



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.