



Book Blurb

On the Olympic Peninsula in Washington, a spiritual war brews among the Spirian race. During one of the many conflicts, clan leader Khalen was forced to kill his mate after she was seduced by the Shadows. Now, he vows to banish them from his territory forever, but like most adversaries, if you kill one, many take its place.

His soul lingers in a dark turmoil of mistrust and vengeance until a most unexpected female enters his life. Skye's innocent nature awakens a protective drive in Khalen that both surprises and terrifies him. Despite his attempts to keep her safe, her unique gifts have attracted the Shadows attention. Can he protect her or will the Shadows claim another life and take what is left of his hollow soul?

This book contains no graphical sex or foul language. It is appropriate for all audiences.

Enjoy!



Chapter 1

A world of duality has many names: yin and yang, good and evil, light and dark. When one overshadows the other, a paradigm shift occurs to restore balance; such is the law of all life.

- S k y e -

SOME PEOPLE DISCOVER THEIR LIFE'S PURPOSE early on in life. I discovered mine when I thought my life was over.

I awoke to the constant beeps of monitors and the smell of alcohol and bleach. The nightmares were becoming more real and demented. In my previous dreams, I was merely an observer. This one was different. I was involved, but as a man, not a woman. Who was I in this dream? In this shadowy realm, I peered into a mirror, but the man who stared back at me was unfamiliar. One thing for sure—I felt his pain as if it were my own.

Prior to my relentless nightmares, the last thing I remembered was Sam's car spinning out of control and my head slamming into a hard, sharp object.

Protected

Sam and I were technical writers for a software firm in Seattle. We were on our way back from the annual company conference held at Safeco field. After the event coordinators got through with it, the baseball field resembled a rock star stage gone technical. Big screen projectors lined the outfield. The turf was covered in cloth and a wooden podium towered out of an impressive stage made to look like marble.

Sam was trying to guess what the theme would be for next year when his cell phone rang. He never got a chance to answer it. A car had swerved into our lane, its tail lights flashed brightly. Sam slammed on his brakes, the rear end of the car slid sideways slamming into a truck. That's when I hit my head. I didn't remember anything after that.

There was a good-sized bump on my scalp and my head felt like it was stuck in a vice. A stabbing pain bit through my right leg. I reached for it and tried to sit up. The room spun around me. My head felt heavy and thick. Though I was mostly blind, I saw, in great clarity, green ooze seeping through the walls.

Someone entered my room. Given the weight of the sound, the person couldn't weigh more than 90 pounds—hardly a threat. Three years ago, I began feeling a bit paranoid as if people were watching me. It was unjustified, but I kept my distance from others except for Sam. For some reason, he seemed safe—perhaps because he was gay and had some oddities to his character that made mine pale in comparison.

“You're awake,” she said. I could only see her shape and the faded hue of her smock. She was a tiny bit of goods, standing at about 5 foot 2 inches tall.

“Yeah,” I replied, so groggy that my voice hardly sounded like my own. “Where am I?” My throat was dry

and raw.

She fumbled with the IV tubes and pressed a button on my monitor. "Harborview Medical Center." Her tiny hand pressed against my forehead. Her skin felt cool against mine. "You're a bit warm. How do you feel?"

I winced from the pain engulfing my leg. "Like I've been recruited for a horror movie," I said.

She laughed in response. "Would you like something for the pain?"

I shook my head. Drugs were definitely on my "things to avoid" list, since I witnessed their effects on my late husband, Derrick. "Are you aware that green ooze is seeping out of the walls?"

She was silent for a second then chuckled. "You've been on morphine for three days. It can make you see things."

Yeah, I thought. It spawned some rather convincing dreams as well. It proved my theory that drugs were evil.

The girl was still and silent for a moment as if she were studying me. "Your friend said that you're blind."

I smiled, grateful to know that Sam was alive and well enough to tell people about me. "I am," I said. "Mostly, anyway."

Her silence and posture indicated that she wanted to ask more but was not comfortable doing so. I was grateful. My blindness was not something I enjoyed talking about, especially to strangers.

"I'm Katie," she said. A pleasant aroma of lilac permeated the air around her as she moved.

I knew that she already knew more about me than I would have voluntarily revealed, but I answered her sweet introduction as she may have expected. "I'm Skye." My head pounded and felt far too heavy for my neck to

Protected

support. “How’s Sam?”

I listened to her babble on about his animated personality. He had suffered a concussion and a broken tibia. His spleen was also enlarged, so they were keeping him for observation.

“There was also a dog in the car,” I said. “Maiyun, my service dog. Is she...”

Katie remained silent and my chest constricted around my heart.

“I didn’t hear about a dog,” she said, probably noticing the tears that welled in my eyes.

She placed her hand on my arm, offering reassurance. “I’ll ask the paramedics who brought you in. Perhaps they know what happened to her.”

I forced a smile. “I’d appreciate that.” In my heart, I knew that Maiyun was okay. She and I had a bond that I never had with my other service dogs. I had trained her myself with the gracious help from my retired dog, Nika. She passed away when Maiyun was eight months old. Somehow, Maiyun knew her job was important and she took it seriously.

“Tell me about her,” said Katie as she removed the items that cluttered my bed tray.

The smell of food wafted in from the hallway; it had to be mealtime. The smell of sirloin steak and rich gravy caused my mouth to water with anticipation. My stomach growled with eager anticipation.

Maiyun’s gray masked face entered my thoughts and I began to smile. “She’ll be two this year,” I said.

“Wow, she’s young.”

I smiled and nodded. “Yeah.”

“Is she a Lab?” asked Katie.

I shook my head. “No, she is three-quarter Malamute,

and one-quarter Siberian Husky.”

Katie was quiet for a moment. “I thought those dogs were used to pull sleds?”

“They are,” I said. “Typically. She was a gift from a friend.”

“She must be very special,” said Katie. “I’ll try to find her for you.”

A young man entered the room with a tray of food. It didn’t smell like sirloin steak. Katie lifted the lids and identified the contents. “Beef broth, two saltine crackers, cherry Jell-O, and a hot cup of tea.”

My stomach growled again, this time in protest. “Am I on a diet?”

Katie shook her head. “Unfortunately, we need to start you with simple foods to give your system time to adjust. You haven’t eaten anything for three days.”

“Good,” I said. “Maybe I lost a pound or two.”

“Doesn’t look like you really need to,” she said sweetly.

My expression reflected the doubt I felt in her words. When I was 37, I stood at 5 foot 7 and weighed 138 pounds. Now, I’m 45, one inch shorter, and 55 pounds heavier. Most people didn’t notice the added years and weight, but I did.

Katie finished arranging the food, and then pushed the tray toward me. “Bon appétit,” she said.

“I don’t suppose there is any chance of me getting a one-pump mocha with cinnamon powder and whole milk?” I asked.

She laughed. “Not tonight.” She checked the equipment one last time before leaving. “I’ll see you tomorrow, Skye.”

“Bye, Katie. Thanks for the company.”

The room was silent again, filled only with the

Protected

rhythmic beeping of the monitors, some conversation in the next room, and a TV show from down the hall. The bed beside me was empty.

I took my time enjoying the food, allowing each flavor and texture to dance on my tongue along with the steak and veggies I conjured with my imagination. The meal was sparse, but satisfying.

A tall, stocky man entered the room, followed by a dark, younger man. Without full-spectrum light, I could not see their faces.

“Good evening, Miss Taylor. I’m Doctor Jigante and this is Doctor Mel. How are you feeling?”

“Like I’ve been run over by a truck.”

He chuckled.

The tall one lifted my chart from the end of my bed and flipped through the pages. “Well, your last pain shot was eight hours ago. You can have another.”

“No thank you,” I said. “The green ooze coming through the walls is a strong deterrent.”

“Yes,” he mused. “Morphine can have that effect. I can give you something else, if you prefer?”

I shook my head. “No, my imagination needs no assistance. It’s scary enough the way it is, thank you.”

He put the chart down then proceeded to shine a bright light into my eyes. “Your chart indicates that you’re blind.”

I blinked a few times, trying to clear the spots from my limited field of vision. “Well, I am now.”

“Is your blindness due to an injury?” he asked.

I shook my head. “No. I have Retinitis Pigmentosa.”

“When were you diagnosed?”

“When I was 20. The doctor claimed I would be completely blind by the time was 30.”

“And are you?” he asked.

“Am I 30, no. Am I blind—partially. I see shapes and shadows for the most part. If the light is bright enough, I can see detail.”

“Hmm.” His reply dripped with doubt.

I received that response a lot. The doctor at the University of Washington, locally known as the U-Dub, had the nerve to tell me my eyes could not see anything. It didn't matter that I could tell him how many fingers he held up. He attributed it to some uncanny ability to use other senses. Hogwash.

Dr. Jigante lifted the covers off my right leg. It looked as large as a tree trunk and felt just as heavy. His touch on my skin felt cold and empty. No compassion or empathy at all, strictly business.

He rambled off some instructions to Dr. Mel that sounded like another language. Dr. Mel left quickly.

“Am I going to live?” I asked jokingly, trying to lighten his dark mood.

“You have an infection,” he said. “Dr. Mel has left to get you antibiotics.”

What I needed was a good acupuncturist and some herbs. Fat chance I'd find them here, though.

Dr. Mel returned with a syringe and small bottles. He filled the syringe, and then injected its contents into my IV tube.

Dr. Jigante finished changing my dressing, and then re-covered my leg. “You suffered a minor concussion and multiple fractures to your femur, Miss Taylor. We had to install a titanium rod to hold your bone together. You also tore the PCL in your right knee.”

I pursed my lips. “Well, that doesn't sound too bad,” I said jokingly. “When can I go home?”

Protected

He scribbled something on my chart. “When your blood count is normal and you are able to get around.”

“How soon can I try?”

He made a gruff sound that reminded me of an old man in pain. “Maybe tomorrow.” He put my chart back and touched my foot. “I’ll see you then.”

The two men talked among themselves as they left the room. Again, it seemed to be in a different language.

I couldn’t read the clock on the wall, but given the darkening light, I gauged it to be around seven or eight in the evening. I needed rest, but I wasn’t the least bit tired, nor was I too eager to have another nightmare.

I sighed and tried to move my tree trunk of a leg. Pain ripped through me like a blazing hot knife, tearing through my flesh, followed by a muscle cramp from hell. I must have cried out loud because two nurses ran into my room. I didn’t have the capacity to tell them I was all right. The pain gripped me and restricted my breath.

Sweat dripped down my forehead. The shorter nurse pried up my eyelids and stared into my eyes, while the taller one grabbed my chart. “Why has she gone so long without pain meds?”

I shook my head.

The short nurse patted my arm. “It will help, honey.” She nodded to the taller nurse, who dashed out of the room.

“No pain meds,” I strained to say. “Please?” Another pain gripped my leg. I could feel the spasms run up and down my thigh. I tried to stifle my groan, but it escaped my throat.

The taller nurse returned and confidently injected my IV with morphine.

The familiar heavy fog engulfed my brain and eased

away the pain.

The shorter nurse patted my hand. “There now, better?”

I wanted to rip the IV out of my arm and wrap the cord around her neck, but my reprieve from the intense pain called for gratitude instead. “Yes, thank you.”

If I was ever going to escape the onslaught of drugs, I needed to control the pain. My limbs began to feel heavy and my eyes could no longer distinguish between illusion and reality.

The nightmare returned.

A REDHEADED WOMAN STARED AT ME WITH wide green eyes. Her body was tall and sleek. Copper hair fell in disarray about her shoulders. The bedroom smelled of sex and sweat where the man and woman laid in bed. The man glanced up at me, a devious smile stretched over his perfect teeth.

My hands reached out but they were not my own. They were the hands of a man. Thoughts swam through my head like hordes of sharks in a feeding frenzy. Some of the thoughts were the woman’s, others belonged to the man she laid with, few were my own. Their union was complete and my body felt hollow. I couldn’t breathe without pain.

The woman approached me. I knew her—intimately. She raised her fist and produced a knife. I turned to escape and felt the sharp steel pierce my flesh and cut through my ribs. When I faced her, I saw no remorse. Her lover laughed. His strong, chiseled face was evenly tanned and flawlessly groomed.

The woman fell at my feet, her life suddenly and inexplicably spent. Mine, too, felt spent, though I

Protected

continued to breathe. My heart pumped blood through my veins, but it was void of life and void of love. I looked in the mirror across the room. Hazel eyes shone back at me. The face in the reflection was eerily similar to that of the woman's lover, though the eyes were more golden than green. Like the hands, the reflection staring back at me was not my own.

From the bed, the woman's lover reached out to me. My world turned black.



Chapter 2

In a world where everything exists and nothing exists at the same time, it is difficult to distinguish reality from illusion.

I FELT MY SKIN TINGLE. I opened my eyes to find a man standing beside me. Oddly, despite the lack of light, I could see him in brilliant detail. He wore faded blue jeans and a black brushed-cotton shirt with long sleeves. The white collar that distinguished him as a holy man shone brightly. He stood tall and in proportion to his stocky build. I noticed his trimmed silver hair, but what really stood out, were his eyes—Caribbean blue with flecks of silver. At first glance, he looked to be about 50 years old, but his face was not wrinkled and he moved too gracefully for a man that age.

He smiled, displaying a perfect set of brilliant teeth. They had to be fake, I was certain.

“I’m Reverend Mark,” he said.

I blinked my eyes a few times, half expecting this illusion to fade; the walls’ green ooze still looked comparatively real. Not wanting to appear rude, even to an illusion, I answered his greeting accordingly. “I’m

Protected

Skye.”

A lump formed in my throat. Had God sent an angel? It certainly would explain the intense vibration of color that surrounded his being. I had never seen anything like it. The color permeated his torso and surrounded him in a brilliant array of color.

“Am I dead?” I asked, sounding a bit foolish. “Have you come to take me home?”

He lifted his brow. “Are you ready?”

I hesitantly nodded my head, and swallowed against the constricting lump. My heart beat so hard in my chest, I found it hard to believe I was really dead. The man in my dream must have killed me, I thought, just as swiftly as he had killed the redheaded woman.

“Stand up, then, and I’ll take you home.”

My eyes grew wide. I wasn’t too eager to repeat my last mistake. My leg felt heavy, too heavy to move. “I can’t,” I barely whispered.

His smile broadened. “Perhaps another day, then.” It was more of a statement than a question.

He certainly was an odd man. I determined that I was not dead and he was not an angel sent to bring me home. Part of me was relieved. Another part was fascinated.

“Is there anything else I can do for you?” he asked.

“Take away this pain,” I groaned.

“Pain is nothing more than illusion,” he said. His eyes seemed to glow.

“It seems quite real on my end.”

He placed his hands on my injured leg. Everything tingled and felt very warm beneath his touch. The tingle changed to a buzz, and then I felt that buzz throughout my entire body. I saw a blue mist rise from his hands. Now I knew I was dreaming.

The dull pain slowly eased away. My eyes fluttered, and then suddenly felt heavy. I couldn't keep them open. The blissful darkness consumed me and allowed me to sleep in peace this time.

SOMETHING SOFT BRUSHED AGAINST MY nose. My eyes snapped open to find a large purple object in front of my face.

"Well, it's about time you woke up," a familiar voice said.

Sam held a huge purple bear with a big black nose up to my eyes. It was ironic how he and the bear shared the same round shape.

He wiggled the bear in front of me. "I brought you a soft and fuzzy," he said. "and it's purple!"

I squinted against the sunlight streaming in through the window. "Yes, I see that." For some reason, Sam thought that the closer an object was, the better I could see it. I tried correcting him many times, but he rarely listened.

He sat the bear down next to me. "You look like hell, Skye. How are you feeling?"

"Better, now that you're here," I said, emphasizing the sarcasm. Sam never was delicate with his choice of words, but he was always honest and had a great sense of humor. It really was refreshing to see him again.

He helped me sit up. His short, stubby hands matched the rest of his physique. At 5 foot 2, he resembled a cuddly bear, round face and all, though not purple. Instead he wore his green plaid kilt and a black t-shirt with "Geek" written across the front in bold white letters. His fuzzy crewcut hair shone like bronze in the morning light. A rainbow-colored cast covered his left leg up to his thigh.

How fitting, I thought. “Nice choice,” I said, looking at the colorful ensemble.

He laughed and clumsily strutted his kilt and rainbow cast. “Do you think they clash?”

“Oh no,” I said. “They scream, ‘bold, daring, and take me now!’”

The rise of his bushy brow and smirking grin reflected my sarcasm. “Great, I’m asking a blind person for fashion advice.”

I heard the breakfast cart in the hallway. Fat chance there was bacon, eggs, and toast on it for me. “Have you eaten?”

“No, they discharged me today. I’m just waiting for Karin to pick me up.”

“How’s your car?”

“I figure it will be melted down and turned into 420 cans of Red Bull before the turn of the week. It’s totaled.”

I frowned. “And Maiyun?”

His cherub face turned pale. “I don’t know. I passed out.” He reached over and grabbed my arm. “Oh, Skye, I’m so sorry.”

I covered his hand with mine. “I’m sure she’s fine.”

The pain in his puppy eyes was too much. He always did have a flair for drama.

“Hey,” I added. “She’s fine. I know it.”

He nodded, then backed away. “I should probably get back to my room before Karin comes.”

I frowned. It wasn’t like Sam to shut down like this. “You okay?”

“Yeah, I’ll swing by tomorrow.”

“Okay.” I grabbed the bear and gave it a hug. “Hey, thanks for Mr. Fuzzy,” I said, as Sam hobbled toward the door.

He glanced back with an evil grin and said, “Enjoy him, but not too much.”

I was relieved to see his normal sense of humor return. Sam and I had been friends for seven years, back when his name was Samantha. I remembered his battle with the trans gender process. It was a two-year ordeal and a very emotional one at that.

The testosterone shots made him intense and angry. He was miserable up to the day when he returned from San Francisco after his sex-change operation. He was several pounds lighter and happier than I had ever seen him.

Sam called himself queer. He enjoyed dating men and women, and prided himself on being polygamous. I didn’t understand his sexual preferences, nor did he understand my choice of abstinence after my husband died. Our not understanding yet accepting one another’s preferences was one of the reasons we were such good friends.

I attended Sam and Karin’s hand-tying ceremony last year. Since polygamy is illegal in Washington, this ceremony provided a means for two or more people to be united in one relationship.

Sam had another wife in Colorado, and a husband in California. His lifestyle was odd to me, but I was sure mine would bore him to tears. I didn’t have long to ponder our differences before the breakfast cart stopped in front of my door. I recognized Katie as she lifted a tray and carried it into my room. My mouth watered in anticipation.

“Good morning,” she said cheerfully.

She was beautiful, and much younger than her brisk manner conveyed. Her blonde hair was held up by a yellow scrunchy and her green eyes were shining. Something had

Protected

her in a good mood this morning.

She lowered my breakfast tray, and then set a steaming cup of coffee right beside it. “One pump mocha with cinnamon powder and whole milk?” Her brow lifted as if looking for confirmation.

My eyes widened and matched the enthusiasm in my smile. “Oh, you’re an angel in the flesh.” I picked up the ceramic mug and took a long, slow sip. I allowed the creamy liquid to linger on my tongue for a moment, enjoying the subtle hint of cocoa before swallowing. “It’s perfect.”

Katie lifted the tray cover and identified the contents for me. “Wheat toast, cream of wheat with all the trimmings, and canned peaches.”

“Yes, it looks lovely.”

She looked at me speculatively, her thin brows arched to a sharp peak. “You can see it?”

I glanced at the window. “Sunlight. If it’s bright enough, I can see fairly well.”

She looked as if she had more questions than she was allowed to ask.

“I’ll tell you about it, sometime.”

Her smirk turned into a smile. “You’re very perceptive.”

She had no idea, I thought. Since I was young, I could read people’s intentions, which also led to knowing about their lies. It was a convenient gift at times, but could also be quite disturbing. The bright-colored vibration of energy that surrounded all life was easy for me to see and was always present.

My abilities disturbed my late husband, Derrick, so I learned to keep them suppressed. He was a religious man, whereas I was more spiritual. On many occasions, we simply agreed to disagree. There were times when I

felt as if I was not really part of this world, just trapped in it for a while. There was more to this life, I knew it, I just couldn't quite touch it.

"I'll leave you to eat, and then I'll come back to check on you," said Katie.

I raised my coffee cup and smiled. "Thank you," I called out to her.

She turned and beamed a smile. "You're welcome."

My next few sips of coffee were pure heaven. I closed my eyes and gave silent thanks to our Father.

I did not consider myself a devout Christian as much as I was a spiritual one. I did not belong to a church, nor did I attend many services.

Derrick gave me a Bible one year for my birthday. He said that I often quoted the words of Jesus when I spoke. I was curious. After reading the New Testament, Jesus' wisdom touched me so deeply that I felt He was my blood brother. From then on, I vowed to follow His example. It was a poor attempt but an earnest one.

The cream of wheat looked half decent, not too sticky and not too runny. It had a bit of a malt fragrance to it. In surrounding bowls, there was some brown sugar, raisins, and a small pitcher of skim milk.

Not being a huge fan of either skim milk or sugar, I emptied the bowl of peaches into my cereal and stirred it up. Raisins were okay, but peaches sounded much better this morning. I took my time eating, savoring every morsel. Food was such a gift in life, one of my favorites. That probably explained why I couldn't lose weight.

Katie came back with a wheelchair, and a smile still beaming across her face.

"Are you up for a little stroll?" she asked.

I smiled back at her, grateful for any chance to escape

this bed.

She checked my chart and furrowed her thin brows. “Did you want a pain shot first?”

My eyes narrowed as I said, “No!”

She put the chart back. “I didn’t think so, but I noticed they gave you one at 11 last night.”

“Yeah, well, it certainly wasn’t my idea.”

She pulled the wheelchair up beside my bed and locked the brakes. “Are you ready for this?” she asked.

“Ready as I’ll ever be.”

She removed my covers and then scooped her arm around my legs. “Okay,” she said. “I’m going to swing your body over so that your legs are off the bed.”

I took a deep breath, and then whispered, “Okay.”

She positioned her other arm under my shoulders. With what seemed to be minimal effort, she had me sitting upright with my legs off the bed. She supported my right leg so it wouldn’t bend. “You okay?”

I nodded, still holding my breath.

“I’m going to lower your right leg very slowly. It might be uncomfortable but just breathe through it, okay?”

Again, I nodded.

I heard someone say, “Skye, breathe.” But I did not know if it was her, or just myself bracing for the pain that was to come.

I forced myself to take a breath. A quiet voice inside my head said, “Pain is just an illusion.” I felt the blood drain from my face.

“Keep breathing, Skye. You look pale.” She held my leg. “Are you sure you’re up for this?”

“Yes, I’m fine.” I took a deep breath. “Okay, go ahead.”

Katie slowly lowered my right leg. My knee burned as if it were on fire. My flesh felt like it was tearing. Tears

began to well in my eyes.

“Keep breathing,” she said.

I breathed deep and tried to relax my leg. My thigh threatened to spasm. Again, the voice whispered, “Pain is just an illusion.”

As the pain increased with each agonizing degree of flexion, I imagined my leg was whole and well. There was nothing wrong with it and there was no need for pain. Instinctively, I placed my right hand over my right knee and imagined the blue mist I had seen rise from Reverend Mark’s hands.

No pain, I thought.

“Almost there,” said Katie.

No pain, I opened my eyes and saw a film of blue mist rise from my hand. My eyes widened.

“You did it.” Katie glanced up at me and smiled. “Well done.”

I looked at my hand in amazement. Katie obviously did not see what I had seen.

“How do you feel?” she asked.

“Great.” I felt more than great, to be exact. I was elated and perhaps a bit scared. What had just happened? Was it real or just another by-product of the morphine?

Katie had an expression of concern. “No pain?”

I shook my head. “No, not now.”

She laughed. “Wow, you’re doing great.” She shifted her hip against my thigh. “Ready to stand?”

“Yep.”

“Only on your left leg.” She scooted me off the bed and supported my weight until I found my balance. She then helped me pivot and expertly guided me into the chair.

“Voilà!” she said. “Success.”

She lifted my feet onto the foot rests. “How are you doing?”

I nodded and smiled. “Better than expected.” That was certainly no exaggeration of that truth by any measure.

“Amen to that,” she added. “You’re gonna like this,” she sang, releasing the brakes. She grabbed the blanket from my bed and draped it over my legs. “Ready?”

I nodded. “Yes, I am.”

The hall was buzzing with people. It must have been visiting hour or something. There was no sign of Reverend Mark.

Katie backed me into the elevator and pressed the lobby button.

“I had a visit from the Reverend last night,” I said.

“The Reverend?”

“Yeah, Reverend Mark.” I described him to her and explained enough about what he had done without sounding crazy.

She laughed. “Must have been the morphine,” she said. “We don’t have anyone like that on this floor.”

It did seem rather odd how I could see him in such vivid detail, I thought. And the energy that surrounded him was too surreal. Perhaps it was just an illusion.

She pushed me past the latte stand and gift shop. We turned the corner and headed toward a door with a large blue sign that I couldn’t read. She pressed her badge to the black reader and the doors swung open.

Cold air greeted us. At the end of the long hallway, I could hear some laughter.

“Okay, close your eyes,” said Katie.

Even though I couldn’t see much in this dim lighting, I did as she asked.

She pushed me into the room where I heard the

laughter. Everyone was silent.

“You can open your eyes now.”

It was too dark for me to see any detail, but one figure stood out from all the others.

My beautiful Maiyun walked slowly toward me and placed her large head on my lap. Tears welled in my eyes and were soon streaming down my face as I looked up and thanked God for keeping her safe.

I bent down to kiss the bridge of her nose. Her musty scent brought me comfort that can only come from familiarity.

She hobbled, clearly favoring her right hind leg.

“Oh, Maiyun, you’re hurt.” I glanced around the room, hoping to hear an explanation.

A middle-aged man with light-colored hair spoke up. “She was injured in the accident. Her right hip was dislocated. It took the vet three hours to reset it.”

I reached over to give Maiyun a hug. I then looked at the room of people through teary eyes. “Thank you for taking care of her.”

Maiyun pressed her right hip against my hand. Her fur felt cool to my palm. I imagined blue smoke rising up through my hand, in hopes of removing her pain as it had mine. She licked my other hand, encouraging me to continue. The increasing heat in my hand traveled up my arm. Blue mist rose from my hand, but no one else noticed.

“I’m Dan,” the older man said. He gestured to a man on his left. “This is Craig.” He then pointed to the woman to his right. “And this is Linda.

“We were the ones who brought you and your friend in after the accident,” said Craig. “Your dog is an absolute delight to care for.”

I smiled. Maiyun had the gift to charm everyone. The folks at work called her the office tramp because of her insatiable appetite for attention. She was definitely not shy about it, either.

“Yes,” I admitted. “She most definitely is. Thank you all for your help.”

Maiyun moved away from my hand. She was no longer limping.

“Wow!” said Craig. “What did you do?”

How would I explain something I didn’t quite believe myself? “Acupressure,” I said. “It works wonders for pain.”

The silence that followed was a bit unnerving. “What vet did you bring her to?” I said, trying to distract their curious thoughts. “I would like to pay for their services.”

It was Dan who answered. “Hometown Vet in Belfair. They were the only ones who would take a service dog.”

“Why?” I asked.

“No one else wanted the liability.”

I frowned. “You can’t refuse to treat a service dog.”

Dan shrugged. “Well, they did.”

Linda spoke for the first time. There was something different about her. She radiated with shades of gray and spoke as if she were shy. I felt a chill down my spine and shivered from it.

“Does your acupressure work on humans?” she asked.

She stood and projected her energy toward me. It felt like steely probes. I drew the blanket up close to my chest.

“I injured my wrist last week and the pain is fairly intense. Can you help me?”

Everything about her warned me to back away. Something wasn’t right. She wasn’t telling the truth.

She held her arm out to me. I reached out and held her wrist. There was no injury, nor was there any pain.

I pressed some points around her wrist but kept my intention in check.

I released her wrist. "There, better?"

She looked at me for a moment, bewildered. "Yes, thank you." She pulled her energy back and sat down. The chill I felt earlier was gone.

Everyone else in the room seemed oblivious to what had just happened.

Katie looked at my face. "You look a bit pale, Skye. Are you feeling all right?"

"A bit tired is all."

"Let's get you back to your room then," she said.

Maiyun stood and moved to my side as Katie released the brakes.

Dan walked toward Maiyun. "I'll keep an eye on her until you're released."

Maiyun pressed her chin on my leg. She didn't much care for our separation any more than I did.

Dan snapped the leash to her collar but she didn't move from my side.

I kissed her head. "Go with Dan," I whispered. "We'll be together soon."

She stepped away and watched as Katie backed me out of the tiny room. When we turned the corner, Maiyun howled.



Chapter 3

Humans are a mystery—particles assembled into a biological phenomenon. They are a puzzle begging to be solved, but the pieces are constantly changing.

IHAD RETURNED TO WORK JUST in time to be granted an RIF notice. “Reduction in force” is a polite way to say your services are no longer needed. As of next week, I was officially unemployed, sentenced to join the other 70 percent of the population who were also out of a job.

These days, there wasn’t much need for a blind, dyslexic technical writer. In truth, I was ready to ditch the technical path and pursue my true passion as a body worker.

For the past 10 years, I practiced massage part time, mostly to retain some semblance of sanity. After having written technical manuals for a total of 30 years, it was time to hang up my keyboard.

I eagerly packed my work computer and Braille display for the last time, and handed everything to my manager. There was an odd sense of freedom that came with it. I had more than enough money packed away to not have to

Protected

worry about my next paycheck, so there was no urgency in finding another job. On top of that, I was offered a generous nine-month severance with one year of medical benefits. This was a perfect opportunity to see more of Washington and I was told the peninsula was a great place to start.

The small town of Belfair, I soon learned, was a lovely vacation spot. After making quite a few phone calls, I managed to rent a quaint cabin on South Shore Road along the Hood Canal. My one-month stay was sure to provide endless opportunities for hikes, kayaking, and just plain relaxing.

Of course I also planned to pay Hometown Vets a visit and thank them for taking care of Maiyun. When I called several weeks ago, they said not to worry about paying for their services, but I still felt obligated to at least stop in and offer my gratitude.

I left early the following morning while it was bright enough for me to see. Technically, I shouldn't be driving, but I could not give up my independence just yet. So long as the sun was out, I didn't have many issues—that I knew of.

Maiyun rode in the rear seat of the cab of my Dakota. I flipped the seats up to give her plenty of room to view the sites or take a nap. The old black truck was paid for and still ran like a champ. We merged onto I-5 heading south.

Two hours later, we rolled into Belfair. I was surprised to see such a development in a small town that was just shy of nowhere. In the short two-mile span, there was a McDonald's, Rite-Aid, Safeway, and QFC Grocers, all of which were packed with clientele.

I saw the oval wooden sign for Hometown Vets and

turned into the parking lot. A car honked loudly as I pulled into a space. I hardly noticed, really. It seemed that folks were increasingly liberal with their horns these days. I had grown numb to it over the years.

I let Maiyun out of the back and clipped her leash onto her collar. I left her service vest in the truck. She was tall enough where I could hold her collar and she could guide me over curbs and such.

We entered the clinic and was greeted by a tall, thin gal with short dark hair.

“Can I help you?”

“Yes, I would like to pay for services rendered to my dog, Maiyun. She was brought in by a paramedic several weeks ago. I believe his name was Dan.”

“Do you know his last name?”

I frowned. “No.”

She typed on the computer, and then shook her head. I don’t have any records for Maiyun.”

“She’s a service dog,” I offered, hoping to spark some memory. “She came in with a dislocated hip.”

A young man with sand-colored hair walked around the corner. Maiyun seemed to instantly recognize him. Her tail wagged and she nudged my leg.

Another man entered the clinic with an unruly hound. It struggled against the leash to reach Maiyun. Maiyun sat beside me and nudged my hand.

The man approached me. “Are you aware that you pulled out right in front of me?”

I shook my head. “No.”

“You must be blind then.”

“Actually, I am,” I replied.

The man had no response. He merely shook his head, and then turned toward the receptionist. “I have an

appointment to see Dr. Ian.”

The young woman looked at me apologetically. I smiled to assure her I was in no hurry.

“Sign in here, please.” She pointed to a book on the counter.

The man Maiyun recognized came to greet us. “Ah,” he said. “The service dog has returned, has she?” His faded Irish accent was charming.

I offered my hand. “I’m Skye, Maiyun’s owner. Are you the doctor who fixed her hip?”

The young man shook my hand and stared much too intensely into my eyes. “Yes, I’m doctor Ian O’Dougherty.” He looked down at Maiyun, and then knelt to her level to offer some attention. He examined her hip and looked up at me, fairly surprised. “I expected her to have a hitch to her step for a bit.”

“I guess you did a better job than you thought,” I explained. “I would like to pay for your services.”

“No need,” he said. “She’s a service dog. There is no charge.”

I had never heard of such a thing, but I didn’t want to question a blessing. “Well, please except my most sincere gratitude, then,” I said. “This dog is everything to me.”

“Yes,” he said. “She feels the same about you.” He scratched Maiyun’s ear. He then turned to the man with the hound.

“Hi Mr. Green. I’m Doctor Ian.” He bent down to greet the hound. “This must be Teddy?”

The hound lunged toward the doctor and bit down on his arm. Ian pulled back, but the dog held his grip. Blood began to stain the doctor’s white sleeve. The dog released his hold, and then quickly lunged to get a better one despite his owner’s feeble attempt to keep him under

control. Ian jumped back out of the dog's reach and gripped his bloodied arm.

"Uh, sorry Doc. Teddy doesn't like strangers." His voice was barely audible over the hound's choked barks and slipping claws against the slick vinyl floor.

Without thinking, I reached over and grabbed the doctor's arm. He tried to pull it back, but my grip held firm as if I had no control over it. After a moment, he softened.

"Follow me," he said, leading me toward a back room. Maiyun trotted behind us.

My face was red with embarrassment, yet still, I could not leave his injury unattended. "I'm sorry," I whispered. I held his blood-soaked sleeve. The blue mist involuntarily rose from my hand. There was no stopping it, nor could I bring myself to let go.

The warmth of his blood ceased beneath my hand. His flesh felt cool to my touch. I slowly let go. My hand was shaking. "I shouldn't have done that."

The dim lights in the room prevented me from seeing Ian's face.

He rolled up his sleeve. "The bleeding has stopped," he said. I saw his head turn toward me. "The wound is almost healed."

I felt sick. I dropped to my knees and Maiyun pressed her body against me, as if to offer support. I'm a freak, I thought. It wasn't just the morphine. Something is wrong with me.

Ian helped me stand. "Thank you," he said. "I guess this makes us even, eh?"

There was no shock in his voice, nor did he think me crazy. "Yeah," I said. "We're even." I grabbed Maiyun's collar and headed for the door. I heard Ian chuckle behind

Protected

me. He did not try to stop me from leaving.

What had just happened? I wondered, staring down at my bloodstained hand. It felt as if it were on fire. I needed to find some water. I remembered seeing the familiar Starbucks logo on the next corner. I could get cleaned up there and grab a much-needed cup of coffee. My hand was still burning and it shook as I turned the key.

Busy parking lots were always a nightmare for me to negotiate. There was too much activity and cars came at me from all angles. I always parked as far from buildings as possible; that way, I didn't have to squeeze into a space between two cars. Since I had no depth perception, it was impossible to tell how far away the other cars were. I learned to use some tricks that enabled me to function without hitting anything, but sometimes those tricks didn't work. It was better to be safe and just park where there were fewer cars.

I clipped Maiyun's service vest on, and headed for Starbucks across the lot. She was great at keeping me safe around cars and had learned to stay near the edge and not in the middle of the drive. Since I had no peripheral vision, it was hard to negotiate through crowds without bumping into people. Maiyun helped a lot with that, and kept me from falling off curbs or running into low-hanging branches and other objects.

I pulled the sleeve of my white sweater down over my bloody hand, still shaking and burning. My vision suddenly grew dark. I looked up and noticed the clouds moving in. That always made driving more difficult. Things appeared gray now and I had lost the ability to see detail.

We entered the crowded coffee shop. I politely asked the first person I met where the bathrooms were, and then headed straight toward them. A woman exited a

door and held it open for me. “Thank you,” I said.

I carefully pushed up my sweater sleeve and began cooling my hand under cold water. It was a good thing that I was not sickened by blood. There seemed to be quite a bit of it. I could feel the stickiness on my skin as I rubbed my hands and arms under the cool stream.

The fire was gone from my hand and the shaking had stopped as well. I still had no idea what possessed me to grab that man’s arm and not let go, but I was sure I could never face him again. His reaction to it all was rather odd. He had said we were even, but he never questioned what happened, nor did he act surprised. I wondered why.

A hot cup of coffee sounded perfect. I got in line to place my order. The man in front of me ordered two drinks and two breakfast sandwiches. He was talking with the gal taking the order as if he knew her. She mentioned something about a massage. He stepped away, and Maiyun led me up to the counter.

“Hi, can I get something started for you?” The cashier asked.

“Yes, I’ll have a grande one-pump mocha with whole milk and cinnamon powder, and one of those breakfast sandwiches that the other man ordered.”

“Very good. For here or to go?”

“For here,” I said. It was difficult enough driving as it was, let alone with something in my hands. I figured it would be safer for everyone if I were to enjoy my breakfast first, and then drive.

“That’ll be \$7.50.”

I handed her my Starbucks card.

“Okay, you have \$23 dollars left,” she said, handing me back my card.

“I heard you mention something about massage to that

man. Is there a place around here that offers massage?" I asked.

"His name is Gregg," she said. "He and his wife run a health clinic. If you want a massage, that's the place to go."

I smiled. "Thank you."

There was no rush to find a job, so why was I so intrigued with this impromptu opportunity to work at a medical clinic? The answer eluded me as I made my way toward the pickup counter.

It was too dark to identify one man over another, so I walked toward someone who looked to be the same height as the man called Gregg.

"Excuse me," I said. "Are you Gregg?"

The man turned toward me and shook his head. "No, I'm sorry."

"I'm Gregg," the man behind him said. His fit and agile physique did not seem to match the wisdom in his tone.

I could feel the heat rise in my face. It was very inconvenient not being able to see clearly and embarrassing at times. I cleared my throat. "The lady at the counter said that you and your wife run a health clinic?"

"Uh, oh," he said, nodding at the woman who took our order. "What did I do this time?"

I liked his voice, and strangely felt comfortable talking to him. "She said that your health clinic offers massage?"

"Yeah, it's just down the street, right across from the vet clinic."

My stomach sank. I wondered if he knew the doctor who worked there. I had a hard time getting the words out of my throat.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

I nodded. "I'm fine."

"Vente latte with two raw sugars, and a grande white chocolate latte," the barista called out.

Gregg turned to get his drinks. "Are you looking for a massage?"

I took a deep breath. "Actually, I'm looking for a job." The words popped right out of my mouth as if I had no control over them.

"Oh, what do you do?"

"Grande, one-pump mocha."

I reached over and took my drink and sandwich from the barista. "Thank you."

Gregg gestured toward an open table. "Do you have time to sit?"

"Yes." I followed him over to where he had pulled out a chair for me. He sat across the table. Maiyun curled up beside my chair and placed her chin on my foot. Now what? I thought. First, I grab a stranger's arm and hold it until his gaping wound stops bleeding, and now I'm asking another stranger for a job? That morphine must have wreaked havoc on my deportment.

I took a bite of my sandwich and managed to miss my mouth. Melted cheese dribbled down my lip. I grabbed the napkin. Great first impression, I thought. I pushed the sandwich aside and decided to wait until after our conversation was over.

"I was wondering," I said, into the napkin. "If—"

"I'm sorry," said Gregg. "I am hard of hearing and I need to read your lips or I don't know what you're saying. Can you remove your napkin?"

Hmm, strike two. I was off to a great start. Maiyun nudged my leg to assure me I was doing just fine. "I'm a massage therapist."

Protected

Gregg was silent for a moment, uncomfortably so.

He must think I'm a loony. I couldn't blame him, really.

"You have blood on your sweater," he said.

My face had gone from hot to cold in a matter of seconds. "It's nothing," I said. Rolling up my sleeve. "I cut myself, earlier."

"What is your specialty?" he asked.

"Chinese Tui Na, acupuncture, and medical massage."

"How long have you been practicing?"

"On and off for 10 years."

He placed a card in my hand. "Can you come by the clinic tomorrow at 11?"

"Yes."

"Did you need me to arrange a ride for you?" he asked, as he stood from the table.

"No, thank you," I said. "I can drive."

He laughed. "Okay, I'll see you tomorrow then." He gathered his drinks and sandwiches. "Oh, what's your name?"

"Skye."

"See you tomorrow, Skye."



Thank you

I hope you've enjoyed reading the first three chapters of *Protected, Spirian Saga Book 1*.

If you wish to continue the story, you may purchase it at Amazon.com, or directly from the author at:

<http://Rowena-Portch.com>

This book is available in the following formats:

Paperback

Kindle (Kobo)

ePub (Sony, Nook, Apple)

Audio book is in production

