

## Chapter 1

A few minutes after waking from a deep slumber, Toph Harrison discovered he was someone else.

The eyes were his first clue. Toph had excellent eyesight, had never needed glasses or contacts in his 35 years. Yet the bedroom around him swam in soft focus. Eyes are just dry, he thought. They'll clear when I wake up a bit more.

But he was already abandoning the thought as he looked at a room that wasn't his. His vision was blurry, yes, but he could still see the soft, purple light of early dawn filtering through a window that shouldn't be there. He looked at the ceiling, straining to see the familiar crawl hole to his attic; instead, he saw an uninterrupted expanse of white texture.

Toph lay still, feeling the sweat starting to bead on his forehead and the rhythm of his heart upshifting to the next gear. Don't move, he told himself. Just don't move. He was still

dreaming, of course he was still dreaming, and something truly odd would happen any second. A juggling dwarf would pop into the room, or the bed would drop through the floor and fall into a swamp of quicksand. Those things, in a way, would be comforting; they would ground him in the world of dreams, where such things happened.

Think, think, he had to think. He turned his head to the side and looked at the night table, pulled back the comforter (a blue and green geometric pattern, instead of the checkered yellow one on his own bed) and started to slide out.

A muffled groan next to him.

He turned to see the back of a woman's head, her warm brown hair frizzed by a night's sleep, on the pillow next to his. Uneasiness ran its tongue across his stomach. Who was this woman, and what was she doing in his bed?

Except it wasn't his bed. It had to be hers. What was he doing in her bed? He combed the memories of the evening before. He had stayed at home, watched a little TV, read a few chapters, then hit the hay. Pretty much the same as every night, which meant he couldn't logically explain why he was ... wherever he was.

Unless.

The army.

Yes, that made sense, now that his dream theory was dissipating. He'd retired long ago, just after the crash, but he was certain they'd been surveilling him since. And now, they had drugged him, kidnapped him, and whisked him away to this secret

location for an experiment of some kind. The government had performed experiments in the sixties with LSD and other mind-altering substances; perhaps this was an update of that scenario, with he and the woman as test subjects. It all fit: it had the sinister whiff of covert ops.

He tried a deep breath, but it felt as if a chunk of granite sat on his chest, preventing air from finding his lungs.

Army or not, he had awakened in a strange home, lying next to a strange woman in a strange bed. If he didn't know her, she wouldn't know him. And if she saw his face--

Another soft groan escaped from her lips as she rolled to face him. Her arm came out, searching for his body, but her eyes stayed shut. He turned away, trying to hide his face.

"No covers, Brandon?" her voice asked. He felt her arm searching. "Aren't you cold?" She pulled the comforter over him and wrapped her arm around his midsection, snuggling.

Uh oh. Alarm bells rang inside Toph's head. He was Christopher J. Harrison, known to the world as Toph for short, but this woman had just called him Brandon. She was probably disoriented, maybe even thinking she was in bed with her husband.

Or perhaps she was part of the elaborate deception herself: an agent put here to mess with his mind.

"Seem kinda quiet," the woman continued. She brought her hand to his cheek, gently turning his face toward her. "To hell with the morning breath."

He kept his eyes shut as he felt her lips upon his--a quick brush more than a real kiss--and then heard her slide out of bed. Toph peeked through slitted eyes and caught a glimpse of her leaving the bedroom. A few seconds later, a door clanged, followed by the sound of water rushing through the pipes in the walls. She was showering.

Okay. Time to think about this. His military explanation was sinking quickly. One: the woman wasn't sluggish and disoriented (as he was), so she probably hadn't been drugged. Therefore, she was not a test subject. Two: she seemed to think he was someone else. Yes, she could be an operative acting a part, but it didn't feel right. As he looked around, he saw more and more details that made him believe he was in a real home. In his experience, the military wouldn't conduct these kinds of experiments in such an uncontrolled setting.

So, barring the dream and military theories, how could this be happening to him?

Maybe it wasn't.

Not him specifically, not Toph Harrison, but this Brandon guy. Maybe he was ... maybe, somehow, he was Brandon. That would explain the weak eyesight, the unknown woman, the different surroundings, the non-reaction to his face ...

His face.

He ran his fingertips along his forehead and cheek, then down across his lips. Smooth. Not the long river of knotted scar tissue

his fingers had memorized.

Well. Best to just take it one step at a time. Get out of bed, find a mirror, get a good look at himself, and go from there. He threw back the covers, then swung his feet to the floor. His movements felt awkward and mechanical, as if the air around him had turned to gelatin, but he managed to stand.

Toph scanned the bedroom until he found a door. A closet door, perhaps? A closet door with a full-length mirror inside? He padded over, opened it, and peered inside. A walk-in closet. Not a huge one, by any stretch, but a walk-in closet all the same. Women's clothes, all in drab, muted colors, hung inside. Skirts, blazers, suits. Evidently, Brandon's wife was an office professional. Attorney, maybe.

Toph stood and looked for a few moments before he remembered why he had opened the closet: a mirror. And indeed, mounted on the inside surface of the door was just what he'd hoped.

He went to the mirror and stared at the reflection.

It wasn't him.

He'd expected this on some level (he was again playing with the idea this was a particularly lucid dream), but he heard himself gasp as he stepped back, stumbled, and crashed to the floor, pulling a few skirts and blazers off the rack next to him.

Immediately, he pulled himself up to look in the mirror again. It wasn't the face he had spent countless hours studying in a mirror, forcing the monstrous to become familiar. Instead, a

thirtysomething man with sharp, angular features and close-cropped black hair stared back at him with dark eyes. Toph blinked and drank in the reflection, studying the flawless, creamy-complected skin.

His eyes told him what his hands already had: no scar.