

ANGELA CARLISLE

SHADOWED WITNESS

THE SECRETS OF KINCAID

A NOVEL

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WITNESS**

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To Jonathan,
I promise I did not kill you off in book one—
but as they say, this is another story!
I love you and am so proud of you, little brother.

LIGHTS? CHECK.

Camera? Check.

Three bags and a purse? Check.

Allye Jessup looped all four sets of straps over her left shoulder and stepped out of her small second-story photography studio into a warm autumn evening. The sun had just set, but it was still light enough that the dusk-to-dawn light above the landing hadn't kicked on yet. That wouldn't last long, especially with the fog already beginning to move in.

Tightly gripping the rail, she started down the metal stairs. She didn't need another fall, and the way her equilibrium had been off lately, she wasn't taking any chances. When she was nearly at the bottom, a dull thud sounded from behind the building. Someone stifled a cry. Another thud.

What in the world?

Allye hurried down the last few stairs and toward the noise. She slowed before she reached the corner. Fished in her pocket for her phone. She groaned silently. Not there. No telling which bag she'd stuffed it into. Or if she'd left it in her studio. Wouldn't be the first time.

As she edged toward the back of the building, she heard a

louder ka-thump as if something heavy had fallen. The sounds changed to a muted, almost rhythmic thumping. She reached the corner and peered around.

Two men. One standing back in the shadows, watching.

The second man delivered another savage kick to something—no, someone—unmoving on the ground. The blow left the fallen man's head tilted at an unnatural angle. Allye sucked in a breath.

The attacker swung around, chest heaving. Looked her straight in the eyes.

No.

Allye pushed off the building and ran, bags flopping against her back and side. Pursuing footfalls pounded the gravel behind her. She didn't dare look back. She had to get out into the open. Had to—

A heavy weight plowed into her back. She screamed. Tried to catch herself as she went down in a tangle of bags. Pain shot through her knees and wrists, but she pushed herself up. Turned to fight.

Her attacker shoved her against the side of the building. The back of her head bounced against the wall.

She screamed again.

A rough hand closed around her throat, cutting off her cry and pinning her against the rough brick. Her hands flew to his, but his grip was like steel. Too tight for another scream. Just loose enough to allow her the slightest bit of oxygen.

“What do we have here?” He studied her, ignoring her struggles. He touched her hair, letting a curl wind around his finger, then slide off. His lips curved in a predatory grin. “Pretty little thing, aren't you?”

A new wave of fear skittered up her spine. She kicked, and the tip of her shoe connected solidly with his shin. He slapped her, then shifted his hold on her throat, lifting so her toes barely touched the ground. Rage glittered in his eyes.

And he started to squeeze.

She clawed at his fingers, his arm. He snatched both her hands in his free one with a grip that threatened to snap her wrists. Her vision darkened, punctuated by pinpricks of light. She tried to kick again, but he was too close and her strength was fading.

Someone shouted—the words garbled by the rushing in her ears. Hope flared.

Her attacker looked to the side, but the force of his grip didn't diminish.

Lungs feeling ready to burst, she jerked one last time against his hold. He didn't budge. The glimmer of hope faded.

Allye succumbed to the darkness.

“ALLYE. ALLYE!” A voice penetrated the smothering black hole of unconsciousness. Someone gripped her shoulders and gently shook her. “Are you okay?”

Allye groaned, and her throat rebelled against the sound. Pain. The attack. Panic flooded in.

She clawed her way to the light, ready to fight for her life. But rather than cooperating with her brain, her eyelids fluttered, and her body declined to move at all.

“Allye?” The voice came again, and this time she recognized it. Mayor Jennings. Not the attacker.

The edge of her panic eased. She concentrated her efforts on opening her eyes, and this time, they obeyed. Mayor Jennings leaned over her, his face a picture of concern.

“Oh, thank God, you're awake! Are you in pain?”

“Where . . . is he?” She forced the words out, her throat protesting every word.

Confusion etched new lines onto the mayor's forehead. “Who?”

“That man.” Allye planted her elbows in the gravel and gathered her strength to rise. Her first attempt was pitiful, and she let

her head fall back against the ground. Ouch. She waited a moment and tried again. She was partially successful, and Mayor Jennings assisted her into a full sitting position. She bit back another groan and straightened her glasses as she focused on regulating her breathing. Everything hurt. Especially her throat. She raised a shaky hand to her neck. “The man . . . choking me.” She could hear the hoarseness in her voice, and every syllable scraped painfully across her damaged windpipe.

Mayor Jennings sat back on his heels. “There wasn’t anyone else out here.”

“A man came after me. Choked me because I saw—” The man on the ground. Could he still be alive?

She pushed to her feet. Dizziness washed over her, and her purse swung against her body. She clutched at the staircase railing. Instantly, she felt the mayor’s strong hand cupping her elbow.

“Easy, Allye. You had a hard fall.”

She shook her head, making the dizziness worse. She squeezed her eyes shut for a count of ten. “I didn’t fall.”

“You didn’t?”

His gaze dropped to her knees, and she glanced down. Despite the harsh shadows cast by the light above the landing, she could make out the shredded mess of her leggings. She blinked and thought back.

“Well, I did fall when he was chasing me,” she corrected.

“When who was chasing you?”

“The man.” And she needed to see if the other person being beaten had survived—though she wasn’t sure how he could have. She shook off the mayor’s hold and stumbled toward the back of the building. He followed, hovering as if he expected her to collapse at any second.

“There was a man—men—back here,” she explained. “One of them was beating another, and the one on the ground wasn’t moving. I’m not sure he was even still alive.” She rounded the corner and stopped short, nearly losing her balance. Mayor Jennings again

reached out to steady her. No one was here now. No attacker. No victim.

She spun in a slow circle, even that motion increasing her dizziness. Had she confused the buildings? She crossed the space between structures and peered into the dimly lit area behind the newspaper office. Only an industrial-size dumpster and empty parking spaces met her gaze. That didn't match. Again she turned. What she'd seen had definitely been behind her building.

"I need to call 911. Maybe they'll be able to find trace evidence."

"Allye, you need to go home and rest." The mayor's voice was gentle, fatherly. "Or get a doctor to check you out. You fell down the steps."

"I don't need a doctor, and I didn't fall—"

"I heard your scream from my office." He took her arm and led her back the way they'd come. "I came outside immediately and found you at the bottom of the stairs. No one else was around."

"But—" They passed by the stairs, and her other bags lay as if she'd dropped them there. She slowed. "I need to get those."

"Let me get you to my car, then I'll collect them for you."

"My car's parked out front. I can drive."

"No." His tone brooked no debate. "You hit your head and passed out. I am not letting you on the road. It wouldn't be safe. Besides"—he winked at her—"your mother would never forgive me if something happened to you."

She tried to muster a smile, but the attempt fell flat. Mayor Jennings and her mom had been dating for the past three months, and Allye still hadn't quite gotten used to it. She had nothing against the man, who'd been Kincaid's mayor for well over a decade and a member of their church for much longer, or against her mom for exploring the possibility of finding love again. It was just new territory.

When they'd lost Allye's dad during what would have been his last active-duty tour in Afghanistan eighteen years ago, Julie Jes-sup had stepped into life as a single mom. In all these years, she'd

shown little interest in dating—even after she abruptly entered the empty-nest stage when Allys's younger brother, Derryck, was killed in a car accident at fifteen. No, she'd just thrown herself more fully into her thriving realty career and spent her free time in volunteer work. Or hovering over her remaining two children as much as they let her.

As they reached the sidewalk, the mayor decisively steered them toward the parking lot on the other side of city hall—and away from her Jetta. Allys glanced over her shoulder. She didn't want to leave her car here and be stranded at home, but . . . the mayor was probably right about her driving. Regardless of how it came about, she *had* lost consciousness, and her brain still felt fuzzy. And truth be told, she didn't have the energy to argue any further.

She bit back a sigh and allowed him to lead her to his shiny black Mercedes. He insisted on helping her inside before heading back for her bags.

After hitting the locks, she slumped in the leather passenger seat and watched until he disappeared around the corner of the newspaper office. Could he be right? She replayed the moments before everything went dark. Though her memories weren't as crisp as normal—or what had been normal until the last couple of months—they were solid. Real.

She frowned. No matter what the mayor thought, she hadn't fallen down the steps. She'd seen someone getting attacked, and the attacker had chased her—choked her.

So where had everyone gone? And why was she still alive?

None of it made any sense.

But she knew what she'd seen. Felt. There was another victim out there, and the more she thought about it, the less she believed he'd be found alive. And if that was the case . . . she'd witnessed a murder tonight.

Her stomach flipped as the realization sank in. She needed to call the police, and the sooner the better. She dug in her purse for her phone but again failed to find it. She'd have to search her

other bags once Mayor Jennings returned. Or just ask to borrow his phone.

When he rejoined her a moment later, she cleared her throat and grimaced at the pain. “I can’t leave until I call the police. I’m almost positive that was a murder in progress, and at the very least, the man attempted to kill me.” She saw the protest on Mayor Jennings’s face, but before he could voice it, she plowed ahead. “I know you think I just fell, but what will it hurt to have them look?”

He sighed and rubbed the skin between his eyes. “How about this? I’ll call the police and have them take a look around. But first let me take care of you. The last thing you need is to be stuck out here while we wait for an available officer to arrive and investigate.”

“But they’ll need my statement.”

“If they find anything, yes. And they can follow up with you with any questions they have.”

A wave of fatigue washed over her, making it hard to think. Would an extra ten or twenty minutes make a difference at this point? The men were gone, and she doubted they’d return anytime soon. And though she had no intention of admitting it, she needed to lie down. Holding herself upright was taking nearly all the energy she had left.

“Okay.”

Satisfied with her one-word acquiescence, the mayor started the engine. “Am I taking you home or to the ER?”

“Home.” The ER wouldn’t do anything for bruises that she couldn’t do just as well herself, and she had enough medical bills and doctor appointments as it was. She wasn’t going to add one she didn’t need.

They pulled onto the road, and the mayor aimed his car toward her house.

“Now, tell me what you think you saw, so I can give the police an accurate description.”

Allie resisted the urge to correct his use of the word *think*. “I

was coming down from my studio and heard what sounded like someone getting hit behind the building. I went to the corner and looked around and saw three men. One was on the ground like he'd fallen, and another was kicking him." She swallowed. "I think I made a noise because the attacker looked up and saw me. I tried to run, but . . ."

The mayor stopped at a light and turned to look at her. "And?"

"He pushed me down." She blinked. "Or I fell. I don't remember now. But when I got up, he grabbed me. Held me against the wall and started choking me. I blacked out. Then you were there."

The light changed, and the mayor returned his attention to the road. "You said you think you saw the attack behind the building. Right or left from the alley?"

"Right. And I *did* see it."

He didn't respond.

Tired as she was, Allys couldn't let the silence ride for long. "How did you find me?"

"I heard you scream and came looking."

"No, I mean how was I positioned? What did you see?"

His fingers tightened on the steering wheel. "When I came around the corner, I saw you face down at the base of the stairs. I turned you over and checked your pulse. Made sure you were breathing." He wiped his forehead. "You scared me, Allys."

His concern was comforting, but his statement didn't make sense. She'd been a couple of yards past the steps when the attacker caught up to her. He'd pinned her against the wall, choked her, and . . . what? She had no idea what had happened afterward, but much time couldn't have passed if the mayor had come looking for her when she screamed.

She realized she was holding her throat again. It still hurt, and her voice was becoming weaker the more she talked. Wasn't that proof of her being attacked?

"I didn't fall down the steps," she said quietly. "I passed out because he choked me."

“Allye”—the mayor sounded weary—“there wasn’t anyone out there with you.”

“Then why is my throat so sore?” Her raspy challenge was pitiful.

“You screamed pretty loud.” He met her eyes for a brief second before returning his attention to the road. “And that purse you’re carrying looks heavy. When you fell, it could have yanked against your neck.”

She glanced down. She normally carried the bag slung over one shoulder, but the mayor was right. It hung cross-body. She couldn’t remember doing that before leaving her studio. But with the brain fog she’d been fighting the last couple of months, that didn’t mean much. She sighed and lapsed into silence, this time for the rest of the short drive to her duplex.

When they arrived, the mayor insisted on guiding her to the door. She reluctantly agreed, but only because she felt so awful. She unlocked her duplex and allowed him to set her bags just inside.

“Are you feeling up to staying by yourself? I could call your mother for you.”

“No.” Allye forced her aching body straighter. “I’m fine—just sore. Please don’t tell my mom about tonight. I don’t want her to worry.”

The mayor frowned. “If your mom finds out you fell down the steps and I didn’t let her know—”

“She won’t.” Allye forced a grin. “I’m sure not going to tell her, and if we were the only ones there . . .”

His expression didn’t clear. “Okay.” He took her hand. “But only if you promise me you’ll go straight to bed and you’ll be careful on those steps from now on.”

“Deal.” She hadn’t fallen down the stairs, but she would continue to be careful when navigating them.

He patted her hand, then released it and headed for his car.

“And, Mayor Jennings?”

He turned back to her.

“Thank you.”

He flashed the smile that had earned him nine-tenths of the vote last election cycle. “I’m always here when you need me.”

Allye closed and locked her door, then limped to a nearby recliner. She hadn’t lied to him exactly. But between the soreness and a renewed weight of fatigue, she didn’t have it in her to make it to her bed tonight.

2

ANOTHER OVERDOSE.

The whole place reeked of cigarette smoke and weed, but neither of those had killed Ashley Harrison.

Detective Eric Thornton ignored the memories this scene called up. And the nausea. With gloved hands, he lifted a baggie from the home's scarred kitchen table. Remnants of a powdered substance coated the corners. He placed it in an evidence bag. The lab would verify what they were looking at. Meth, likely laced with fentanyl, if his suspicions were correct.

There'd been way too much of the stuff floating around Kincaid lately, judging by the uptick in ODs over the last couple of weeks. The medical examiner was still waiting for toxicology results on several of the victims, but the few finalized reports he'd sent Eric's way indicated fentanyl-laced methamphetamine was likely responsible for the deaths.

Where was it all coming from? Kincaid was a small town, a significant drive from any major cities or interstates. Weed was common enough—meth too, unfortunately. But fentanyl was relatively new to the area. And so much more dangerous.

Though it had been wreaking havoc on much of the country for years, Eric had held out hope that the synthetic opioid would skip over his hometown. So much for that.

He really should have known better. It had only been a matter of time until a greedy dealer succumbed to the lure of additional profit either through direct sales to willing customers or through cutting a more costly drug with the cheaper and more potent opioid—with or without the user’s knowledge. But the consequences of using a drug with unknown or unexpected potency were often deadly.

Paramedics had been able to revive the last victim, but Ashley Harrison hadn’t been so lucky. The thirty-four-year-old had been stone cold by the time someone claiming to be a concerned neighbor called in a wellness check.

He hated calls like this one. Too late to save the victim of an obvious overdose. Too little evidence to bring the dealers to justice—usually anyway. But he’d do his best.

Randi Owens, the patrol officer who’d found Ms. Harrison’s body, leaned in the front door. “Medical examiner will be here in fifteen.”

Good. The sooner the ME removed the body, the sooner Eric could finish evidence collection and get out of this place. Afterward, the family would have to be notified, if she had any.

Based on the contents of the small house, he’d guess she had a couple of kids, and he hurt for them. The neighbor who’d called in the well-check hadn’t mentioned them, but it was possible the deceased shared custody with a father who lived elsewhere. He hoped that was the case—that her kids hadn’t spent the night with their mom dead on the couch and just assumed she was passed out when they left to catch the school bus this morning. He couldn’t make the call on time of death, but his guess was that she’d been gone for more than a few hours.

Something in another room crashed. He and Randi exchanged looks. They’d searched the house already and found no one. He slipped his gun from its holster and jerked his head toward the hallway. She nodded, her weapon already in hand too.

Eric led the way down the short hallway, breathing silently through his mouth to avoid the stench emanating from the bathroom. He quickly cleared it and the first bedroom while Randi covered him. They moved to the second and smaller of the bedrooms. A wooden chair now lay toppled under an open window where rain was beginning to blow inside. Something or someone had knocked the chair over. Considering they'd seen no sign of a pet and the window had barely been open an inch when they checked this room earlier, he'd put his money on a someone.

His eyes trailed to the closet door. Shut. It had been open before. He nodded at it. Randi's eyes hardened. Eric crept toward the closet, keeping himself positioned so that if someone was hiding inside, they wouldn't have a direct shot at him.

He leveled his gun and threw open the door.

"Police!"

A small boy—five, maybe six years old—crouched inside.

Eric caught his breath and quickly holstered his gun.

The kid had snot crusted below his nose, and his clothes smelled like they hadn't been washed in a while.

He crouched down to get on eye level with the boy. "Hey, I'm Eric. What's your name?"

The kid just stared at him.

"You hungry?"

He didn't respond for a moment, then gave an abrupt nod. Of course he was hungry. Eric knew what hunger looked like. Felt like.

"You like nuggets?"

Another nod.

"Okay." He slipped a mini chocolate bar from his pocket and handed it to the boy. The distrust in the kid's eyes didn't waver, but the tightness around his mouth eased.

And Eric recognized him. From church. The realization sucked the air from his lungs.

"Lucky?"

Lucky—Eric couldn't remember his real name—blinked and inclined his head.

“Where's Dion?”

At the mention of his brother's name, Lucky's defenses flew up. He pushed the candy bar back at Eric.

Eric raised his hands in a placating gesture. “No, you keep it. Dion's not in trouble. I just want to make sure he's okay.” They stared at each other a moment before he decided to try again. “Is your brother okay?”

Lucky looked down at the candy bar and shrugged.

Eric traded glances with Randi. The officer nodded and joined them on the floor—crouching like Eric, rather than sitting, to avoid unnecessary scene contamination and whatever else was on this floor. She'd stay with Lucky and keep him away from his mother's body while Eric made the necessary calls.

While Randi pulled out her phone and started rambling about a litter of puppies in her brother's barn, Eric stood, barely resisting the urge to clap Lucky on the shoulder. The boy needed support, but he radiated defensiveness. An almost-stranger's touch wouldn't be welcome.

He backtracked through the house, refusing to look in the direction of Ms. Harrison's body as he passed through the living room. How could a mother care so little about her kid? Kids. Dion was out there somewhere too.

God, let him be okay.

He stepped outside, stripping off his gloves. Once in the fresh air, he dialed the station. “Darla, can you get somebody over here with a kid's meal?” He turned and stared at the chipped paint on the door. Rain dripped down his neck, but he ignored it. “Nuggets with extra fries. Boy's toy if there's an option. And we'll need a social worker.”

Thirty minutes later, Eric watched the CPS caseworker's car pull away with Lucky. He shot up a prayer that he'd be placed with a good home—or, better yet, with a responsible family member.

Maybe he'd be able to reclaim some of his childhood before it was too late.

But Eric knew the boy would always bear a scar from losing his mom so early. And who knew what else he'd experienced before her death? Neglect? Probably. Deprivation? Almost certainly. Though neither of those were true in every case involving a parent with an addiction, it happened far too often. Eric knew that from personal experience. And the hunger he'd seen in Lucky's eyes had been more than one missed breakfast would account for.

Once the car disappeared from view, he pulled in a fortifying breath and headed back to the scene that would likely haunt him for days. But he'd gladly accept that for a chance to shut down even a tiny branch of this deadly industry. Illicit drugs had ruined far too many lives.