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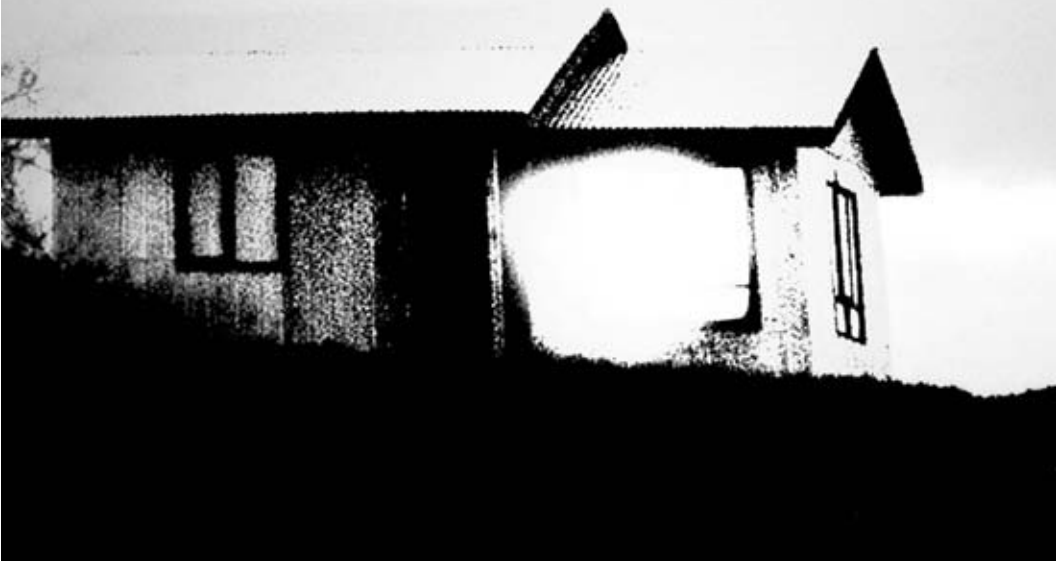


SHADOW PAWLIK

VALLEY OF THE SHADOW



TYNDALE HOUSE PUBLISHERS, INC., CAROL STREAM, ILLINOIS



**“A DOOR HAS BEEN OPENED....
A DOOR YOU CAN'T CLOSE.”**

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Valley of the Shadow

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*For Mom and Dad,
who've gone on ahead*

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PROLOGUE

“NINE-ONE-ONE.”

“There’s two guys—two kids in a car.” Jim’s voice was shaky. Out of breath. “I think they’ve just been shot. I saw another car tear off and . . .”

“Sir, where are you located?”

“I’m—I’m on the corner of Jefferson and West. Just a ways down on West. I think it was like a drive-by or something.”

“Are they conscious?”

“No. No, I think they may be dead.” Jim’s breath rasped over the phone.

“Oh, man, there’s blood all over.”

“Sir, are these children?”

“No . . . I think they’re maybe teenagers.”

“Is the car unlocked? Can you get to them?”

“Uh . . . the window’s shattered. The driver-side window.”

“Can you tell if they’re breathing?”

“No. I don’t think . . .” Jim leaned into the window, scraping the cell phone against the metal frame. “I can’t tell. I don’t—he’s not breathing. The driver’s not breathing. Man, they’re just kids. They gotta be no more than seventeen or eighteen.”

“Sir, I have the police and paramedics on the way.”

“I’m checking . . .” Jim hurried to the other door. “I’m checking on the other side. The other kid.”

Jim fumbled with the door handle. He could hear a siren in the distance. The passenger door opened and the boy tumbled out, limp. Jim dropped the phone and caught him. Pulled him out of the car. Laid him on the cement. The boy’s head flopped and rolled. A cherry red stain spread across his gray Nike T-shirt. Jim felt himself gag. He’d never touched a dead body before.

He picked up the cell phone. “I’m on the other side. I got the other kid. He nearly fell out when I opened the door.”

“Is he breathing?”

Jim bent and listened. He watched the bloody chest for movement. It was motionless. “No. I—he’s not breathing.”

“Sir, are you able to perform CPR?”

“What?”

“I can walk you through it. Until the ambulance arrives. Are you able to perform CPR?”

“I, uh . . .” Jim stammered. He’d taken a course back in high school. That was twenty years ago already. “I—I can try.”

The operator walked him through the steps. Clear the airway. Administer mouth-to-mouth. The kid had been smoking; Jim could smell it. He pushed on the boy’s chest, not sure if he was pressing too hard or not enough. He prayed silently.

He glanced up into the car. The driver was slumped forward against the steering wheel. Blood was pooling on the seat. Dripping onto the floorboard.

Jim could help only one of them.

“Somebody help me!” His voice echoed down the street. Cars rolled by on Jefferson. But nobody turned down West. He was half a block down. Too far down. They couldn’t see him in the dark. No other pedestrians approached.

The siren grew closer. Jim worked through another set and breathed in two quick breaths. His heart was pounding, yet he found himself strangely calm.

“Jesus, please help me. Help this boy.”

Five minutes ago he had been sipping a beer at Frank’s Tap around the corner on Jefferson. He’d had his own problems to worry about then. They seemed like pretty big ones at the time, but he hadn’t been in the mood to pray. He’d been too angry.

A Chicago police car pulled hesitantly onto West, spotlight sweeping the street. Jim stood and waved and the squad car rolled toward him. He went back to CPR. He could hear the car doors open and close. Two officers moved slowly. Cautiously.

Jim was careful not to make any sudden moves. They’d heard a report of gunfire and probably had their own weapons trained on him. He glanced up, squinting into the glare of flashlights. They lit up the sidewalk around him. Jim looked back down and gasped at the amount of blood.

He’d better explain. “I was coming out of the bar.” His breathing was labored. “Coming back to my car over there. I saw a black sedan pull away. It just tore off. Then I saw these two kids in the car here. I saw the window shattered. But I didn’t hear any shots. No gunshots.”

One of the officers knelt beside him. “I can take over.”

The other cop was shining his light into the driver-side window. "This one's not breathing either." He spoke into his shoulder radio, relaying information to the dispatcher. He described the scene, then opened the door and pulled the driver out.

Jim sat back and caught his breath. His forehead was dripping. He could hear more sirens now. Getting closer.

A second squad car arrived and, shortly after that, the ambulance. There was a flurry of lights and activity. A second ambulance was on its way. The medics unpacked their gear. They seemed to work without emotion, speaking to one another in tight, clinical phrases.

Jim's head was swimming. He'd never been this close to death before. Well . . . except for once.

The second ambulance arrived. A row of spectators had gathered, watching from the shadows. Jim just shook his head. Sure, now there was plenty of help.

The medics unpacked more equipment. They had cut off the boy's Nike shirt, exposing his chest. Jim could see a bullet wound near the shoulder. One of the medics checked for an exit wound and set about packing gauze around it.

They had an oxygen mask on the boy now and a medic squeezed air into his lungs. The other listened with a stethoscope, then turned and reached for the portable defibrillator. Flipped a few switches, pulled out the paddles. "Charging," he said to his partner.

The medic laid the paddles against the boy's flesh. "Clear."

Jim heard a click and soft hum. The boy's body stiffened for a moment, then fell limp again. The medic checked for a pulse. Finally he nodded.

Jim's eyes widened. He couldn't contain himself and blurted out, "He's alive?"

But they ignored him and continued giving the boy

oxygen. Three cops gathered to help lift the boy onto a stretcher and wheel him to one of the waiting ambulances. Jim watched them go, then remembered the other kid. The driver. Had they been able to save him too?

Jim moved closer for a better look. But they had covered that boy with a sheet already. Jim felt his stomach tighten. The kid was just a faceless shape lying on the asphalt under a blue sheet. Jim couldn't even recall what he looked like.

One of the officers pulled Jim aside. "Good thing you happened along when you did or they'd both be dead."

Jim stared at the sheet.

The officer held a notepad. "Sir, I'm going to need to ask you a few questions."

Jim nodded.

"Let's start with your name."

His name? Jim couldn't take his eyes off the sheet. Or the body underneath it. Thoughts started peppering his mind like crows diving for corn. Swooping down and flitting away. What if he had pulled the driver out first? Would that kid have been in the ambulance now instead of under a sheet? Why had he even gone to the passenger's door in the first place? For that matter, what if he had just stayed at the bar for another beer like Danny had wanted? Or what if he hadn't gone to the bar at all? What if he'd stayed home with his wife instead? She had asked him to stay. She'd said they needed to talk. They had a big decision to make. But he'd just wanted some air. To clear his head and have a beer. There were so many tiny decisions that night. So many choices that led him here.

"Sir?" The officer's voice broke into his thoughts. "Can I get your name?"

Jim blinked and nodded. "Uh . . . Jim," he said. "Jim Malone."



FREEZING. Devon Marshall was freezing.

Darkness enveloped him. Thick and heavy, wrapping around him like a blanket. He could feel its weight pressing in on him. Squeezing him. Smothering him. And far off in the darkness, he heard sounds. A deep rumble mixed with a jumbled, muddied squawking. The noises were muffled and distant but growing steadily louder. Like a train approaching: the thunder of the engines and the clacking of its wheels on the tracks.

A pinprick of light blazed in the darkness. Tiny at first, but getting closer. Every second it grew larger

and more intense. The sound roared now as the light rushed toward him and then . . .

Everything exploded into chaos.

Light and sound washed around him like a giant whirlpool. He could feel himself spinning inside it. Being buffeted and pulled along by a current.

And he was still freezing.

Lights flashed in his face. A dizzying array of reds and blues. Light and darkness. Shadows loomed over him and moved about. He tried to focus on the shadowy images as they swirled around him. Then he recognized them.

People?

He was surrounded by people. Actual human beings! They were speaking to one another. Devon could hear distinct voices but still couldn't make out the words. And the voices sounded worried. Anxious.

Devon's vision was becoming clearer. Several people with uniforms and badges hovered over him. An ambulance was parked nearby, and two police cars, their lights flashing.

Paramedics? And cops? Was there an accident somewhere?

His mind was a jumble of thoughts and he tried to recall what had just happened. Images flashed through his mind. Terrifying ones. Disjointed and vague memories of huge, empty buildings. Skyscrapers. An entire city, void of life. A dull, overcast sky. Gray, faceless creatures reaching out hands with long, bony fingers like enormous spider legs.

And a farm out in the middle of nowhere . . .

Terrell. Where was Terrell? They had been together just a few days ago. Or had it been only a few minutes?

Devon tried to turn his head but couldn't. Something was holding him in place. He struggled to move but was too weak.

He had to get out of here. He had to find Terrell.

He could hear the voices better now. One of them called for help. Something about a stretcher. Legs and feet shuffled out of view, then back in again. More lights.

Not far off, a row of strangers huddled together, watching. Devon scanned their faces, and one of them caught his eye. One face seemed out of place in the group. One man was standing off a little ways by himself. Standing in the shadows, staring right at Devon. His face seemed to draw Devon's gaze toward him, as if pulling him down into a pit.

It was long and narrow. Pale skin almost glowed against the shadows behind him. His cheeks were gaunt and sunken. And his eyes . . .

His eyes shone a pale yellow. But they seemed hollow. Then he smiled. His thin, puckered mouth expanded into a wide grin. Rows of brown, rotted teeth dripped with black saliva.

Devon couldn't take his eyes off the man. Then someone passed between them and he was gone.

Suddenly Devon felt himself moving. Floating. He could see several people standing around him. Cops and paramedics. They slid him into an enclosed space where white light surrounded him. Two people climbed up beside him.

What was going on?

Devon heard doors slam shut with a thud and a click. A moment later, he could feel himself moving again.

His eyes widened and his breathing grew more rapid. The crowd. The paramedics. The cops . . .

They were there for him!

They had put him into the ambulance!

One of the paramedics leaned close. He had reddish brown hair, green eyes, and a broad, freckled face. ". . . what

I'm saying? You've been shot. . . . going to be all right . . . Cook County Memorial . . . understand?"

He was pressing something against Devon's chest. Devon glanced down. Now in the light he could see his shirt was cut open and drenched in blood. A large, white piece of gauze was taped to his chest.

Devon looked back up at the medic and his breath caught in his throat.

The man's face had changed. His eyes glowed yellow. His lips parted in a twisted grin, showing dozens of teeth. Dark and rotted, all jammed together in his mouth. Black liquid, like tar, dripped onto his chin.

"The door is still open," he croaked. His voice was gargled and deep.

"Leave me alone!" Devon squeezed his eyes shut. "Leave me alone! Leave me alone!"

He felt a hand on his forehead and opened his eyes again. The medic's face had returned to normal. The guy was working on Devon as if nothing had happened.

Devon tried to slow his breathing. His chest burned and a sharp pain knifed through his ribs with every breath. He struggled for air as darkness began to close in around him. Sounds grew muffled. The medic's voice sounded urgent but began to fade. Devon could feel them moving around, trying to save him.

And he could feel himself slipping away.