

# THE 49<sup>TH</sup> MYSTIC

BEYOND THE CIRCLE



ONE

## TED DEKKER

  
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Set me as a seal upon your heart,  
as a seal upon your arm.

Song of Songs 8:6 ESV

You are about to escape the old, limiting confines of your mind. The ride is wild and sometimes bumpy, so hold on tight. There is no greater thrill than finding freedom from the shackles of a common existence. The status quo is no life at all.

All of the neuroscience and psychology herein is firmly established. If in doubt, google it.

In addition, the nature of reality as demonstrated by Talya can be found in excerpts taken from his journal at the end of this novel. If in doubt, read it.

And so it begins . . .

## PROLOGUE

I'M WALKING through a field of yellow daisies, wanting to love the way they sway in a gentle breeze, wanting to enjoy the scents of fresh earth and natural grasses, the bright blue sky, the sound of chirping birds in the trees just ahead of me. Wanting to love it all but not quite able to, because a voice deep in my mind tells me that it will change any minute now. Any second. And when it changes, I'll wish I was dead.

I run my hand through the tall grass, determined not to listen to that voice, because I'm smart enough to know that people get into trouble when they pay too much attention to the crazy voices that run through their minds. Not me. Not this time.

Still, the ancient memory of something off-color haunts me, so I stop thirty feet from the tall pine trees and look around, just to be sure.

Nothing. Nothing but tall swaying grass and thousands of bright daisies. It's all slightly blurry to me because my eyesight isn't the best, but it's peaceful and full of wonder all the same. And not a sound except for the chirping birds.

See? It's okay. Nothing's wrong. Nothing to be afraid of.

So I start walking again.

I make it five steps before that distant dread finds me once more, insisting that something really is wrong. Terribly wrong.

My house is through the trees, maybe a hundred yards away, and I decide

then that I have no business being out in the field. God only knows what could happen to a girl walking alone in a field. I walk faster, straight for the trees, and I begin to hum for comfort, for distraction from my thoughts.

The first three notes are sweet and high.

The fourth comes out low and guttural, snarling with static, and I pull up sharply, terrified to breathe. The sound had come from inside of me?

No, it comes from behind me, a loud, crackling roar that slams my heart into my throat. I spin toward the house and tear for safety with the threat at my back, gaining, gaining.

I sprint through the trees, running without thought of the ground I'm covering. Praying I'll make it. Desperate.

Just before the roar reaches me, I crash through the front door and slam it shut. For the briefest moment, I think I am safe.

But now I hear a sound behind me. A soft chuckle. I jerk around with the door now at my back, and I see him. A tall man with slicked-back hair and penetrating red eyes.

*Shadow Man.*

I've seen him before, many times, and I know what he's going to say. What he's going to do. And although my lungs are frozen and my throat is tight, my mind is screaming.

"Hello, Rachele," he says, drawing out each word through a slight grin. "Do you know what seven times seven is?"

I remember now. All of it. He's asked me the same question a thousand times and I know what he's going to do, but still I can't move.

"Forty-nine, the fullness of all that is," he says. "All the darkness and all the fear in the world, dumped into one worthless girl." He takes a step toward me, eyes gleaming with anticipation. "She must be punished for her failure. You know what that means, don't you, 49th?"

I am so terrified that my mind begins to go numb. Waves of heat rush through my body. I want to run, to find my father, to hide. But my legs are lead.

"I'm going to blind you." Another step. "And when you see again, I'm going to blind you again. And again. And again, until even the thought of

seeing makes you want to puke, because you know that I'm only going to blind you *again*."

Another step. I'm trembling and I can smell his putrid breath. It's like dirty socks that have been deodorized with vanilla.

"Because of you, and through you, I'm going to blind the whole world. What happens to you happens to them all. It's all your fault, and they're going to hate you even more than they already do."

A weak plea manages to squeak past my throat. "Please . . ."

"This is only a fore-shadow."

In a flash he's on me, slamming me against the door, prying my eyes wide as I flail in a hopeless attempt to free myself from his iron grip. I know what he's doing. I think I would rather he kill me.

His mouth is spread wide, and in that last moment as my first screams fill the air, Shadow Man becomes himself, a shadow shaped like a cobra, spitting venom into both of my eyes.

Excruciating pain slices into my head and lights every nerve in my body on fire.

I bolt up in bed, screaming.

I didn't know I was asleep. I never do. But now I know I'm awake.

And that I'm blind.

# 1

IT WAS the same nightmare I'd had every night for the past ten years, beginning at age six. The dream betrayed my deepest fears that nothing would ever change, but still, it was just a dream. I reminded myself every morning.

I couldn't have been more wrong.

My name is Rachele Matthews, and I was born in a small mountain community well off the grid. The town was roughly ninety miles southeast of Salt Lake City, Utah—close enough to find help if the need arose, and far enough to be a world unto itself. When I say *off the grid* I mean completely self-sustaining in every way imaginable.

Eden, population 153 at last counting, sourced its own utilities and food, all generated and grown within the valley. We had our own law enforcement, our own hospital, our own government, and everything else required to sustain and protect life on an island.

Only we weren't on an island. We were in a deep mountain valley shaped like a bowl roughly two miles in diameter. Actually, most geologists would call the huge depression in the Rocky Mountains a sinkhole rather than a valley, but who wants to call their home a sinkhole? Certainly not Simon Moses, founder and incorporator of Eden, Utah. He envisioned a heaven on earth, a safe and peaceful environment, the polar opposite of the conflicted world we lived in.

But Eden was a sinkhole. My father, David, said the tall red cliffs that surrounded the valley made that much clear. And the only way in or out

of the sinkhole was through a three-hundred-foot-long tunnel near the top of the western face.

My father once told me Eden looked like God had taken his walking stick and slammed it down into the middle of the mountains.

I was only seven at the time, and it was easy for me to picture a huge God standing over me with a stick, ready to hit me if I wandered off the proper path. That's what Simon Moses, whom we also called the Judge, preached. The last thing I wanted was to be squashed by that stick when God slammed it down.

"I don't like that image," I said. "And you don't really believe in God."

"Sure I do. Just not the way everyone else here does." My father believed God was more in our minds than he was a person in the sky with a big stick. "Either way, one day you'll be able to see the cliffs for yourself and you'll see just how beautiful they are," he said.

I couldn't see the cliffs the way my father did, because I'd been blind since I was a baby. Miranda said I probably had seen for the first five or six months, until the irregular formation of my red blood cells, a result of sickle cell anemia, caused all kinds of complications. Among them, very fair skin and damaged retinas.

My father was a psychotherapist, not a physician, but he'd made the healing of my blindness his life's sole ambition, and he knew more about how the brain and body work than most doctors. According to him, there was something more than sickle cell going on with me. Sickle cell was an inherited disease passed on by one or both parents who have the same trait. Neither my mother nor my father had this trait.

He sometimes wondered if my sickle cell anemia was linked to the complications and stress of my birth, which nearly killed me and did kill my mother, also named Rachelle. She'd given her life for mine, he once said. He'd never quite recovered from her death. Neither had I.

Still, I had learned to be practical about my situation in life, despite all the fears that haunted me. I had no mother, but I had a father who was sure I would see again if I followed his way. And I believed in a God who would ultimately save me if I was very careful and followed *his* way.

I thought of my dad and God as two halves of a whole, both offering me hope.

In fact, I *did* have sight, just not the typical kind. Actually, I saw two different ways.

The first way was in my dreams. Not only did I dream in color, my dreams felt, smelled, and looked more real than anything in my waking blind life. Everything was still a little fuzzy and muted, but clear enough for me to experience it visually. For me, it was vivid seeing, because I had nothing else to compare it to.

Why I could see in color while dreaming was the subject of wild speculation. Maybe because I hadn't been blind for the first few months of my life, I knew what color looked like. But infants don't really see color well at that stage. And in my dreams I did.

The problem was, most of my dreams were nightmares of Shadow Man always saying the same thing, always blinding me, mocking me, condemning me. Those nightmares weren't just kinda real, but so real that I dreaded falling asleep. I called it my nightmare sight.

From a psychological perspective, nightmares don't create new fears as much as they reflect deep hidden fears. The mind has to process these in some abstract way so it won't melt down.

What kinds of fears? For starters, the fear that I would always be blind, always suffer the same nightmares that had haunted me for the past ten years. Every time I closed my eyes to sleep I begged God to take away my nightmare sight.

But I had other more common fears as well. In fact, all negative emotions are rooted in fear, most commonly fear of loss, my father said. The fear of losing worthiness created jealousy, fear of losing honor created anger, fear of losing security created anxiety, and so it went. In the end, fear was the only challenge facing all humans, he believed.

The second kind of sight I experienced had nothing to do with sleep. While awake, I saw through echolocation, the same kind of "sight" that bats and dolphins use. I wasn't the first human to "see" in this way, but my father said I was probably among the best. Daniel Kish, perhaps the best-known

blind man in the world and a hero to me, had his eyes removed in 1967 at thirteen months old due to retinal cancer. He mastered echolocation well enough to ride his bicycle through any park.

A specialist had come to the valley to examine me on two different occasions, and he'd been so impressed with my ability that he begged my father to allow further testing. So many blind people could benefit if we allowed him to study my brain, he insisted. The thought terrified me. My father refused.

While awake and using echolocation, I didn't see color. Or any definition, like features on a face. I only saw shapes. I saw them by clicking my tongue and almost immediately hearing the sound waves that returned to me after reflecting off objects. My brain took those very faint echoes and measured the distance, size, and shape of those objects around me, then sent the information to my visual cortex, where an image was created.

How can the brain learn to see shapes based on sound waves? One word: neuroplasticity. Not so long ago, science commonly held that the brain's neurons were essentially fixed at birth through genetic imprinting, but evidence to the contrary showed how the mind can create any number of new neurons and rewire old ones based on environmental input.

The first study to examine a human utilizing echolocation was in 2014, when researchers used fMRI to take high-resolution images of the brain while subjects who'd learned to echolocate clicked and "saw." Surprisingly, the visual cortex at the back of the brain, not the auditory centers of the brain, lit up, showing pronounced neural activity. The subjects really were "seeing" with the visual cortex. Their brains had rewired themselves to use sound and ears rather than light and eyes to perceive shapes, dimensions, and distances.

Echolocation didn't make me so special. I was only being human. We've known for some time the human brain can be rewired and reprogrammed. This is what my mind had done, but only because I, encouraged by my father, had developed the intention to rewire it.

I was much happier seeing through my clicks while awake than seeing in nightmares while asleep. I comforted myself with the thought that at least those nightmares never crossed over into my waking life in Eden.

And then one day they did and changed my life forever.

The date was Friday, June 8, 2018. The time was just after ten in the morning—I knew that because I had the news on, as undoubtedly most Americans did. Terrorists had executed a second wave of targeted cyber attacks against the power grid and thrown much of the East Coast into darkness.

My father was at the hospital that morning. I was standing over the stove, cooking eggs, my favorite food bar none. Eggs and ketchup.

I had one ear on the sizzle of the frying eggs and one on the voices coming over the television in the living room. Subtle shifts in the sound of the frying told me how well cooked the eggs were.

Most of my brain's processing power was occupied with the television. How a person said something spoke as loudly as their words, and in the absence of visual cues, I had learned to read inflections better than most.

The first cyber attack had hit the Northeast on Wednesday, two days earlier. It cut off power to over twenty million homes and businesses, including all of Manhattan, proving that the vulnerability of the power grid was one of America's greatest weaknesses. Not only because power plants and substations all ran on code that could be hacked, but because without electricity, everything stops.

And I mean everything.

At the moment, the voice on the NBC broadcast belonged to Cynthia Belmont, a young woman in her thirties. Blonde hair and too much makeup, my father had said.

Makeup—something I didn't bother with, thanks to my limitations. My skin was pale and made my face look like a "ghost in a hood" because of my dark hair, if you listened to Sally, who was also sixteen. Today that ghost was dressed in jeans and a black T-shirt. I knew black made my skin look paler, but I wore only black so I could grab any shirt and know what I was wearing. Besides, although makeup would give my face color, any attempt to apply it myself would surely turn me into a clown.

"Someone has to be held accountable," Cynthia was saying. "*The Wall Street Journal*, among dozens of other respected publications, warned of

precisely this vulnerability numerous times over the past five years and no one listened.”

“Look, you’re a news agency. Did NBC listen?” That was Martin Seymore, grid expert. “Pointing fingers will come later. Restoring power should be our only focus, and that’s looking more difficult by the hour.”

Cynthia hesitated. “So how do we minimize the damage? Wall Street has been locked down for two days. There’s a run on grocery stores and looting in some areas, based on reports we’re receiving. Are there plans to send in the National Guard to restore order?”

“Send them from where? Governmental agencies like the National Guard are as dependent on power as Wall Street.”

“Surely—”

“This morning’s attack affected another forty-five power stations and nearly five thousand of the fifty-five-thousand substations on the East Coast. They’ve struck twice in three days, which means they could do more. Power stations farther west are reluctant to reroute energy to the east, concerned they might be next. If the president were to send assets like the National Guard to the east, it would leave the west vulnerable.”

A pause.

“Things will get worse before they get better.”

There was an edge to Seymore’s voice that drew my stare. By *stare*, I mean turning my head so that both ears are equidistant from an object, thus allowing me to detect shapes and judge distances.

I clicked several times by habit, and the shapes of the room came into view. It was like turning on a small light for me. I could make out the objects in our small kitchen and living room, as familiar to me as the rest of the house, down to each edge and corner.

To my right: the electric stove with a range hood two feet over the burners. To the right of that: the refrigerator. Ahead of me a breakfast bar separated the tiny kitchen from the living room. There, two stuffed chairs and a couch were grouped around the television and a fireplace.

To my left, a hall led back to three bedrooms—one mine, another my father’s, and the third a study that we shared.

My face was turned to the four-foot, flat-panel television as I imagined the looks on the faces of the worried talking heads. By the sound of Seymour's voice, the situation was worse than anyone was saying.

I forgot about my eggs as they continued to talk, now urging calm and suggesting steps that anyone in the west might take to prepare for the "unlikely" event the attacks cascaded to the Pacific coast.

How much worse could it get? The government always figured out a way to dig the country out of holes, right? Americans were inventive and resilient.

But I already knew how much worse it could get. Every person in Eden knew. "One day," Simon Moses often insisted, "the whole world will face catastrophic collapse. But we in Eden will prevail. We are and will always be a totally self-sufficient community protected by the walls God has given us for our safety."

I had always been more concerned about my personal fears than Eden's ability to survive nationwide catastrophes. My world of virtual darkness and nightmares kept me somewhat insulated from all the survival talk.

But what if it was actually happening?

Without electricity, cell phones and their networks go completely silent. Computers become hunks of plastic and metal. Commerce comes to a sudden stop. The first attack on Wednesday had already cost over a trillion dollars due to loss of trade, Cynthia Bellmont said.

But that was the least of it. Refrigeration ceases and food spoils in a matter of days. Gas stations shut down. All flights are grounded. Sewage pumps fail and wastewater backs up. Water is cut off. Big cities become death traps with no way in or out except by foot. Survival instincts kick in and humans begin to do whatever is necessary to protect their own lives.

Chaos breaks out.

Maybe Simon Moses was as right about the world ending as he was about following God's law. Honestly, the thought of a nationwide collapse had a calming effect on me. It would prove Shadow Man wrong, right? He said *I* would bring blindness to the world, but here the failure of the grid was doing it without my help. Not that I believed my nightmares.

They were only symbolic, like the numbers, seven times seven. Fullness. Of *course* I didn't really believe my nightmares.

But a tiny part of me did, and that part gnawed at me whenever they crossed my mind, which was far too often.

I turned my attention back to the eggs, heard that I'd let them go a little too long, and quickly scooped them onto the plate I'd placed on the counter, right next to the stove.

Now the ketchup. I stepped to the fridge, pulled the door open, and scanned the contents with a few quick clicks. Sonic waves reflected back to my ears and traveled to my visual cortex, where they were converted to shapes and sizes that showed me what was there. I knew them well. For my sake my father always bought the exact same items.

Mayonnaise, mustard, pickles, leftovers in a large Tupperware—that would be the sauerkraut and sausages from last night—milk jug. No ketchup? We always had . . .

Then I remembered. I'd taken the ketchup with some fries to my room last night. Must have left it on my desk. I closed the fridge and headed down the hall. Could have clicked, but I was so well spatially oriented in the house that I didn't need to. If I didn't feel like clicking, distances, angles, and slight variations in temperatures guided me in this familiar place.

I did click at the door, just to see that it was closed, before turning the knob and pushing it open. Three clicks and I saw the bottle of ketchup on my desk, right next to my computer.

The keys on my keyboard were raised with Braille, but I almost always used voice-recognition software that rendered the Braille mostly unnecessary.

I was reaching for the ketchup bottle when the talking heads on the living room television went silent midsentence. But it was more than the silence that stopped me. It was the tiny popping sound that a television makes when it's turned off.

We'd lost power? But no . . . I could hear the hum of the refrigerator. I turned toward the door. "Dad?"

I heard a slight creak, which would be him walking across the living room.

I grabbed at the ketchup and knocked it off the desk. Stooping, I clicked, saw the bottle, snatched it up, and headed for the bedroom door.

This time I called louder, “Dad?” fully expecting his gentle voice to echo down the hall. *Hi, honey . . .*

Instead, I got a soft but unmistakable chuckle that stopped me in my tracks. Someone was in our house. Someone who’d just chuckled under his breath. I knew the sound of that chuckle all too well.

But that was impossible, because I wasn’t dreaming. And Shadow Man was a creation of my imagination.

Had I imagined him while awake? In my dreams, I seemed powerless to change my imagination, but awake I had full control over my perception of the world.

I was awake, right? What if . . . No, that was impossible. I wasn’t dreaming this. Or was I?

Ignoring the fear spiking down my back, I stepped forward, turned into the hall, and called out again, if for nothing else than to hear the sound of my voice echoing off the walls.

“Hello?” Then, “Dad?”

A voice began to hum the tune of a Sunday school song that had always filled me with terrible fear. *Oh be careful little eyes what you see . . .*

I flinched and dropped the ketchup bottle.

*Oh be careful little eyes what you see . . .*

Panic swarmed me even though I knew I was only imagining that tone, that pitch.

*For the Father up above is looking down in love, so be careful little eyes what you see.*

Shadow Man’s voice. But that couldn’t be! I was only remembering a song that had haunted me, a blind person. That was God and this was Shadow Man, and my mind was mixing them up.

“Hello, Rachele,” the voice said. “So good to finally see you in the flesh.”

I remained frozen at the entrance to the kitchen with the living room

on my left. Then my mind engaged properly and I let out a quick string of clicks so I could see him—see whoever was talking to me.

I saw nothing. I saw nothing because there was nothing to see and I already knew that. Something in my mind had short-circuited, and my dreams were crossing over to my waking life. After years of properly separating the reality I experienced in my dreams from my true reality here in Eden, I was mixing things up. Like a schizophrenic.

My mind told me all these things in rapid fire, and I took a tiny bit of comfort in them, but not much. Because my mind was also hearing the sound of his breathing now. Was he here or was it just my imagination? Which part of my mind was telling me the truth?

“Both,” he said.

He could read my thoughts? Of course. He was in my head.

“You’re not real,” I said in a thin, wispy voice.

“No?” I could hear him cross the floor toward the kitchen and couldn’t help but think of the knives there. “But I am. Just as real as you make anything else in this world.”

A pause and a breath. I could almost hear him grinning.

“What do you say? Wanna see, baby? Really see?”

I couldn’t stop fear, but while awake I had learned to be aware of myself feeling it. I recognized my mind at work. It was only firing off certain neural connections associated with what it thought was danger. Like an internal guidance system, it was only ringing its warning bell based on what it perceived, whether the danger was real or not.

In this case the danger wasn’t real. Couldn’t be.

“Are you willing to bet your life on that?”

He was in the kitchen. I heard the scrape of a plate on the counter followed by the sound of something being eaten. My eggs.

But clicking, I saw no eggs floating. My plate was just where I’d left it, waiting for ketchup. Of course, that was just perception too. Maybe my mind was refusing to see what terrified it. I stood like a statue with a runaway pulse, begging my imagination to right itself.

“I’ll make you a deal,” Shadow Man said, speaking around the eggs I

imagined to be in his mouth. "I'll trade my sight, which is perfect, for yours. Make this one exchange and you'll be able to see in this world, just like everyone else. I'll never bother you again. What do you say?"

My fingers were trembling. When I could see in my nightmares, he blinded me. Now I was blind and he was offering to give me sight. I clicked again, just to be sure none of this was real. Nothing. It was all in my mind.

"The whole world is in your mind, pumpkin."

He was walking toward me. That's when I lost it.

I sprang from the hall, veered right, took two long steps to the edge of the counter, and after a bit of a mad fumble, snatched a knife from the butcher block. I spun, breathing heavily, knife extended to ward him off, even though I knew he couldn't be real. I was awake! I was awake and this wasn't happening.

"Come on," he said, close again. "My sight. For your sight. One way or the other, I'm going to get it."

"I'm blind!"

"Oh, but you can see, sweetheart. You're the 49th, the only one who can see. Let me see that world, and I'll let you see this world."

"You're not real," I said again, trying to convince myself.

"No, I suppose not." He spit something out. "No deal then? You're sure? That's your final answer?"

I was breathing too hard to respond. At this point, all I wanted was for him to go away, because if he touched me . . . if he laid one finger on me . . . I would rather die.

He sighed. "Very well. But you must know that it took a lot of work to crawl inside your mind, and I'm just getting started."

He was so close now that I could feel the heat from his breath. I swung the knife about, stabbing at the air.

"See you in your dreams, my little dumpling."

And then he was gone, leaving me planted on the kitchen floor, gripping the knife, knuckles white.

The TV came back on. Familiar sounds filled my ears: a bird chirping in the large maple in our backyard, the hum of the refrigerator, a dog barking

near the center of town, the clicking of the stove top cooling down. My pounding heart, the faint rush of blood in my ears.

My world was back in order.

The door between the garage and kitchen opened and I spun, knife extended again, clicking. My father took shape.

“Rachelle? You okay?” He closed the door behind him. “What’s going on? You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

Now I felt a bit foolish. But this was my father and I had never tried to appear any particular way to him. So I just stepped over to the counter, calmly set the knife down, and turned back to him.

My emotions caught up to me then, a huge surge that rose up my chest and came out in a single sob. Then another.

He reached me in one long step, strong arms around me, pulling me close, reminding me that I was his little girl and nothing would ever hurt me in his care.

“It’s okay, honey.” He rubbed my back. “It’s okay.”

“I saw Shadow Man,” I said, pulling myself together. “While I was awake.”

“It’s okay. You’re allowed to see whatever you see.”

He didn’t patronize me by telling me it was all in my head. We’d talked about this often. According to my father, our whole lives are in our heads. The separation between mind and body has been firmly debunked by neuroscience. The whole body is one big placebo effect. Our belief makes things so—even my blindness—which gave us both hope. Technically speaking, my brain could rewire itself to actually see through my eyes, not just through clicking.

He took my face in his big strong hands and tilted it up to his. “What do you see?”

I took a deep breath and clicked. “You,” I said.

“That’s right. And who am I?”

“You’re the one who’s going to keep me safe.”

“That’s right.” He leaned down and kissed my forehead. “And I have some very good news for you.”

“What news?”

He stepped back and breathed deeply. “CRISPR. It arrived by courier this morning.”

I froze. CRISPR. Engineered segments of DNA that might fix my eyes. “It’s here? So soon?”

“Simon bent over backward on this one.” He was having difficulty containing his enthusiasm, which was something for my father, who was generally stoic. “Miranda’s prepping for you now.”

My heart was pounding again, but now with nervous anticipation. “Today?”

He stepped to the counter. “As soon as you finish the rest of your eggs.”

I blinked. “Finish them? I haven’t eaten any.”

“Well, someone took a bite.” He stepped over to the coffeepot. “You’re not hungry?”

My mind was spinning. “Not really.”

“Leave them. It’s going to be a big day. I can feel it in my bones.”

He had no idea just how big that day would be.