

Imaginary Darkness

by

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DEDICATION

To all my readers. Without you, this story would not have life.

Love is, in part, brightening the truth that had previously been darkened.

Dean Henryson

Chapter 1

Jeff Holloway was glad the girl wasn't dead.

He noticed a crater in the center of her front door, splintering a multitude of tiny wooden spears. Peels of paint curled off the door's frame. They gently swayed in the March breeze. Graffiti of the notorious 18th Street Latino gang infested neighboring street curbs, trashcans, fences, and walls of the houses.

Despite having a muscular build of two hundred pounds and thirty years of life experience, he felt vulnerable that cool evening.

He knocked hard, wanting to be heard over the police sirens, helicopter blades, and Rap music polluting the air.

The door creaked open.

A short Latina in her early thirties, chubby with smooth skin, stepped out from the darkness, shaking her head. She complained, "A white guy?"

Jeff glanced down at his black dress shoes, slacks, and white dress shirt. He did seem out of place in this neighborhood. He usually didn't visit clients' homes, but because this family lacked transportation to his office, he had made an exception. Offering his hand, he greeted, "Ms. Marie Arroyo?"

She ignored him and turned to go back inside. An intricate tattoo of a web covered the back of her neck. She grumbled, "You're here now, so come in." He assumed this was Marie Arroyo.

As he stepped through the doorway, he collided with the stench of stale air.

Across the living room, a gray wolf crouched in the corner. It had no collar, causing Jeff to pause. Didn't wolves live in mountains and forests? What was a wolf doing here, in East Los Angeles of all places?

"Don't be afraid," Marie said, snickering. "My daughter is in her bedroom."

As Jeff ambled through the living room, the wolf advanced. Although Jeff was six feet tall, the wolf's head rose almost as high as his chest. Scars distorted its face. Tufts of hair were missing from its coat.

He wasn't exactly afraid, but he wasn't trained to deal with wolves. His expertise was in helping people emotionally. He guessed pausing and avoiding eye contact with the animal would be best.

"Rocky!" Marie snapped, pointing the wolf back to the corner.

The wolf stopped.

As Jeff started across the living room again, Rocky's head rose high in dominance, his tail stiff, eyes feeding on Jeff.

Marie had already disappeared down the dark hallway.

Surely he won't attack, Jeff told himself. But he didn't know this family. They could have raised the animal to be aggressive. As he walked faster towards the hallway, probably appearing like fleeing prey, the wolf trotted to intercept him.

Jeff froze as Rocky vigorously sniffed his slacks. He thought the fabric might disappear into the enormous black nostrils. But the wolf's nose soon tired.

"Good boy," he said, perhaps reassuring himself more than the animal. He started for the hall again, with Rocky following closely behind.

Marie stood illuminated at the end of the hall by an open door, hands fixed to her hips, looking in with disgust. "It's a little late to clean now, Ashley. Your therapist is here."

Once Jeff entered Ashley's bedroom, Marie pulled the trailing wolf by the skin of the neck back into the hall with her, closing the door.

Unaware he had become so tense, his shoulders and arms relaxed.

This room smelled fresh, like vanilla and mango.

The slim fourteen-year-old girl had her back to him.

Squatting, her blue denim skirt brushed against her white ankle socks as she tossed clumps of clothing into a hamper. She went to the dresser, picked out a folded top sheet, and flew it over the ripped and spring-bare mattress, evidently having no bottom sheet to use. Ashley gathered up the bright yellow comforter from the floor and threw it over the bed as well.

He realized she was not going to acknowledge him. He didn't feel rejected though. This distance was common from the teenagers he worked with.

When she turned to place her purse on the dresser, he read purple words on the front of her gray t-shirt, *life is hard, then you die*. Several band-aids clung along her right wrist.

He moved to the imitation leather couch and sat. This was the cleanest, most elegant piece of furniture in the room, and evidently intended for him, as the area was free from clutter.

"It's okay, Ashley. I don't mind a mess."

Stealing glances at him through her black hair, she sank to her hands and knees and began scrubbing scuff marks from the floor with a wet rag.

"Really ... your room is nice just the way it is."

After she finished, she put the rag in the bathroom and retrieved a bottle of Windex. She went to the mirror above the dresser, spraying and wiping smudges with old, crumpled newspapers.

His heart ached watching her. There was more to this girl than obsessive cleanliness. Tucked deeply inside the folds of her soul, hidden from even herself, lay messy feelings. He implored, "Please, sit so we can talk."

Her silent work seemed to elevate the room's temperature. He rolled his sleeves up to his elbows. Every once in a while, he caught her glancing at him, as though assuring herself that he was still present and all right. He thought her sly concern for him was sweet.

From behind an old ray-tube television, a brown and gold kitten blurred across the floor and under the bed. The sweetest, tiny

mews passed through the mattress.

She dropped the newspapers and rushed to the bed. “Pixie.” She reached under and brought the kitten out. Sitting on the blinding yellow comforter, she caressed the feline on her lap, swarming purrs through the air. This magical kitten had the power Jeff lacked to break Ashley’s obsession.

Jeff could see now that the girl’s face was beautiful.

Looking down at the wide-eyed kitten, Ashley spoke softly, “His mother was killed in front of our house by a car.” She took a deep, tremulous breath. “His brothers and sisters all ran away, but he stayed on the street, guarding her. He kept trying to wake her, licking her wounds. He almost got hit too.”

Jeff waited, keeping as still as possible. He didn’t want to interrupt her disclosure.

“I felt so bad, I ran outside. I called him, but he wouldn’t come. So I picked him up, but he jumped back to his mother.” She sighed. “I had to bring him inside to keep him safe.” She brought Pixie to her chest and kissed the top of his brown and gold head. He licked her chin before she could lower him.

They sat in silence for a while.

On Ashley’s lap, underneath her soft strokes, the kitten’s eyelids closed into slits of peace and contentment.

“What happened to you, Ashley? What happened to make you cut your wrist?”

“Even after I fed him and warmed him in blankets, he meowed. The kind that aren’t good. No matter how long I held him, fed him, and petted him, he wouldn’t stop. For a whole week...” A crystal clear tear fell from her cheek. “They still come, but less—”

A shadow passed outside the window, startling her.

“What hurt *you*, Ashley?” He was trying to steer her to express her feelings directly. “Something you lost, just like Pixie?”

“I wonder if the driver knows what he did, knows all the suffering he created. Not just for Pixie, but for his whole family.”

He thought about that. “Probably not.”

“He should know,” she said quickly. After several moments, she took a deep breath. “He should know all the hurt he caused. It’s not right he doesn’t.”

“Who should know all your hurt, Ashley?”

She petted the kitten, still avoiding Jeff's eyes. "Pixie's brothers and sisters are probably all dead. A lot of hungry, stray dogs live around here. Sometimes at night," her voice trembled, "Pixie wakes beside me, panting. When I turn on the light, his eyes are big. I think he worries." She was silent for a while. "It's not fair."

"I know." He sighed, wishing expressing feelings was easier for the girl.

"It was terrible seeing his mother die. I think he has nightmares."

"I'll bet that's true. We all have bad dreams sometimes."

"I think he's scared ... of the *dark*." Her eyes fled to Jeff, as though checking his reaction.

"Yeah. How about you? Are you afraid of anything?"

She didn't answer. But she began to shiver.

"You okay, sweetie?" he asked softly.

She curled into a fetal position on the bed, bringing the kitten to her chest, petting him tenderly. "I want him to be okay. Do you think he will someday?"

"Yes." Jeff could feel his eyes becoming moist. "Someday, I think he will." He held back his emotions. It was difficult. His intuition told him she was hiding something horrific. Ashley didn't deserve to be harmed at such a tender age. This brought thoughts of his own daughter to the surface.

Her eyes finally held his. The exotic blue-gray pools were intense, perceptive, yet drenched with innocence. They seemed to peer to his soul, extracting private elements.

"What're you thinking?" she asked.

He looked away. Her therapy wasn't about him. "Oh, nothing. Just wondering ... about you."

She hugged the kitten. "I hope he'll be okay soon."

"Me too."

The ceiling light flickered, as though failing.

She sprang up with Pixie and clicked on the lamp resting on the nightstand, arms trembling, eyes darting about. "I don't know how much longer he can stand to be this way."

"I understand."

"He doesn't deserve this." She hesitantly sat back down.

“No, he doesn’t.” Jeff believed she wasn’t just talking about the kitten she loved, but also about herself. Reminded too much of his deceased daughter four years ago, a tear escaped his right eye and dripped onto his white shirt.

She didn’t see though. Her eyes were focused on Pixie. “I want them to stop bugging him.”

“Who is bugging Pixie?”

She turned her head, and her hair fell over her face. In barely a whisper, she spoke something about shadows.

“I don’t understand. Shadows?”

She didn’t respond. After a minute, she pulled her hair back. Her face glistened with trails of tears. “I just want him to be like he was before his mother died.”

“I don’t know if he can ever be the same, sweetie. But he can heal. We all can.”

She was quiet for several moments. As her eyes rose to meet his, a smile flickered on her face. “Do you promise?”

“Yes.”

She said softly, “That would be nice.”

Chapter 2

Ashley Arroyo held Pixie so close that she smelled the tuna flavored dinner he had eaten an hour ago. Mews rolled off his tiny pink tongue. He was so cute and vulnerable. She wanted to keep him safe forever.

When she checked the clock on the nightstand, it read 9:17 p.m. Nine long hours stood in her way until sunrise.

She began to cry. It was hard to stop once she started.

The shadows in the corners of her bedroom frightened her the most. Something had escaped from them before. She had seen it, but couldn't believe it.

She wanted to tell Jeff more about it earlier. He seemed nice enough, but he surely would have hospitalized her for being crazy.

She set Pixie under the lamp on the nightstand, basking him in the safe bubble of light, and briskly crossed the room to turn on the bathroom light, leaving the door open to spill warm glow into her bedroom. She also turned on the lamp in the corner of the bedroom beside the window, and then she lit a candle on the edge of her nightstand. The lights now chased away most the shady areas. She felt slightly better.

Picking up Pixie and the fizzling Dr. Pepper soda beside the candle, she took a long sip.

Mom would come in soon and tell her she was wasting electricity again. Mom would make her turn off all the lights, and then the creature from the dark would come. Ashley wouldn't be able to stop it, no matter how hard she tried. The candlelight only held it at bay.

Pixie would start meowing fast, breathing hard, and trembling. She worried mostly about him. He knew about the shadow creature. This helped her understand she *wasn't* crazy. If Pixie sensed it, then the shade was not just in her mind.

She set the soda back on the nightstand and kissed Pixie on the head. He purred so hard it massaged the air between them.

She kept watch around the room. Despite the lights, traces of gloom still lurked under the bed, under the dresser, behind the open bathroom door, and in the corner where the laundry basket sat.

Nine more hours till daylight. She really didn't want another sleepless night. It would be hard to stay awake tomorrow in school. Her grades had already dropped, and Mom had put her on restriction because of that. For a month, Ashley was prohibited from going outside except for school.

As her eyelids grew heavy and closed, she snapped them wide open. She gulped more soda, tickling the back of her throat, trying to keep caffeinated. She prayed for daylight to return as fast as possible.

Chapter 3

Driving his red Jaguar down Lincoln Boulevard to Café Tango, Jeff began to relax. The first few dates of a relationship often included some awkwardness, but this had been extreme.

“I’m so embarrassed,” Laura Turner apologized. With a floral dress reaching mid-thighs, brown hair past her shoulders, and simple sandals, she was gorgeous. “Graisse usually isn’t like that. He’s really a well-mannered dog.”

“So, there’s something about me that gets him excited?”

“No, that’s not what I meant,” she quickly corrected. “He’s more mellow. Maybe just ... I ... I can’t explain.” The flush on her face wouldn’t subside.

“It’s okay.” Trying to lighten the tension, he suggested, “I’m used to dogs humping me.” He suddenly felt like he had said the wrong thing. What had he been thinking? How could he have said that? He ran the words through his head again, trying to figure out what had drove him to make such claims.

“Oh really?” Laura replied smiling. “I better not be a bitch tonight then.”

He was relieved she wasn’t as critical as himself. “You could never be a bitch.” Feeling uneasy again, like he had said the wrong thing once more, he pursed his lips closed. He was out of practice for dating, the last woman he went out with being his ex-wife. When she left him the week after their daughter died, he had lost interest in romance.

“Thank you,” Laura said shyly, looking down, “I think.”

Now he was afraid to open his mouth, lest something abhorrent escape. Focusing his eyes on the road ahead, he turned on the radio. Light jazz softened the air. This was his favorite music, aside from classical.

“So what’s it like being a psychotherapist? It sounds *exciting*.”

“It can be,” he said slowly, calculating his words.

His thoughts returned to the sweet girl, Ashley Arroyo. He wanted to help her heal. This meant he had to uncover her hurt, but she didn’t trust him yet. He vowed to gain this trust. He would not allow her to slip into a major depression and potential suicide. There was something about the girl which was terribly defenseless, yet strong and important. Realizing his attention left his date, he refocused his thoughts. “It can be troubling, too, sometimes.”

Laura pulled a bottled water out of her purse. “I’ve always wondered what goes on behind those closed doors. What’re some of the things you therapists do?”

He thought for a moment. “I guess I specialize in therapeutic metaphor.”

The traffic signal ahead turned yellow. He slowed the car.

She asked, “What’s that?”

“Using something you’re familiar with as a symbol for something else. Like, I use light and dark to represent good and bad.” He stopped at the red signal and looked at her.

“So tell me how you used it today.” She twisted the cap off the bottle and sipped. Afterwards, she licked the excess water from her lips.

Caught in the allure of her actions, Jeff had difficulty answering. “Umm ... well ... one boy had problems lying to his mom. So I turned off the lights and told him this is where she is when he lies—in the dark, unable to help.”

She nodded. “That makes sense.”

The signal turned green, and he accelerated the Jaguar. “It’s just a metaphor. But it seems to work.”

She sipped more water, looking out the window. “What if it’s true?”

“Huh?”

“What if the metaphor is true?”

“What do you mean?”

She sounded suddenly nervous. “What if there really is something bad in the dark?”

“You mean, for real?”

She didn’t answer.

He looked around them. The sky was gloomy, most the streets held shadows, and alleyways were blackened. He

remembered Ashley's comment about shadows. Did she and Laura share something that he needed to understand? Impossible. It had to be merely a coincidence. What could they share? They didn't even know each other. His mind was overreacting. It had been a long day.

He jokingly replied, "We might be in trouble then."
"I know a secret about the dark."

He was confused. Was she being playfully seductive or did she really hold a secret? He glanced at her but couldn't get a read. What secret could she possibly have about the dark though? He decided to play along. Smiling, he encouraged, "I love secrets."

Laura barely returned the smile, now appearing more troubled than flirtatious. She screwed the cap back on the bottle and stuffed it back into her purse. "You might not like this one."

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