

The Sleep

by

Deven-Kenyon Ward

*My sleep for that unnatural nightmare
Drain my dreams*

*Cloak twilight with these tears
My souvenir – a dream*

*My sleep for that unnatural nightmare
I sleep...
bludgeoned in a dream.*

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I

Sunrise is to daybreak what sunset is to darkness. Dreams were to Alex Dagny what Alex Dagny was to dreams.

The entire world was, indeed, a stage to Alex, but only when she was asleep. In the Playbill of her mind it would read, "Alex Dagny, This Is Your Life." But it wasn't; it was just imaginings. Nevertheless, she'd take her place in the one seat auditorium and munch her hypothetical popcorn, waiting for what her dreams would play out for her this time.

Alex's eyes fluttered; the Rapid Eye Movement's had been going on for ten minutes. Most often as soon as her head touched the pillow, she was out of this world and into the bizarre, and sometimes aching, events of her unconscious mind. It wasn't that she lived an additional life in her dreams; no it was more of an identification of that life she had never lived.

She had gone through her adolescence twice, once awake in the real world, and once in dreams, recalling things otherwise left in the far reaches of her mind when she was wide awake. She could recall the birthday party her mother had thrown for her when she was a year old. The cake was a single layer, with chocolate frosting and one big candle in the center. She dreamed the color of the candle, pink, and saw the flame whipping and snapping sideways when her mother carried it from the kitchen into the dimly lit dining room, and then set it down in front of her.

She was seated in a highchair. She could plainly see herself, and surrounding her was her immediate family. There was Uncle Chester, and George (his lover at the time. George had died of AIDS in another of her dreams when she was much older). Beside them were her cousins, Phil and Denise, the only set of twins in the family. On the opposite side of the twins were her father and older brother, Tom. Her sister hadn't been born yet, and in another revelation in the world of dreams, would die of cancer at age three.

The atmosphere was brimming with love and laughter. Everyone, including Alex herself, blew the single candle out. The room resounded with applause afterwards, and in her glee, Alex clapped her own chubby little hands, then preceded to reach out and grab a fistful of cake. Everyone erupted with laughter.

Alex woke up with a smile on her face. She liked when the dreams were enjoyable. She didn't much care for the ones in which she lost her dream family, or when she broke up with someone for whom she cared dearly. No, those hurt too much. She knew it was silly to get so emotionally attached to people in her dreams; after all, they were figments of her imagination. None of her family resembled anyone in the dreams.

She once considered she may be living a past life through dreams, but since it was in dreams that these adventures took place, she set that idea on the wayside and left it alone. She considered outside influences. Hadn't she seen "Passion Of Mind," a psychological romantic thriller where fantasy and reality become indistinguishable for a woman leading a double life in her dreams? Alex clearly remembered the tag line, "What if you had two lives at once? What if you knew that one life took place only in your dreams? What if you didn't know which life was real?" She scoffed at the very idea. This was, in fact, the 21st Century; this wasn't a movie. So what, maybe she was impressionable, but (and she'd stake her life on the 'but') didn't the dreams start before she'd seen the movie? And hadn't she rented the movie because of the dreams?

And her situation was far more different than the movie. She wasn't torn between lovers, nor did she question her reality. She knew to which world she belonged. So, psychologically, she was fine--a sane woman having some fun in dreams. She couldn't explain why the dreams started with the same characters, most often with an on-screen cameo in her mind's eye of a new lover here or there. Nor could she explain the way in which she dreamed these characters.

Of course, there could have been other movies that preyed on her subconscious mind, but none she was aware of having seen.

Her body was stiff; usually it always was when she woke from one of those "other lifetime" dreams. Her legs felt as if they'd been inactive for years, and her arms tingled when she started moving them to get the circulation going again. She'd wake with neck pains, and her throat would be dry as a bone. She had trouble opening her eyes, but after a time, and much rubbing, the lids lifted to reveal a startling set of blue eyes, which she considered her best feature.

Her lover, Cally, was nowhere to be found, and Alex thought that was just as well. Cally Taylor was a bit jealous of Alex's dreams, especially the ones in which she had romantic involvements. She wanted to be supportive, yet found herself uneasy when Alex would, in detail, describe her nightly passage into that other world.

She presumed her will was much stronger than Cally's and that she had her priorities straight. It was her creed.

It was with incredible detail she remembered the tail end of the dream, but as the day progressed, the images slowly shifted from her mind until they were a minute flicker at the back of her brain.

But wasn't that just as well? She couldn't live her current life walking around in a dream--albeit a tasty temptation. Her real life was fine. She had a lover, and they had a child. She was financially well off, and Cally's writing career was flourishing. She couldn't have asked for more, nor did she want more.

Dreams were dreams were dreams. And that's the way she wanted it to remain.

Her day advanced quickly. She hardly noticed time passing while she penned the famous cartoon strip "Amy;" the idea similar to the Cathy strip, but fashioned somewhat after her own life. Hers was a lesbian version of Cathy, and she wouldn't have had it any other way.

In her dream life, she was a boring tax attorney. This is what told her they really were only dreams and not any past lives coming back to haunt her, or that she was (by any degree) insane. She couldn't imagine living anything as mundane as the life of a lawyer, especially a tax lawyer. She attempted to change that aspect of the dreams, maybe serving as a lawyer to the rich and famous, or working for internal affairs, anything but a lowly tax attorney, but no matter how much she tried, and wished it to be, a tax attorney is what she was and would always be in that other world.

She heard Gail crashing into the house and looked up just in time to see the long yellow bus pulling away from the curb. The scraped face of her watch told her it was quarter after three.

The child was seven, and looked exactly like Cally. A watered down version of Cally, but Cally nonetheless. She had been the birth mother after all, so it was only natural she resemble her. With the one exception, Alex's biting blue eyes; the youngster had the same flawless golden tresses, the same set mouth when she was serious, and the same dry humor her mother graciously splurged on Alex from time to time. She was short for her seven years, which told Alex she'd mostly make it to around five two if she were lucky. Alex stood a full foot over Cally. When standing side by side, the smaller woman's golden head would just make it to Alex's shoulder. No more, no less.

They had gone through so many files on donors to get someone who looked a little like Alex--tall, six foot one, dark skinned, long dark hair, smart, funny--but in the end, they found a guy who had only one of the remarkable features Alex possessed, her blue eyes.

"Mom?" was yelled from across the house, and Alex yelled back, "In here, Squirt!"

The child followed the strings of Debussy filtering from the second floor. Alex heard the sound of running Nikes on the stairs, and a thud, and imagined the book bag being dumped unceremoniously onto the hall floor, and could only smile. The child had also gotten her piggish habits from Cally.

"You'll pick up your things on the way back upstairs, young lady," she chastised when the child finally made an appearance at her studio door, a bit out of breath, cheeks red, hair blown out of its tight knot she'd tied herself that very morning.

"Yes, Mom." Gail received her hug and a kiss on the tip of her nose and moved from Alex's overabundant embrace to see what she'd drawn that day. "Oh cool, she did get the dog!" She was bubbling with excitement.

Alex eyed the girl suspiciously. "That doesn't mean we're getting one, too."

"But... The strip is about you, us; so if Amy gets a dog, we get one!"

"Amy's daughter also got the mumps. Would you like a case of the mumps?"

The girl shook her head adamantly. "No thanks!"

"Sometimes I add a little fabrication; otherwise it would be a tad uneventful."

"Our lives are eventful."

"Perhaps. To a seven year old, going to bed is an adventure in itself."

Gail rolled her eyes and headed for the door. "Call you at six?"

Alex remembered, "Are you hungry? Want a snack?"

"I ate some chips on the bus," Gail called from deep within the house.

Content, Alex settled back to her work. She was a good kid; she behaved and seldom gave either she or Cally any flack. Face it; you've raised a model kid. Happy with the thought, she resumed her drawing.

II

Graduation day, a year after her mother had departed the earth. Tears were in Alex's eyes, for accomplishing something her mother and she had strived long and hard for--one of her children graduating and going on to college, and for the fact her mother was cold in her grave and wouldn't get to see their dream come alive. But her mother knew; Alex believed it was so.

Her dad was there, as was her brother, Tom. He was near the podium pretending to have dropped something so he could chance a glimpse under one of the girls' robes. Little pervert. Alex gave her father a look that said, "Stop him or strangle him, either is just fine."

Regardless of her brother's antics, the day couldn't have gotten any better. She spotted her Uncle George, partnerless, and stricken with the virus that had taken his beloved. In the other world, her real world, Alex knew she would mourn the loss of her dream uncle.

After graduation, she was to hurry home, get changed, and go out with the girls for one last foray into misbehavior before she got serious and started thinking about college.

The night would end on a blissful note; it would be the night Alex first kissed a girl.

As the evening wore on, jubilation had settled, and the girls were mildly drunk, except for Liz Widrow, their designated driver that evening. She sat beside Alex and counted the beer bottles the girl had emptied. Current total stood at four. The bar door opened, letting in the street noises along with a group of other graduates laughing and shoving at one another.

Alex's eyes fell on the last to arrive. She was the small girl, who had sat next to her all semester in Biology. Alex had had a crush on her forever, and it was with red cheeks that she watched as Liz called the group over to sit with them. Alex wondered if she slid down under the table, would anyone notice? Now there's a butch attribute if she ever saw one.

She skirted eye contact with the beauty for as long as she could stand, which was five minutes in "I simply adore you" time according to her defaced watch, and Alex's eyes finally fell on her. It was with great surprise she found her looking back.

Was it common to have two gay people in the same family? Or was she simply intrigued by the unknown? Nah, that wasn't it. The first time Billy Peterson had kissed her, she knew something was missing, and quickly, though secretly, found herself admiring the other girls in the locker room when changing clothes between gym class and her other classes.

It came as a total surprise when she saw the girl pointing to the back door. Alex set her pack of cigarettes on the table (another indication she was dreaming, being asthmatic and unable to smoke in real life) grabbed her Heineken, and sauntered towards the back of the club. The fresh air felt good on her face, and she was taking in great gulps of it when she heard music, as the door opened behind her. And then she knew she wasn't alone; Tina had come outside and was standing right behind her.

The door closed out the noise from inside, and it was just the two of them, the stars, the night noises, and the moon engulfing them.

Small talk dominated the conversation at first, but once they got to know one another outside of Biology, and discovered each had a sense of humor the other admired, the ice broke—smashed actually. They were at the beach no less than three hours later, strolling along, holding hands, and laughing appropriately here and there as they shared stories of their lives growing up.

They knew it was the start of something, and at the end of the evening, neither wanted to go home, but go home they must. After all, it was four in the morning. Alex pictured her family calling all the hospitals looking for her, and from the tale Tina spun, hers would be just as worried.

They ended the evening with an embrace, and then the kiss.

The alarm buzzed. Cally groaned, rolled over and slapped an arm around Alex's midriff. Alex oofed in her sleep and then groaned. She tried to clasp onto the last remaining wisps of the dream, but it was gone. Her lips had just touched Tina's, and here she was, in her bed, beside Cally. She could feel the heat from her body, and the warmth of the sheets beneath her. Her legs hurt, and her arms were surely asleep. She would not move yet, she would let her limbs wake on their own. In the meantime, she tried to open her eyes; they were filled with sleep, and dried tears. Had she been crying in her sleep? It wouldn't have been the first time. When her little sister had died in one of the dreams, Alex had woken to a soaked pillow, sore throat, and a raspy voice that lasted until she had her first cup of java.

She suspected the same this time. But however her outward appearance seemed, she was buoyant within, not for just having had her first kiss in that other world, but of the pride she had felt in herself. That came rarely these days. She was proud of the daughter they'd raised, and of the home they'd made, but of herself... She mentally made a checklist of her accomplishments, and then became angry (the first time) at the dreams. Why should they make her feel less of herself? That wasn't reality, this was. She was a fine artist, cartoonist, and woman. She had a lot to be proud of in herself.

She'd graduated from high school, too, and went to college. Her life in reality and in the other world up until her twenties was nearly the same, or at least her accomplishments were. Straight 'A' student, graduating with honors; proud family by her side. So she had nothing of which to feel envious. There was not one scrap of evidence she was less a woman in this life than she was in the one in her dreams. End of subject.

"You look a bit pale." Cally greeted, smothering Alex's aching limbs with her womanly frame. She smoothed a kiss across Alex's accepting lips and after, leaned on an elbow to stare down at her. "The dream again?"

Alex nodded, eyes closed.

Cally got the hint; Alex wouldn't reveal the contents just yet. That was fine by her. She rolled off Alex and stood next to the bed stretching. It felt good to get all the kinks out. Yawning, she took herself to the bathroom to begin her day.

Alex conversed with her partner through a mouthful of toothpaste. She didn't see Cally's fleeting smile at her back as she leaned down to spit a glob of the substance into the sink.

"Today you have to pick up Gail. It's only a half day, and she needs to be at soccer practice early."

"Will do." Alex spat out the remaining toothpaste. She grinned at herself in the mirror, inspecting her handiwork. Still white, except for a coffee stain she'd missed. She squeezed another load of toothpaste onto the brush and went to work on the guilty tooth.

"You keep that up and you'll brush the white off," Cally teased and whipped her with the towel she'd been using to dry her hair. "Come on, fancy pants; come down to the mortal plane with the rest of us."

Alex arched a brow at her in the mirror. "I'll remind you of that tomorrow when I'm waiting a half hour to get in here while you primp and pamper yourself."

There wouldn't be a visit to the bathroom that next day, nor for many days following. It had been quick, and unexpected. The minivan had slammed into the side of Alex's Toyota on a green light.

The impact had crushed the vehicle and the woman inside. The world went white and then black. Alex wondered if this was death, and if it were, shouldn't it have remained white? She didn't suppose she was in hell; hell was for those who defied the Lord and tax attorney's.

Funny thing death was. The senses were more acute. She could hear sounds far off that in the normal world would never have reached her. She felt unbelievable pain in her body, and wondered if it was her heightened senses, or was she really in that much pain. Was there pain after death? How was she to know, she'd never died before. Well, if this was death, she wanted her money back. Lord, I'll take the next train to death, now boarding at gate 2045.

She saw herself as a character drawn in her comic strip, a one-dimensional colorized figure floating to heaven on a cloud. She'd not sprouted a halo or wings yet. That would come later once she was initiated into heaven. Initiated? Was Heaven now a country club?

Regardless of her mind losing its faculties, she was very aware that death was upon her and Heaven at its heels. There were sirens, and people poked and prodded at her as if she was a new crop of tomatoes. She giggled, picturing people bending over and sniffing her. She bled like a tomato, the concrete filling with the red substance. Her

lungs felt as if a car was sitting atop her chest, her limbs burned as if they'd been consumed by fire.

She tried to speak and felt one of her teeth come loose. All she could do was wait until it fell from her bottom lip onto her chest. Good, it was that stubborn coffee stained tooth. Don't have to worry about brushing that one anymore.

Her mind wandered to Cally, and she began to pray. Dearest Cally, you come to me when I'm alone, setting my heart on fire, you speak to me – velvet voice splitting my senses with every sound. Where you are, therefore am I, inside and out, I feel you. And touching you inside is where I love you most.

I'm sorry I didn't tell you I loved you before I left this morning, Honey, but I know you can hear the dead speak. Hear me now my Love. I love you dearly.

As the last words left her mind, floating on a thought to her beloved, Alex Dagny died.

III

There was a bright light. This! This is that light I'd been waiting for, Alex's disembodied mind thought. I haven't gone to hell after all. Dear Jesus, you've heard my prayers.

Blinding light, eclipsed. She could see images behind the light and wondered was it lost family members come to take her home? Wouldn't that be nice if it was like "Ghost," and they took her to their loving bosoms? Oh, look, there was Uncle Charlie, and his lover. Oh, and wasn't that her baby sister? Three-years old and she was racing around as if she were five.

But wait... these aren't my relations. These are the dream people. The dream. Could it be? Was she just dreaming again? Oh thank heaven! And that bright light? Was that mere sunlight come to kiss her awake to a new day?

"Alex?" Someone was intruding in her blissful journey. She frowned, not wanting any part of it.

"Alex, can you hear me?" There it was again. Alex wouldn't have any of it. No, if she came to that voice, then wouldn't she forego the dream to reality? She wasn't ready yet; there was so much more to dream about. She wasn't done. She didn't want to be alive.

After what must have been decades, but had in actual fact had only been a week, Alex's eyes opened. Not much, but just a bit that she could manage once she got the sleep out of them.

There was an unfamiliar woman in white standing beside her. Alex surveyed the room leisurely. There were machines surrounding her and white walls in every direction. She could see her feet, and the metal contraptions encasing her legs. Were those metal pins like they use for victims of smashed bones? And my arms! What's wrong with my arms? She tried to lift them and experienced the same sensation as if she was waking from one of her other world dreams. Just asleep, that's all. I'll give them a few minutes and they'll be right as rain. Her brain would not acknowledge the truth—the simple fact that had taken root in her reality.

Her neck hurt like a bitch, and forgetting about her arms, she tried to lift her hand to massage her neck. The pain was intense, and she bit down on her bottom lip. It was her bottom lip wasn't it? It felt like someone had attached an extra pound of flesh to it. She tried to run her tongue across it, but she had no spittle.

"Water," she croaked. Was that my voice? What in the world has happened?"

Leaning down over her body, the nurse had buzzed the attendant's station for the doctor the moment she acknowledged Alex's awareness. She'd finished checking

the pupils with her penlight and had slipped the object back into her pocket. She reached to the bedside table and brought a plastic cup to Alex's parched lips. It had a straw, and she inserted it in between. Her hand was cool on Alex's and she registered the touch. At least she had feeling other than pain in her extremities.

Alex greedily gulped down the cool liquid, and then swallowed some air afterwards. Now she was feeling a bit better. Her throat at least felt more open than it had moments before.

"Where am I?" she asked the obligatory question.

She received the obligatory answer; she was in a hospital, she'd had an accident, and just rest now, the doctor would be there any moment to speak with her.

As promised, a tall man in green scrubs came striding through the doorway. He was balding, but he must have figured if he combed all the hair from the right side of his head over to the left, no one would notice that tiny fact. His eyes were kind, and she realized she liked him. He was honest.

"Well now, you're awake. Good. How do you feel, Ms. Dagny?"

"How do I look?"

He smiled wider and accepted the metal clipboard the nurse was handing him.

"Where's Cally?" Alex wondered where her partner could have been other than by her side during this tumultuous event.

"Pardon?" The doctor glanced up at her from his reading and note making.

"Cally Taylor, my friend. Has anyone notified her?"

The doctor looked at the nurse and she gave him an uncommitted look while busying herself with monitoring the monitors monitoring Alex.

"I don't believe so. Someone can notify her. Your father has been phoned and is on his way from California. We had a devil of a time reaching him. There were some very bad rainstorms; his flight was delayed twice already. However, your cousins are here. They've been here since you were brought in."

Cousins? She wasn't aware of any cousins living in New York or the surrounding area who could have come so quickly to be at her side. Cally, she had to get them to call Cally.

"Please, if you could, ring her up. I know she'd want to be here. And Gail must be out of her mind with worry."

"Gail?" He looked further perplexed.

"My daughter."

He pursed his lips a moment and laid a hand on Alex's arm. "I'm sorry, Ms Dagny, but we weren't informed there was a child." He shuffled through the charts and papers on the clipboard looking to make sure there wasn't a note somewhere he'd missed.

Alex was becoming agitated quickly. Something didn't feel right, and it wasn't the feeling of her many broken bones. "If you'd just call Cally." She whispered the number, and the nurse quickly scampered away to do her bidding.

With that taken care of, the doctor went down the list of her injuries. She'd been in a coma from the moment she'd been pulled from the wreckage. Her vital signs had

been unstable and warranted her placement in the ICU. Listed as in critical condition, he told her she had given them quite a good scare that she wouldn't make it. However, he had faith in her, and here she was, awake and talking, exceptionally more than he hoped for seven days after the incident. He went into a more detailed description of her many injuries, but Alex had tuned him out.

The nurse returned, face glum. She took the doctor aside a moment and they spoke in whispers. He then turned to Alex, an apologetic smile pasted to his features. "I'm afraid that number you gave the nurse wasn't in service, Ms. Dagny. Are you sure you..."

"I've had that phone number for eight years." Alex turned her head away from him and stared at the window. "Call the paper then. Talk to my boss. He'll contact Cally." She felt renewed excitement.

"Paper?"

"Yes, the Daily Advisor. I draw a cartoon strip." She was a bit affronted that he wasn't aware of who she was. What must my face resemble anyhow?

"In what city would that be?"

"What city?" Alex looked at him dumbfounded. "This city. It's a local paper. Don't read much?"

"I don't believe I've ever heard of it, but just to be sure," he nodded to the nurse and she disappeared again.

While the frazzled nurse was gone on her new task, he set the tablet down and began to inspect Alex's injuries. "You're making an astounding recovery, Ms. Dagny. Far faster than I had thought you would." He was delighted and prideful of the quick actions he had taken in the ER that he believed had gotten her prepped and into surgery to fix her broken body.

Alex let the sound of his voice lull her back into oblivion. She just wanted to sleep, and to dream.

IV

The next time Alex opened her eyes; there were people in the room. These weren't hospital employees; they were the people of her dream. It was becoming clear to Alex she was still dreaming of that other world. But what an awfully long dream this time. And different. She was still in the hospital, and her pain was all too real. She'd never experienced something so true in any of the other dreams.

Her other world father noticed her awareness immediately, and he, along with her twin cousins and brother Tom, descended on the bed quickly, their pain and worry masked by smiles of greeting and relief.

"Alex!" Her father couldn't help crying out with jubilation. He laid his big paw of a hand atop hers and gently applied pressure. "I'm so sorry, Baby; I wanted to get here as soon as possible..." He let his words flounder when he noticed the single tear that had fallen over the lip of her left eye. "Honey, don't cry."

So it was just a dream after all. She could let it run its course; let it relay whatever message it was after, and then she could return to her normal life. She tried to place her hand upon his, but the pain she felt shooting up her arm halted any further attempt.

"Don't try to move so soon, Alex." Her brother was leaning over the other side of her bed peering down at her. Over the years he'd lost his boyish prankster personality and had grown into a man of whom his father was exceptionally proud. He had his own family now, a wife and three children. He was a gentle man in every sense of the word. To look at him and his life now, she couldn't believe he'd been such a devil's spawn growing up. She tried a small smile for his benefit.

The cousins, who had played a major role in her formative years in this other world, began to crowd around the bed.

"You're a miracle, Alex," the man said, the twin woman at his side nodding in agreement. "The doc says you may have some memory loss, and you'll need therapy to relearn some things that may have been lost to you, but from your rapid recovery skills, we think you'll be up in no time, continuing your former life as if this accident hadn't happened at all. So don't you go getting down on yourself. This is just a minor setback."

She was glad for his words, albeit useless in this dream world. A minor setback. And how.

Time seemed to crawl for Alex in that hospital bed. She had nothing to do but think and to play mind games with her intellect on the chalkboard of her brain. She couldn't recall ever having noticed time passage in any of the other dreams. Sure, day

turned to night to morning, but wasn't that normal? "A minor setback." The words reverberated around in her head. What could a major setback be compared to this minor setback? Death, she presumed. And maybe that wasn't so far fetched after all. Suppose she had died and was destined to live in this dream world until her time came to revisit the earthly plane?

She had to get up, get out, soon. She couldn't bear just lying in bed too much longer. She was too active a person to allow herself to vegetate in this manner. Had anyone called her work? And what about her other life? Her real life. What was she doing sleeping so much? Surely Cally should have awakened her by now. But what was time in dreams? A flicker of her eye in the real world could span a lifetime in dreams.

The pain was too real for her to continue believing it was a mere dream. There wasn't a pain possible of inflicting itself so profoundly in a dream world. But what did she know about dreams anyway? You fell asleep, you dreamed, you woke up. That was the extent of it. She didn't look for meanings in her dreams, she placed them as no more than the movies of her mind; a place she went to release the day's energies.

They say – who are "they" anyway? – to pinch yourself if you think you're dreaming. But didn't the pins in her arms and legs suffice as a pinch of the factual?

So she started examining this dream world of hers. Suppose she wasn't dreaming? Suppose this was her real world and the other was the one she dreamed? Now that's just plain silly, she laughed at herself. Now you're the woman in that movie, not knowing which was which. She must not let anything formulate an impression on her mind. She had to think rationally. She knew for a fact she was an artist, and she had a partner named Cally Taylor, and they had a daughter named Gail. That life was too real for her to believe otherwise. She'd lived that life all her life, not in increments as she had this life, her dream life. So surely she knew which was which. Or so it seemed.

She'd been in a coma for seven days. Did that time warrant a lifetime? Had she dreamed in this life while in that coma, her life with Cally, dreaming of this life? It was a little too complex to her. But what did she have but time on her hands to think?

That realization was the first she started exploring. Had she, in fact, been living that other life while comatose, all the while her subconscious trying to link her back to her real world by making her dream of it in the dream?

Dreams within dreams within dreams. An odd concept, but not totally unacceptable or unrealistic.

It had to be reality; she was in this dream far longer than any other. She was a relatively smart woman; she didn't read much fantasy, or science fiction. She was more a Poe or Shakespeare lady, not HG Wells. Retaining that idea, she could only believe the unthinkable until now. She was dreaming an "other" life, while dreaming her real life within.

That realization made her scream.

"Alex, Hon, you need to speak some time," the therapist coaxed, bending Alex's leg at the knee and pushing it backwards toward her chest. Alex had been her client for the past year, and the woman hadn't uttered one word, not of complaint, or of pain, nor had she laughed. Sometimes, though, she cried. It was sad really, she was a bright woman; June Abrams could see that in her eyes, albeit a dull pair of blue eyes that used to sparkle.

Alex had made great progress. She could read, and write, and soon she would be able to walk. Keeping her vocal cords working posed the biggest hurdle for June. But she had faith. All was not a total loss. If the woman had given up, then would she have continued the painful therapy sessions after the coma, struggling to relearn all the basic skills? She obviously had the will to live and continue with her life, and June made it priority one to see she was returned the full woman she was the day she'd gotten into her car before it was plowed into by that drunk driver. So she pushed harder, made it impossible for Alex to even think of slacking on her sessions.

"I have this therapist friend, does wonders for some people. I'd like for you to go see her, Alex. Will you do that for me?" Her brown eyes bore down into Alex's. She thought she saw the determination there falter a moment, but it was slapped back up, even stronger than before. She released Alex's leg, setting it down gently, and then leaned on a hand, propped over Alex's prone form. "You will talk again, Alex. Your tongue wasn't severed in the accident. Maybe your will to be vocal was, but we'll get that back again."

She sat back, still staring at Alex, whose eyes never faltered from her own intense stare. She whispered to her, "I know you haven't given up. You're here, you're getting better, and you want to get well, so why won't you speak? Hm? Go on, tell me to screw off, mind my own business, anything. I'll take anything at this point."

Alex remained silent.

She was living her real world; there was no doubt about it. She'd come to that painful realization over a year ago. There was no Cally, there was no Gail, and there was no comic strip. What she'd known, or thought she had known, was all a farce.

She was a tax attorney. A lowly, boring tax lawyer. Of all the pathetic things she could have been, to be saddled with the dismal of the lot was the lowest of lows. Now don't go slighting all tax lawyers. Some of them actually like what they do. Did I just think that? She almost smiled at herself.

She would get better, she would go on, but she didn't have to talk about it, or talk at all. What did she have to say anyway? She couldn't very well tell anyone what

she'd gone through a year ago. How could she explain she'd dreamed a life she thought was real, and in that dream, dreamed a life that was real?

She recalled part of a poem she'd read once in that other life.

*"Where is my dream house? – what state? – what part?
If you'll try – you'll find it – within your own heart."*

"Alex? Where did you go off to now?" June was shaking her shoulder. Alex's eyes unclouded and she moved them to June's. "Daydreaming?" June wondered aloud. "About when you'll get up and walk out of here? Why not do it instead? Hmm?" She lifted Alex's right leg and began working on that limb. Alex grimaced.

Her father wheeled her into Dr. Daniels office a month later. She hadn't voiced her agreement to see this head shrink, but June had kindly badgered her until she'd accepted the doctor's card and her father had made an appointment.

She didn't suppose it would hurt; maybe she would even get something from the sessions. After all, wasn't that what shrinks did, un-shrink your head? Of course she'd have to talk to the good doctor in order for the shrinking to begin. She'd deal with that later. First impressions were a high for her. If the doctor messed up there, she wouldn't be back.

"Ah, Alex, welcome," the receptionist greeted her. "The doctor's in with her eleven o'clock; it shouldn't be more than a minute. Can I get you anything?"

Yeah, how about my old life back? She looked away from the woman, out the windows behind her back. There was a nice view of the parking lot. Should their car be broken into, she'd be able to see it. Not much she could do, of course, but she would be a great witness.

Ma'am, what did the thief look like?

Silence.

"Ma'am, can you describe what he wore?"

Silence.

Ma'am, how many were there?

Silence.

The door opened, drawing Alex's attention away from her mental meanderings. She saw a little girl no more than nine appear in the doorway. She had a pretty dress on, and shiny black shoes. Her hair was in pigtails. Holding back the tears, Alex thought of Gail and closed her eyes.

"Bye, Mom," she heard the child voice, and then the running footsteps as she made her way across the carpeted floor and through the open door.

Alex felt a presence before her, a warmth so inviting she opened her eyes and started to move them up the body in front of her. Alex just about fainted dead away when their eyes met, and she was staring into the face of her beloved Cally.

The green eyes, the white smile flawless except for the tiny chip in the front tooth from when, at eleven, she took a topple from the swings at the local park. Her hair was

still that same reddish gold, the same length. Even the wisps that escaped her careful brushings were still the same, curling around her ear, being defiant.

A hand was thrust in her face, and then the introduction in a voice that Alex would have recognized blindfolded, "Hi there, Alex, I'm Ca-"

For the first time in over a year, Alex spoke one word – the one word that made her whole world right again. "Cally..."