
Chapter 1

He woke with a start, the sweat already growing cold as it poured down his chest. Michael tried to calm the pounding of his heart, but his breath would only come in short, labored bursts. It was always this way, right after one of his nightmares. It had been suggested to him, by numerous doctors, counselors, and fellow veterans, that he should try writing it down, letting it out. 'Just sit and let the words flow,' they would all say, 'it's very therapeutic.' He'd politely listen, nod his head, appear to agree, all the time knowing he was going to do no such thing.

He buried that shit as far down as it would go.

The clock on the nightstand flipped to 3:37am. Somewhere, far away, maybe outside but sounding like a bomb in his head, a car backfired, something in his mind exploded, and Michael rose like a shot from his bed.

"No more sleep tonight, Rangers!" he heard the Staff Sergeant saying, "time to gear up!" Not knowing that was the night that would change everything, the night he lost his squad, his friend, and the last thread he held of his sanity.

But no one knew, or maybe they guessed but never asked, about the trauma he carried around in his head and on his back. The pain of the shrapnel and the fire up his spine were moments that had buried their claws so far in his psyche, he would never be free. They knew of his service with the Army Rangers, of his feats during war, of his many tours in Afghanistan, all the things that molded him into the law enforcement officer he had become.

He just wanted peace.

Michael moved across the floor of his apartment, his bare feet making no sound, to sweep aside the curtain on his window. Outside, he could feel the pulsing of life in the air, in this city that never slept, his new hometown.

It was then that he realized he felt something different this time, something almost warm and comforting. The feeling had started as just an echo in the background, having been drowned out by the chaos in his mind, but the longer he stood in silence, the warmer it became. Like the sun shining on his face, a whisper of a touch, the faintest hint of birdsong.

It was a feeling he hadn't felt in a long time, one that had soothed him while also torturing him for almost his whole life. This feeling, he had been chasing it since he was a boy on the shores of Lake Huron, never able to catch it while wanting to so desperately, needing its comfort, wanting to feel the warmth and acceptance it offered. But he'd never been able to reach it. For just a moment, Michael allowed the walls in his mind to drop, allowed himself to feel the world around him, allowed the voices in his head to receive the message, accept it, and let it wash over him.

She was coming, finally.

"Attention passengers, flight D839 with nonstop service from Detroit to Phoenix will commence boarding in ten minutes."

Ava was glad she'd removed her headphones or she wouldn't have heard that announcement. She'd been paying little attention, and that wasn't like her. She felt around for her backpack and stowed the headphones in the pocket she always put them in. If they went anywhere else, she'd never find them and she wanted to finish the audiobook she was listening to. Ava lifted her long red hair off her neck and pulled it into a ponytail, her hair still falling to the middle of her back. At least, she'd been told her hair was red, she'd never actually seen the color red with her own eyes.

Everything in her life lived in dark and light shadows.

Charlie laid his chin on her knee and Ava reached down to scratch him behind the ears. She'd had the German Shepard for two years now and she'd come to depend on the seeing eye dog more than she'd admit. Not only did he help her with her everyday life, he had become one of the only friends she had. Relationships were difficult when you were "normal", and day to day encounters with people could be taxing, but especially difficult when you were blind.

And a psychic medium.

The second part, she was more able to hide than the first part. It was difficult to know who to trust when you couldn't look in someone's eyes, couldn't see their face, didn't know what their intentions were. This wasn't a new situation. Ava had been blind since birth; she had never seen the colors of a sunrise, a rainbow, the color blue, or, for that matter, even her mother's face.

Actually, it wasn't fair to say she was completely blind; she wasn't. Ava fell under the category of legally blind. She could still see light and shadows, and if the light was bright enough, she could make out objects. Inside her home wasn't as much of an issue. She kept everything in the same place, had placed tape on

things so she knew which buttons did what, like how far to turn the button to start her washing machine. It was bright in the airport, so she was able to make out people pretty easily today. Ava felt Charlie shift his head on her leg.

"Excuse me, Ms. Mitchell?"

Ava looked up at the person standing in front of her and squinted her eyes. "Yes, I'm Ava Mitchell."

"I'm one of the gate attendants and I just wanted to let you know that it's time to start boarding. I'm here to assist you if you need help."

"Oh, thank you," Ava said as she unfurled her long legs that were folded under her and stood. She had no visual idea of how tall she was, but she'd been told by the doctor she was 5'9" and she assumed that was tall for a woman. Ava slung her backpack on and grabbed the handle of her carry-on bag in one hand and Charlie's handle in the other. "We're ready. Charlie, follow."

Ava and Charlie followed the gate attendant onto the plane, Ava thanking the person who had thought about putting four wheels on luggage; it made her life a lot easier. The attendant led her and Charlie to her seat, fifteen steps from the bathroom, stowed her carry-on for her and left the plane. Ava had paid for the whole row of seats, even though she didn't have to buy a ticket for Charlie since he was a registered seeing eye dog, but he was also a large breed dog and took up a lot of room. Charlie jumped up in the seat next to hers and they waited for the rest of the plane to board.

There would be very little she would be able to see on the flight, so Ava started rummaging around in her backpack, looking for the headphones and Kindle she'd stored away. She felt when people pulled away from her when they found out she was different, and she and Charlie stuck out like a sore thumb, especially in the close quarters of a plane. People were just going to stare at them anyway. Ava had the headphones over her ears

and was about to start her audiobook again when she heard a whisper in the back of her head.

Her spirit guides were starting to chatter.

Sometimes they blared so loudly in her mind that she would actually jump; other times it started as the tiniest whisper. At those times, it was like all of a sudden noticing a noise behind her. She felt the stirring in her mind. Ava couldn't fathom why they would need to talk to her while she was sitting on this plane. She was headed to Phoenix to do a consultation and open reading. People hired her to walk through a room and channel the spirits of dead loved ones. Ava was also known to be invited to help on a lot of missing person's cases. She was the one the police called when they had no other options.

Look up.

Ava raised her eyes and the shadow of the person walking down the aisle stopped right beside her. She could tell that person was also looking at her. She'd never been able to see her own eyes but she'd been told by all the kids in the foster homes she'd grown up in that they were a freaky blue, like glacier ice. "People can tell you're weird when they see your eyes," they would say, and those were the nice ones. When she got older, one of the other fosters told her that her eyes were "fucking creepy, stop looking at me, freak."

The shadow beside her turned and sat and stowed a bag under the seat in front of him. Ava didn't even need to breathe that deeply to know it was a man. He wasn't wearing an obnoxious cologne or any that she could smell, just soap and deodorant, but he was definitely male. It was true what they said, if one of your senses is weak, the other ones will make up for it. Ava wore noise cancelling headphones but she still heard everything going on around her. Even the lightest scent could gag her, and she was guaranteed to develop a headache on this flight. Ava used unscented shampoo, body wash and lotion because her nose was so sensitive.

Then there was taste and touch. Growing up in foster care since the age of ten, Ava had lived with several different families of ethnic origin. They were all nice families until it came to dinnertime and Ava had a hard time with all the different spices that would sometimes be used. More often than not, this was when families would be upset with her and she would go to bed hungry. Ava would beg for a simple bowl of cereal, but this was seen as defiance, and when you have foster kids in your house, you had to maintain control or they'd take advantage. At least, that's what she'd come to understand. They didn't understand how overwhelming the food could be sometimes. For a while, she'd lived on Frosted Flakes, plain oatmeal and peanut butter and jelly. As she grew into an adult, she became more able to handle the different spices in food, but it was something that still bothered her. She'd also been told by her doctor that she was thin for her height but it was difficult to explain why she didn't eat very much, so she'd purchased some vanilla flavored weight-gain powder and hoped for the best.

The glance she'd done because of spirit lasted only a moment, but she felt Charlie stir beside her and she reached over and ran her hand down his head. He'd stretched out over the other two seats in the row and his head lay by her leg. Again, life had been way more difficult before she'd gotten Charlie and Ava didn't know what she'd do without him now. More passengers were boarding and Ava tried to ignore all the people passing by. Whenever she flew, she sat in the aisle seat, mostly because it was easier to get to the bathroom, but also because people just couldn't resist when they saw a dog and wanted to reach out and pet him. Not that he was a vicious dog, he wasn't, Charlie was the sweetest dog ever, but it was a distraction to him and rude of people to touch him without asking. So, she dealt with all the bodies that touched her as they brushed by so Charlie wouldn't have to.

She actually hated flying, but she really had no choice. She couldn't drive and she had to make money somehow. Flying around the country to get paid to do open channel groups was the bulk of her current income. It definitely hadn't been in her plans when she'd been in college, but she did what she could.

The plane filled and Ava realized she hadn't even turned her Kindle on when she heard the attendants start the same safety demonstration she'd heard a hundred times already. "In the event of sickness, there's a bag in the seat pocket in front of you." Sorry, but she couldn't see it, she'd be puking on the floor if she was susceptible to motion sickness. The next half hour went smoothly, the plane taxied and took off with no problems and Charlie settled in for the ride. Ava reached for the water bottle she usually kept in the outside pocket but didn't feel it, until she remembered TSA had shoved it into her bag after they checked to make sure it was empty. Ava sighed. Her head was pounding already and she wanted to take some ibuprofen. She dug around in her backpack and found the water bottle she'd filled after going through security, but had to turn on the flashlight of her phone to try to find the bottle of pills that had also shifted out of its usual spot.

Don't be alarmed.

A tap came on her shoulder just then. Sensation traveled down her arm from the spiritual power coming from the man sitting across the aisle from her. Ava looked up and felt him draw his hand back, as if he'd felt the same jolt. She pushed the headphones back off her ears, to give the illusion that she could hear him better now, as if she couldn't before.

"Can I assist you with anything?" he asked.

"Oh," Ava looked down at her bag, "I was looking for my bottle of ibuprofen. It's usually in this pocket but must have fallen out."

"May I look in the bag for you?" Ava appreciated how he

worded the question and she nodded her head and handed the bag across the aisle to him, pressing the button to turn off the flashlight. She heard him rummage around until he found the bottle and pulled it out, shaking it so she could hear it. "I found it but does this sound like the right one to you?"

It took Ava a moment to respond, she was so surprised by the question. "Yes, it does."

She heard him pop the top on the bottle. "How many do you want?" Ava told him she wanted four and she heard him tip the bottle. "Here, hold out your hand." She did and the man placed each round pill in her hand one at a time so she could feel each one, running her thumb around them and feeling the numbers stamped on each side. He then closed the lid, placed the bottle in the pocket she'd indicated and handed her back her bag. Ava had watched this all play out in shadow, the running lights on the plane too dark to let her see much.

"Thank you," she told him.

"You're welcome," came the response.

The noise of the plane became too much for her again and Ava placed the headphones back on, closed her eyes and waited for the pills to kick in. She plugged her headphones into her phone and verbally pulled up her favorite playlist, the 1940s jazz no more than a whisper in her ears. Each of her playlists lasted about an hour and by the time it came to an end, her headache was gone. The flight attendants came through with the drink service and Ava kept her eyes closed so they didn't ask her if she wanted anything. She heard the man next to her ask for a bottle of water.

Ava felt a spiritual brush against her arm then. She opened her eyes and turned her head, the process of opening her eyes more of a reaction than a necessity. Standing next to her, was the outline of a man, lit by spiritual light. His hair was long, reaching to his shoulder blades. His face was open and smiling, his eyes kind. The body he showed in the vision was thin, as if he'd spent

his life ill. He also had the look of a Native American. The image disappeared.

"My name is Martin," came the voice from beside her.

"Hello, Martin, my name is Ava. And this is Charlie." The dog raised his head at the mention of his name and cocked his head. Ava gave him a pat and he lay back down.

"Is Phoenix your destination? Or are you traveling farther after that?"

"No, just heading for Phoenix. How about you?"

"My flight ends in Phoenix as well. Are you visiting family?" Ava could hear the note of concern in his voice.

"I have no family left. I'm actually heading there for work, you could say. I'm a consultant of sorts." Ava did finger quotes in the air. "How about you? Business or pleasure?"

Martin chuckled at her, "Would you believe me if I told you that I'm not sure yet? That was a silly question, of course, you would." Ava gave him a little half smile. "I actually do have a brother who lives in Phoenix, but he's not expecting me. I got a sudden compulsion to get to Phoenix and only bought this ticket a few nights ago. I'm actually surprised there was an available seat."

Martin trailed off for a few minutes, as if he was listening to some voice within, and maybe he was. Ava thought back to all the times in her life that conversations she'd been having had trailed off like this, the other person losing interest in the conversation. Maybe losing interest in her, realizing what the color of her eyes really meant. While in college, she'd been told she had a "smoking hot body" but that statement had done nothing but made fear rise inside her. As someone who didn't see well, she was completely susceptible to people taking advantage of her and she'd lived in fear of being assaulted or raped since she'd understood the concepts. She'd very quickly stopped looking for a personal relationship. It made for a lonely life.

She'd basically been on her own since her mother died when

she was ten years old. There had never been a father in her life that she could remember, until foster care. Ava didn't even know if she had any family anywhere. Hell, at this point, she didn't even know if Mitchell was her mother's real last name, it was just the one printed on her birth certificate. Spirits always started to chatter whenever her thoughts went to her mother, and the day she died was a day Ava hadn't thought about for a long time.

Ava's eyes shifted to the sight of the man walking down the aisle at that moment. She knew he was non-corporeal because she could see him clearly. This was one of the very things that had confused her so much as a small child. She'd believed she could see because she saw people all the time. The man stopped in front of her because he knew she could see him. He looked to be an older man, and his clothing was fairly modern, but Ava couldn't see any colors aside from black and white and shades of gray. Even if he was wearing colors, no matter what color his hair was in life, she wouldn't be able to recognize them, so she didn't know what they looked like. The man pointed his finger at someone towards the back of the plane. "No," Ava said, "I am not available."

The man kept pointing towards the back of the plane and she heard the man speak in her mind. "Wife."

"I'm sorry, I'm not available. Find me another day." The ghost of the man started to look angry. Ava was used to this, every ghost that approached her thought she had a duty to help them, and she'd pissed off more than one in her lifetime. The ghost lunged at her like he was going to jump her and she slammed her shields up at the same time Martin's hand crossed the aisle and snapped his fingers.

The ghost man turned his attention to Martin, surprise etched in his features. Ava shifted her gaze to look at Martin and was also surprised at what she saw. Gone was the image he'd shown her earlier and in its place was the image of a full warrior

dressed for battle, from feathers in hair, to painted face, to bow and arrow slung across his back and war hatchets in his hands. This warrior was huge, muscular and in his prime. He looked deadly and ready for a fight. In the back of her mind, Ava could hear the chanting of generations of warriors.

If it was possible for a ghost to get pale, this man did before he faded away from sight.

"Wow," Ava said, "that was impressive."

"Thanks," Martin replied. "Sorry to interfere, I was going to let it go until he lunged. I saw your shield too late."

Ava had never heard someone apologize for chasing a ghost away. "No reason to apologize. Thanks for your help."

"The people sitting around us must think we're insane." Martin looked over at his neighbors. The couple were both asleep, the wife leaning against her husband's shoulder.

"I'm used to it, and Charlie doesn't judge."

"If my husband was here, he'd just roll his eyes at us," Martin said.

"He's not traveling with you?"

"No, like I said, I bought this ticket rather abruptly. Depending on how long this trip goes, he may end up joining me later."

"So, you don't know why you're here and you don't know how long you'll be. If you want my opinion, it sounds like a bit of an illicit liaison."

"Most definitely not that. All I know is that I had to come out here for my brother and I had to be on this flight." Martin thought about it for a minute. "Listen, Ava, if you're not busy later, would you like to grab dinner with me? I can pick you up. I'm just following my intuition here."

"Actually, that would be nice, I don't have anything going on today, I do have a few private meetings tomorrow." Ava felt Martin's smile from across the aisle.

"This will be great. Maybe we can stop and invite my brother also. Undoubtedly, I know where he'll be, and it's been a while since I was the one who surprised him. How about we program my number in your phone and I'll call you in a few hours after we land. My brother, Michael, is my twin brother. Here," he said, "let me add it in for you, my last name is Whitefeather."