life, and if you can’t cut the flip act and take me seriously, then just forget it.”

“Okay, calm down, bro. The last time I saw you get all worked up like this was... Hell, I don’t know when I’ve ever seen you get all worked up like this. Except over

politics, of course. Weren't you voted Mr. Reliable in our senior yearbook? You ain't the kind of guy to have visions, my friend."

"That's my point," James said intensely. "This isn't me. I don't know for sure what it was, but I know what it wasn't. It wasn't a dream and it wasn't the beer talking. Look, don't get hung up on the word 'vision.' That's just the way I've been thinking of it, but we can call it an experience, if that helps."

James chugged the rest of his beer, trying to steady his nerves. "You know, I've been sweating this for four days. I haven't been able to think about anything else. And I've been looking forward to today, when I could unload it on you and get your perspective. But I'll be honest, I've been dreading telling you, too. Because it's so totally weird, and I'd rather just be sitting here having a beer and telling jokes and complaining about work as usual. But I don't know what else to do. So I'm just going to tell you the whole thing, and the hell with it. You believe me, great. You don't, fine, we'll just forget it and I'll try to deal with it in my own way. Okay?"

For maybe the second time since James had known him, Danny was at a loss for words. He stared at James for a long minute. Then he said, "I'll tell you what. You've always been like the rock for me, you know? I'm the crazy one, right? I let the air out of the principal's tires, you cover for me. I tell you I want to propose to that sexy girl from Australia that I only met two weeks ago, you talk sense to me. That's the deal. So okay, I owe you one time when you get to be the crazy guy and I'll be the rock. Go ahead. Shoot."

"Okay." James sucked in a big breath, and was flooded with the memory of that overwhelming experience. His voice took on a hypnotic quality as he became immersed

in it and the story flowed from him. “It was a visual message—no words, just images. I could see the earth floating in space, hanging there surrounded by billions of stars. It was so calm and peaceful and ancient feeling, and this incredible feeling of well-being just washed over me and filled me.

“Then images of life on Earth started flashing—whales spouting in the ocean, insects crawling on flowers, kids running and laughing, trees growing, old people walking in a field in China, kangaroos hopping—just living thing after living thing, flashing in front of me, one after another, hundreds of images.

“Then, the earth started shimmering, and I could literally see these beautiful waves of color emanating from it, like a huge Aurora Borealis flowing from our planet into space. It was so powerful, so amazing! Somehow—I don’t know how, it just came into my mind—I knew this was emanating from every living thing, all the billions of plants and animals and people. It was the Life Force of all living things on Earth.

“Then, picture it—the shimmering round earth began darkening and getting silvery, so it looked like a big hole in space surrounded by billions of stars, but still with the Life Force flowing from it, radiating into space.

“Then I suddenly realized that the earth’s Life Force was attracting something. Like a magnet attracts metal, you understand? It was these... beings. These alien beings. They felt huge, but I don’t know if they had any real physical size. They were definitely otherworldly. Way, way otherworldly. They kind of looked like giant white gossamer sheets, kind of undulating and flowing. But that’s a really inadequate description.”

James pulled himself out of his reverie and looked at Danny. “I wish I could tell you better what the picture in my mind was. It’s really hard to put into words so that you

get the full effect. Anyway, these beings were kind of flowing through space toward Earth. It's weird, but ever since that experience, I've been thinking of them as the Seekers. I don't know why, but that's what's in my head. I guess it's part of the vision.

“Then suddenly, it all became clear, like I just knew. I understood that the earth is a portal for these beings, these Seekers. I could see them streaming toward Earth, and then gliding in on the Life Force, kind of like surfing on it, and then disappearing into this Earth Portal. Somehow I just knew that they were passing from their current state of existence into some other plane of existence, or some other dimension, or something that I can't explain because it is entirely out of my earthly human experience. But they're passing through, and the earth is the portal that they do this through. Because of our powerful Life Force, you know?”

Danny hadn't moved a muscle. Now he blinked for the first time since James had begun his recitation, and said softly, “Holy shit.”

James's voice became grim. “Yeah, well, I wish that was all there was to it. Because fine, they can pass through us all they want. We'd never know. We don't feel it, we don't perceive them. But... okay, this sounds stupid, but I think these Seekers gave me this vision as a message.

“The final part of my vision showed me that most of the Seekers are harmless. They just surf on our Life Force right through the Portal and into their other existence. But... well, the only way to put it is, some of them are evil. Not just bad, but devastatingly, totally evil. And the thing is—the really, really scary thing is—some of those evil Seekers get stuck on their way through the earth. They get stuck in people, certain kinds of people.

“It’s kind of like a mouse getting caught in a glue trap. It’s like some people are predisposed to evil themselves, for whatever reason, maybe a genetic defect, I don’t know. But there’s something in those people that attracts the evil ones and accidentally catches them and holds them stuck inside. Like Hitler. It explains Hitler, how one guy could even think of trying to exterminate all the Jewish people in the world, not to mention the gays and the Gypsies. Or like Pol Pot, or Stalin. They killed millions, right? Hell, there was that Russian queen a long time ago who took baths in the blood of peasants. The point is, there have been a relatively few people, among the billions of us who have lived and died throughout history, who were completely, inhumanly, off-the-charts evil. Why? I don’t know, but maybe I just found out.”

James looked at Danny, waiting to hear his reaction. But Danny just sat there, beer poised halfway to his mouth, which was hanging open. James finally had to ask. “So, what do you think, Danny? Give it to me straight. Do you think I’m nuts?”

Danny slowly lowered the glass to the table, forgetting to drink. Then he leaned forward, eyes lighting up with excitement. “So, do you think the really good people on Earth, like Mother Teresa or Gandhi or Martin Luther King, have been glue traps for the saintly-type Seekers? Or like, maybe some people who’ve been super geniuses, and nobody’s been able to explain why, because their parents were just ordinary people, maybe those people caught some of these Seekers, and maybe the Seekers are way smarter than us. Like Leonardo da Vinci.”

“Or Einstein or Thomas Jefferson,” James added, relief washing over him like a cool shower on a hot day. The tension squeezing his muscles let go of its death grip. He relaxed and smiled at Danny with gratitude.

“Or Kurt Cobain!” Danny said.

James laughed. “No, I think it was more the drugs with Kurt, man. I don’t know. It’s an interesting thought.”

Danny laughed. “Or hey, maybe there are really inane attention-seeking aliens who get stuck in our worst comedians.”

“Yeah.” James grinned at Danny. “That would explain you putting that girl’s marker up your nose in fifth grade and trying to write on her arm with it. You’ve definitely got to be the glue trap for any lame-comedian-sports-loving-flashy-dressing-can’t-make-a-free-throw-beer-drinking Seeker types out there.”

“Thanks. I’ll drink to that.” Danny raised his glass and finished off the rest of the beer. “So, how did it end? Your vision, I mean.”

“That was it. I was totally engulfed in this feeling of horror, and then I just woke up suddenly, and like I said, I was shaking so bad, and sweating, but cold, really cold. It seemed like it was thirty degrees in our bedroom.”

“What about Emily? Did she sleep through this?”

“Well, that’s the weird thing. I must have screamed or something, ‘cause I woke her up, too. Listen to this, Danny. She asked me why it was so freezing cold in our room. That’s the thing I can’t get past. I’ve tried to convince myself it was just a nightmare. But then why did Emily feel the extreme cold?”

Danny munched on a French fry. “You know what, James? I never told you this. I never told anyone this. But once I had a dream that was truly real, not just a dream. It was after my grandfather died, about a week later. He came to me while I was asleep, and he told me that he loved me. Which he had never said to me when he was alive. He said he

needed to tell me. I woke up, and I could still feel his presence in the room. I absolutely knew he'd been there. So, I'm not going to be the one to tell you it couldn't be real."

"Thank you."

They sat there finishing off the basket of fries, both of them lost in thought. James wondered if he should turn the conversation back to the Timberwolves' chances of going to the conference finals this year. He'd said this totally bizarre thing, and Danny was still his buddy. He felt a huge urge to get back to normal. Probably it was over and done with and nothing would come of it anyway. But just as he was about to ask Danny if he thought the Wolves' new point guard would be the key to their season this year, Danny spoke up. "The question is, how or why did you have this vision? I mean, was it actually given to you, by the aliens or God or something, or did your unconscious mind somehow just find out this thing?"

Okay, so he'd been living with this for four days, and was looking at telling Danny as the end point of the whole thing. For Danny it was new, and interesting.

"I don't know," James said thoughtfully. "It felt like I was being shown a movie inside my brain. It felt like—okay, I feel like a total idiot saying these words, but it felt like the aliens were contacting me. Me personally."

Danny pointed a finger at James. "Hey, just don't go getting abducted by space aliens, dude. Who would I have a beer with on Fridays then, huh?"

James stuck out his fists in answer, and they did their elaborate handshake, tapping fists up, down, sideways, wiggling fingers, touching fingertips, hands gliding past each other, index fingers pointing at each other. The one they'd made up in ninth grade. "I'm not going anywhere. Not Tahiti and definitely not Mars."

“Good. So what’s the answer to the sixty-four thousand dollar question, then? Why do you think these aliens contacted you and revealed all the stuff about the portal and the Life Force and the evil aliens getting stuck in people?”

James looked at Danny with a distressed expression and said hesitantly, “I think they want me to do something about it.”