

SHADOW *of the* PIPER

A Novel By
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THE SHADOW OF THE PIPER

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CHAPTER 1

Pittsburgh

Cali ducked into the shadows of a brick building as the vagrant paused and looked over his shoulder. He turned in her direction with an expectant look. She stiffened, sure she'd been spotted. To her relief, the factory whistle bellowed, and the old man pulled a bottle from his dirty coat pocket and raised a toast.

“To the suites.” He cackled and downed the dregs.

The teenager waited as the vagrant coaxed the last golden drop from the bottle. He tossed it in the dumpster and was on his way again.

Won't be long now, Cali thought as she followed from a distance. A gust of wind picked up a pile of gutter trash and dropped it in a clump at her feet. Bad weather was moving in.

The old man pulled up his collar around his leathery neck and picked up his pace. Once or twice, he stopped, rolled his shoulders beneath the spattering of rain, and glanced back; but Cali was swift and clever, always slipping out of view. Four city blocks later, the hobo reached his destination, the Pittsburgh Rescue Mission.

SHADOW of the PIPER

This has to be it, she told herself, noting the “Jesus Saves” artwork painted across the windows.

The rain came faster, flushing the street dwellers from their hovels. She held back as they scurried for shelter beneath a doorway with a plaque that read *Come to Me, All You Who Are Heavy-Laden, And I Will Give You Rest*.

Though she had not slept in days, the last thing on Cali’s mind as she crossed the street was rest.

The smell of food, mingled with something akin to wet dog, assaulted Cali’s senses as she stepped inside the spacious dining room. Dwarfed among the gathering and lost in the rumble of lively conversation, Cali searched the area, squinting under the florescent lights. She did not have to look far.

“Hey, Bruno, how ya doin’?” From the other side of a lunch counter, a young man wearing a wool knit skullcap grinned at the homeless man. “I was beginning to wonder if you’d make it in today. Say, when are you going to pose for one of my charcoal drawings?”

The vagrant shrugged his bony shoulders and flashed a grin, exposing the blackened skeletons of his few remaining teeth. He stepped up for his serving.

From beneath a ledge of black bangs, Cali studied the younger man’s face for any resemblance to a photograph taken of him when he was a child. Chestnut hair spilled from beneath his knit cap and rested in unruly waves against his neck. His pale coloring was right but the jaw line had matured. There was a definite family resemblance that brought a chill to her soul. *It has to be him*, she thought. But then he glanced her way.

Cali quickly dropped her gaze. Those warm, gray eyes carried a kindness that matched his smile. It confused her.

When she looked again, the young man was busy filling plates with food.

Behind the counter, two aluminum doors burst open and a huge African-American woman emerged from the kitchen, her arms loaded with a large platter of turkey.

Cali grabbed a tray from a table and fell in behind a lady who was nervously twisting knots in her tattered handkerchiefs. Scarves of silk, satin, and chiffon covered the street urchin's head, the ends dangling like colorful streamers. More scarves were tucked into the waistband of her skirt—plaids, flowers, polka dots, even one with a Southwest pattern.

The line moved like rush-hour traffic, and Cali's fingers twitched in boredom. She reached out and lightly tugged on the woman's western scarf. With every step forward, Cali released it a little more. One last pull, and the scarf came loose. Feeling pleased with herself, Cali quickly shoved it deep into the pocket of her baggy jeans.

The scarf lady stiffened as though some internal alarm had sprung. She whirled around and shrieked, "You took my scarf!"

"I don't know what you're talking about." Cali casually studied the chipped black polish on her fingernails.

"Give it back!" The woman's eyes were wild with indignation.

Cali pointed to her layered turban. "You must need all those scarves to hold your brain in."

"I'll teach you to steal." Scarf lady grabbed Cali by the wrist.

The heavysset woman hurried across the room, waving her big arms in the air. “Now, JuJu, you let go of that child!” she yelled.

“But, Mavis, she took something that belongs to me.” She attempted again to extricate the scarf from the teenager’s pocket. Cali exploded, biting, clawing, and kicking.

“None of that, now.” The large woman wedged her girth between the two and pushed them apart.

“I didn’t steal anything!” Cali spat defiantly and took a step back. She felt hot. Adrenaline pumped through her veins like she was a cornered animal. She stood on shaking knees, nervously fiddling with the ring in her eyebrow. Cali’s dark gaze darted from behind greasy bangs, looking for an escape.

“Calm down, honey. Ain’t nothing that can’t be worked out.” The woman leaned forward with a smile. “I’m Mavis.” Suddenly, her brow wrinkled. “Honey, those dark circles of yours tell me you could use some rest.” She touched Cali’s cheek. “Darlin’, you’re burning up with a fever!”

Cali slapped Mavis’s hand away. “Don’t touch me.” She held a finger up in warning. “If you touch me again, you’ll be sorry.”

The room fell quiet, and all eyes turned her way. Cali felt weak, and her head was spinning. *It wasn’t supposed to go like this*, she thought, but for the moment, another plan eluded her. Instinct told her to run. Cali yanked the scarf from her pocket, hurled it to the floor, and dashed from the building into the darkness and the pouring rain.



As the evening drew to a close, Jesse stood near the

door holding a box of black garbage bags. “They aren’t raincoats, but they’ll do in a pinch,” he said, handing them out to those who were preparing to venture out into the deluge. Jesse imagined the throngs trudging through the muddy back lot to their makeshift dwellings by the river. Tin City, as it was known.

Mavis stood beside him offering hugs and prayers. She cast an empathetic look Jesse’s way. “Remember when the rescue mission was open on cold nights to everyone who could find a space to lay their head?”

Jesse offered the last bag and sunk empty hands into the pockets of his faded jeans. “Fire code regulations,” he said. “Back then it seemed the mission was warmed by body heat alone.

“At least the fire marshal still lets us take in a few,” Mavis said with a heavy sigh.

After the last person left the building, Jesse helped clear leftovers. He stacked dirty trays onto a cart and rolled them into the kitchen. Mavis seemed unusually pensive. Jesse heard her praying quietly as he rinsed the dishes. “Something on your mind?”

She grabbed a stack of trays and slid them onto a shelf. “That pale girl with the black hair—the one who was fighting with Juju. You ever seen her before?”

Jesse rubbed his chin and thought about it. “Nope.”

Mavis’s expression fell, and she chewed the inside of her cheek. “That’s one sick child, physically and spiritually.” She unfastened her apron and hung it on a nail by the pantry.

“I’ll ask around while I’m out doing my street ministry.”

“You goin’ out?” Mavis raised an eyebrow.

Jesse laughed. “I don’t think many people will be out on a night like this.” He put his arm around her shoulder and they listened to the rain as it steadily fell upon the roof.

Suddenly, Jesse walked to the back door and grabbed a raincoat from a hook.

“What are you doin’?”

“I’m going to go look for that girl.” Before Mavis could protest, Jesse stepped out into the alley. The overflow from the swollen gutters ran between the buildings like a small river. Jesse lifted the raincoat’s hood over his head, pulled the string tight around his face, and splashed up the alley toward the local teen hangout.

Business was slow at Dino’s Pizzeria and Video Arcade. Except for two kids playing the machines, the place was empty.

The slick-haired manager eyed Jesse as he crossed the threshold, sloshing puddles from his tennis shoes. “I’m closing early,” he barked.

“I won’t be long.” Jesse headed toward the kids on the other side of the room. The boy pounded furiously at the video game controls. A few seconds later, he yanked on his dreadlocks and slammed a fist on the Plexiglas. “I need fifty cents.”

“I only got two dollars in change left,” his girlfriend said, eyeing Jesse.

The boy snatched the coins and fed them into the machine. He threw his whole body into the game as the minutes passed. Finally, the score flashed on the screen and the boy pounded the side of the machine with his fist. “I

almost had it this time!” His eyes lit on Jesse.

“Hey, you got a quarter?”

“Sorry.”

The young man slung his arm over the girl’s shoulder.

“So, what’s up, Jesse?”

“I’m looking for a girl, about fifteen, maybe sixteen, with longish jet-black hair and a pierced eyebrow. She’s new around here.”

“You mean that weird chick?” the girlfriend exclaimed.

“I seen her around. What a spook.”

“Do you know where she is now?” Jesse asked.

“I told her about the Place, but I don’t know if she ever found it. I think she’s strung out or somethin’. She kinda gave me the creeps.”

With mop in hand, the manager mumbled something and flashed the lights to signal closing time.

Jesse stepped back out into the elements. The Place was a block from the railroad tracks in an area that was once largely residential. Now, due to the demand for warehouse space, most of the old apartment buildings stood in ruins, waiting for the wrecking ball. The rooms of one such building housed clusters of teenagers huddled together to ward off cold and loneliness. They were mostly runaways—or throwaways—who were trying to form a family where their own had failed them.

Jesse climbed the fire escape on the side of the building and entered through a broken window on the second floor. The old linoleum was slippery with mud from those who had gone before him. He lost his balance and fell.

From the corner of the dark room, a flashlight clicked

on, blinding Jesse. Before he could climb to his feet, a gun barrel pressed tightly against his cheek.

“One more step and I’ll blow your teeth to Philadelphia.”

“Hey, it’s me, Jesse!” He slipped the hood from his head and wiped rain from his face.

A young man with red hair and freckles giggled nervously. “Sorry, I didn’t recognize you.”

“No harm done.” Jesse picked himself up from the floor.

“It was my turn to stand guard tonight. Guess I fell asleep.” The boy smiled sheepishly. “We can never be too careful. Last week a couple hobos from the tracks tried to crash the place. It took ten of us to run ’em out, ’cause Lenny was off somewhere with the iron.” He leveled the .38 Special at Jesse.

“Hey, Billy, be careful with that thing,” Jesse said as he ducked out of the way.

The young man leaned forward and whispered, “It don’t got any bullets, but don’t tell nobody.” He grinned. “What ya doin’ out tonight?”

“I’m looking for someone.” Jesse described the girl. “I think she might be sick.”

“Yeah, she’s here. Up on the third floor in Veronica’s room. You’ll need a flashlight. I got an extra.”

Jesse thanked him and walked down the corridor to the stairwell.

The communal third floor was the heart of the building. With a few old sofas and chairs, the hallway between the doors of the apartments had become a haven to the city’s

wounded children. Soft light from a few open rooms spilled out into the hallway and lit a path for Jesse. He passed two young boys who were sleeping upright on a small couch. The older boy, middle-school aged, had his arm protectively around a younger one, probably his little brother. Questions rolled through Jesse's mind, some deeply personal. Before moving on, he prayed these kids would find a refuge from whatever they were fleeing.

Near the end of the hallway, the door to Room 337 stood ajar.

Jesse could hear the sound of muffled voices. He knocked softly.

The door opened and a gangly young woman with a blunt, chin-length haircut smiled broadly. "Jesse!" She ushered him inside. "It's great to see you."

He lightly kissed her cheek, then followed her into the living room of the apartment. It was dark because the windows had been buffeted from prying eyes by cardboard boxes taped across the glass.

Veronica fiddled with a lantern, muttering something about low batteries. The room was homey despite the fact that it had been furnished mostly with items salvaged from dumpsters. Except for the artwork. A gallery of talent was displayed on Veronica's walls, including some of Jesse's earlier charcoal drawings. He remembered the name of every social refugee he'd ever drawn.

Veronica stood beside him. "Your pieces are some of my favorites. You always somehow manage to capture their haunted souls."

Jesse quickly changed the subject. "I came out tonight

to look for a teenage girl. She was at the mission earlier this evening and we think she's very sick."

Veronica nodded and gestured toward a closed door. "She's in there. I'm glad you came. I didn't know what to do, 'cause she's in pretty bad shape."

Jesse found the girl mumbling incoherently beneath mounds of blankets. He knelt beside her and put his hand on her forehead. It was almost hot enough to burn. Jesse threw back the covers and picked her up. The girl clenched her jaw and her arms twitched as if the cool air had slapped her. Jesse felt chills convulsing in waves through her body. "I've got to get her to a doctor."

Jesse sent Veronica ahead to call for a cab, then carried the sick girl to a convenience store around the corner. The rain revived her for a moment. She opened her eyes and stared at Jesse. "It's you."

Headlights penetrated the darkness. The cab sliced through the torrent and rolled to a stop. "Hey," the cabby said, looking the girl over. "The kid's not gonna get sick in my cab, is she?"

"No," Jesse said, trying to sound reassuring. "But we need to get her to the clinic as soon as possible."

"Let me guess. The free clinic, right?" the cabby asked as he pulled away from the curb. "She better not have AIDS or anything like that." The man glared at Jesse in the rearview mirror. When Jesse didn't answer, he drove faster.

Ten minutes later, the cab pulled up to the curb outside a cinder-block building with windows made of glass brick. "Six bucks," he barked.

"I don't have any cash, but if you'll go to the Pittsburgh

Rescue Mission and tell Mavis Berry that Jesse sent you—”

The cabby let out a mouthful of obscenities. “You and Typhoid Mary get out of my car!”

Jesse apologized as he lifted the young woman out of the cab, but the driver just gestured obscenely and peeled away from the curb.

Inside, the waiting room was long and narrow, with empty rows of institutional chairs upholstered in red vinyl. At the far end of the room, a sleepy-eyed receptionist peeked through a small window. She took one look at the girl in Jesse’s arms and called for help.

In a flash, a nurse appeared in the doorway and ushered them to a tiny examining room that smelled of boric acid and rubbing alcohol. Jesse gently laid the girl on an examining table.

The doctor, a short, boxy Asian gentleman in his early fifties, entered. As he gathered the girl’s vital information, she drifted in and out of delirium.

The nurse gasped when she looked at the digital thermometer. “Doctor, her temperature is 105,” she whispered.

“Prepare this young woman for a thorough exam.” The doctor turned to Jesse. “Young man, you will have to leave.”

In the waiting room, Jesse thumbed through the forms that the receptionist had given him to fill out. It occurred to him that he did not even know this girl’s name. Everything had happened so fast. He had not thought to ask Veronica if she knew anything about her.

Jesse set the clipboard aside, rose to his feet, and paced under a flickering florescent light. Above the receptionist’s

station, a wall clock ticked yet never seemed to change. After what seemed like hours, the door leading to the examining rooms opened. The nurse motioned to Jesse. “Would you come this way, please?” She directed him to a tiny room at the end of the hallway and pointed to a chair wedged between a cluttered desk and an overloaded bookcase. “The doctor will be with you shortly.”

Jesse looked at the diplomas and certificates that hung on the wall behind the desk until the doctor came in. The man sat at his desk and cleared his throat. A minute slipped by while the physician rubbed a spot on his temple. Finally, he leaned forward and looked solemnly at Jesse. “She has a very serious problem, a severe systemic infection.”

“Is she going to be all right?”

The physician shrugged, then looked down at his small hands. “We are giving her a powerful intravenous antibiotic, but to be honest her prognosis does not look good. I called the hospital. They’re sending an ambulance to transport her there.”

“Could she die?” Jesse blinked and swallowed hard.

“I see this every day,” the doctor snorted. “You young people think you’re invincible.” He stood and shook his finger at Jesse. “She should have seen a doctor months ago. She’s had the worst postnatal care I’ve ever seen. A piece of the placenta was left in her uterus and it caused an infection. You could end up raising the baby alone!”

“Baby?” Jesse pushed himself up from the chair. “What are you talking about? This girl was sick and I brought her here, that’s all. I don’t even know her name.”

The doctor sucked in a sharp breath and his eyes grew

wide. “I apologize. I assumed, since you brought her in. . . .” The doctor lowered his head and the room grew quiet. “All we can do is wait.”

“And pray,” Jesse added.

The physician looked tired. Discomfort etched deep into his features.

“It couldn’t hurt,” he said, as the ambulance attendants arrived to take Cali away.