

The Shadow

Grace Daniel

Alice wasn't ugly. It's just that Jamie was always the prettier of the two.

Alice wasn't stupid. It's just that Jamie made better grades. Perfect grades, in fact.

Jamie was everything Alice was, only better. No matter how hard Alice tried, it seemed that Jamie was always one up; she had one more star in her ever-brightening sky, one more blade of greener grass.

Alice Monroe had always lived in her older sister's shadow. Yet, because she loved her sibling fiercely, she never allowed much room for jealousy. But the shadow was always in the back of her mind, lurking, always growing. Alice simply chose to ignore it. She had to daily light her candle of sisterly love in hopes of scaring the shadow back.

After sixteen years, the wick in her candle began to run out.

"You girls sound amazing!"

The two sisters smiled at a handsome young man in his early 20's.

"I saw you perform a few hours ago. All I can say is... wow. How long have you two been playing together?" the man inquired.

Jamie, with her trademark giggle, replied, "Gosh, since forever! Alice and I both began taking guitar lessons when she was seven and I was eight. Before that, we sang *a//*the time, ever since we learned how to speak!"

"Well, you both sound wonderful." He paused briefly to look at his watch. "I have to be somewhere right now, but I hope to see you beautiful ladies again," said Mr. Handsome, with a wink at Jamie.

She giggled again.

He walked off into the crowds, disappearing among a sea of heads.

The humid summer air wasn't the only thing suffocating Alice. Even though the sun was still bright in the western sky at the annual Midtown carnival, Alice felt a cold shadow pass over her. The drops of sweat slowly making their way down her back felt like the sharp talons of a monster caressing her skin. She felt sick.

Alice jumped when someone poked her side.

"He sure was cute, wasn't he Alice?" Jamie whispered to her younger sister.

Alice turned to look at her sister and smiled, trying to mask the uneasiness she felt. Staring at her sister's big blue eyes, she could see why everyone adored her. With her long blonde curls and bright smile, Jamie could pass as an angel.

"You are more beautiful than he is cute," Alice said playfully. She brushed her hand through her straight dirty blonde hair. "Let's go find something to eat before we have to play at 8:00. That should give us about two hours to clear our throats of greasy

carnival food.”

The Monroe sisters clasped hands and pushed their way through the crowds and arrived at a pretzel stand. While waiting in line, they chatted about their recent performance, critiqued each other, and discussed their next set list.

Alice and Jamie had been playing at the Midtown carnival for the past four years, and developed quite a following. The guitar playing, harmonizing sisters impressed audiences everywhere they performed. Jamie normally sang melody while Alice picked up the harmony and sometimes played harmonica. When doing sweet ballads, their voices sounded like water rushing over pebbles. When they cranked out the high energy, guitar string-busting tunes, their combined voices sounded like the battle cry of the goddess Athena; feminine, yet tough.

Everyone knew The Monroe Sisters would make it big one day.

“Are you feeling ok?” Jamie asked Alice, with her usual compassionate tone.

That voice, that sweet sensitive voice, had begun to haunt Alice lately. Every time she heard her sister speak, something in her twisted. A knot had begun forming in her stomach. With every inflection of the angel’s voice, the knot squeezed tighter and tighter.

Alice began to feel light-headed. And she knew it had more to do with the invisible knot choking her soul than the heat of the sun.

“I don’t know, I feel a little funny. Probably the heat.”

“Well then, we need to find a shady spot somewhere to chill out for awhile. We can’t have you getting sick on us. We have one more show before the day ends.”

Jamie kissed her sister’s cheek and walked up to order a pretzel.

Normally, her sister’s words and touch were soothing and reassuring. But today, Alice imagined them to be filled with mockery. Hate. Pride.

Alice blinked, hoping to erase her irrational thoughts. Perhaps it was just stress causing her to feel so bizarre. After all the years of being Jamie’s best friend and fellow musician, maybe she just needed to get away. Their entire lives they did everything together. Perhaps it was time for Alice to take a break. A vacation. Something. She had to get out from underneath the shadow...

She wasn’t sure she ever could. The elder Monroe sister would always steal the attention. Jamie sang most of the leads; lead singers were always the more recognized. Jamie was more outgoing; she met more people and everyone loved her. Jamie was prettier; more than once her big blue eyes caught the attention of a guy Alice had her heart set on. As long as Jamie was alive, Alice would be dead to the world.

“That’ll be four dollars ma’am”

Jamie fished out a five-dollar bill from her front pocket and handed it to the greasy faced man behind the small counter. While he took her money and made change, a woman to the left of him, presumably his wife, handed Jamie a large pretzel in a thin paper bag.

“Cheese?” Mrs. Pretzel asked.

“Oh yes! Thank you.”

The woman handed Jamie a little container of nacho cheese, which Jamie accepted with a smile. Alice took the dollar Mr. Pretzel held out and a wad of napkins and shoved them in her jeans pocket.

“Mmm, that pretzel smells good. Hurry up, let’s find some shade.”

The moment Alice spoke the word “shade”, a cold shiver passed through her entire body. Her pace quickened and the hair on her arms stood on end. She knew the shadow was out to get her. Suddenly she didn’t want to be in the shade. She longed for the heat, for the sunshine. She wanted to soak in as much sun as possible in hopes of warming her dark soul.

“Grease and dairy, great for the voice!” Jamie announced sarcastically. With a giggle in her voice, she added, “but like you said, we have two hours. We’ll just drink a lot of water.”

As they walked among the throngs of people, Alice tried to concentrate on *not losing control*. She couldn’t let Jamie see her hands shake, couldn’t let her see the tension in her face.

In front of her, Jamie was making way for the stage about forty feet directly in front of them. No doubt they would walk around to the back (permission granted with their laminated VIP passes hanging from their necks) and sit under the awning in the

shade.

Alice's mind and heart began to race. As they kept nearing the stage, with its bulk and awning blocking the sun from its backside, Alice felt like she was marching to her fate. There was no escaping it. Jamie was leading her, stupid girl, she was leading both of them to their fates. Irreversible fates.

Alice's brain was buzzing.

Did she really have a choice?

Yes, actually, she did. There were two choices before her.

One, she could keep living the way she did now, following behind her sister, and being unrecognized and unnoticed.

Or, two, she could do something for herself for once...

Suddenly, Alice knew what she had to do.

She had to kill her sister.

The thought sounded so harsh in her head, but she knew she couldn't live the rest of her life in her sister's shadow. She would let jealousy have its perfect work and eliminate what stood between her and happiness.

"I'm sorry ladies, but this area is restricted to VIPs. You have to be a *very important* person to come back here."

Jamie smirked at the tall slender sound technician with dark hair as they stood to the left of the stage.

"Since when are we not *very important?*" Jamie asked.

The man laughed, and wrapped his right arm around Jamie.

"I'm just teasing. Nice to see you girls again."

"Aww Ted, we miss you," Jamie said with a smile.

Ted's other arm wrapped around Alice.

"How are you Alice?"

"Hungry," she replied smiling, and nodded at the pretzel in Jamie's right hand.

"Oh, right, right. Well I suppose you want to go eat your pretzel in the shade around the back." He released the girls and clasped his hands together. "Hey, we'd like to do a sound check at seven, is that ok?"

"That's fine, Ted. Thank you again for all you do. We really appreciate it," Jamie said with usual sincerity.

"Ah, well it's my job. It's what I do," Ted said with a grin. "Oh, and I went ahead and set up your guitars, so all you have to do is get on stage and test things out."

"My hero," Jamie replied with another smile.

The Monroe Sisters sat down cross-legged across from one another in a grassy spot behind the stage. They had finished their pretzel an hour earlier and had been drinking a lot of water since. With their sound check already done, the girls chatted and waited around for show time.

From the moment the girls had walked around behind the stage, Alice felt a strange confidence. She wondered if she drew an unnatural strength from the shade. No longer was she jittery or light-headed. Her mind was clear and focused. There was one thought dominating her brain.

Do it.

While Jamie kept blabbing on and on about something irrelevantly stupid, Alice played with the card on the lanyard around her neck. She stared at the laminated VIP pass, and ran her fingers along its edges. Her fingertips traced the card and the string up to her neck. She gently bit her lip.

Her eyes looked up ever so gracefully to meet Jamie's. The dumb girl was still yakking about nothing important, and Alice just stared at her.

The normally gray eyes in Alice's skull began to turn green.

"But can you believe that?" Jamie busted out with her annoying giggle. "I actually thought that the white ice cream in the triple chocolate container was vanilla! It took Rachel forever to finally convince me it was white chocolate!"

Jamie laughed some more and then quieted down when she caught her sister's gaze.

A few seconds' pause.

The perfectly shaped eyebrows on Jamie's forehead furrowed, and her head cocked a bit to the side.

“Alice?”

Alice just sat there, staring into those gorgeous blue eyes.

“Alice, what’s going on? That blank look on your face is creeping me out.”

The look on Alice’s face hardened into a frown.

Before Jamie could react, Alice sprang to her knees and grabbed the lanyard around her sister’s neck. Caught by surprise, Jamie’s eyes filled with fear and bewilderment as Alice squeezed and pulled on the VIP pass which had become a noose. Choking and gagging sounds came from Jamie while Alice clenched her jaw. The victim flailed her arms and tried to ward off the predator, but Alice was behind her with the advantage.

The sun was sinking. The shadows were growing longer.

Alice was determined. She was going to squeeze the life out of Jamie just as Jamie had suffocated hers for sixteen years. Alice was doing this for herself. For once, she was going to put herself first. She deserved it. She bared her teeth and held on to the back of the lanyard as Jamie kept swatting the air. And a tear trickled down her cheek.

At that moment, Ted turned the corner and stared in shock for a few seconds at the two girls. No doubt he had trouble understanding the scene before him. The two girls who had always exuded the appearance of sisterly love and affection had disappeared. In their place were a monster and a helpless victim.

The man quickly assessed the situation and ran up to Alice and landed a punch to her jaw. She fell backward, and lost grip on the lanyard. Jamie collapsed to the ground on herself. She managed to get on her hands and knees, and began gasping and wheezing.

The summer sun was bleeding on the horizon.

Alice, however, wouldn't give up that easily. Lying on the ground with her feet near the sound tech, she kicked his left shin, trying to knock him over. He let out a curse and lost his balance, and Alice scrambled back towards her sister. Grabbing a fist full of curly blonde hair, Alice yanked Jamie's head backwards and punched her in the nose.

The blood began to pour.

Ted, regaining his balance, yelled out for security as loud as he could. He grabbed Alice's arms and tried to detach the girl from her sister. With a broken lip and swollen jaw, Alice fought against the man's control. As Ted dragged her away from the pitiful older girl, she managed to land a few violent kicks to Jamie's back.

"What the hell is wrong with you?!" the man yelled at Alice, who refused to answer, except to curse him for thwarting her plans and ruining her destiny.

Jamie, leaning over with blood dripping from her nose, was still gasping for breath, and now coughing up blood that had tricked down her throat. Her dripping nose left a spot of red sticky dirt below her.

Two security officers arrived on the scene. One of them ran to help Ted control

the increasingly insane Alice and the other ran to Jamie, calling for backup and an ambulance on his walkie-talkie.

A few feet away, the first security officer managed to get on top of Alice, with his left knee jammed into her back. Her face was twisted to the side and she continued to scream into the dirt.

“Shut up!” he yelled at her.

Alice wouldn't obey his demand.

Sirens began to be heard, along with the eerie wails of dogs.

Two cop cars arrived and the policemen hurried out and helped the weary security officer tame the beast. While Alice was handcuffed and read her rights, a screaming ambulance arrived. Paramedics ran out and attended Jamie and laid her out on a stretcher.

While the battered girl was driven away to a nearby hospital, one of the security officers walked over to the distraught sound technician.

“Aren't these the Monroe sisters?” the officer asked.

“Yeah,” Ted replied, scratching his head and looking at the ground. “Weird. It leaves me speechless. It's just so... bizarre. I've known these girls for a few years now, and Alice has never hinted towards any violence at all. She isn't as outgoing and vocal as Jamie, but she has always been sweet and kind.”

He paused.

"She tried to *kill her sister*," the sound tech said with a note of disbelief.

"Well, if she doesn't wind up in jail for a few years, she'll be locked a loony house. That look in her eyes, man, it was wild. I have a feeling a few screws got loose inside that head of hers." The officer stared at the fading lights of the ambulance.

"Is it alright if I talk to her for a few moments?" Ted asked hopefully.

The officer shrugged.

Ted walked over to Alice, staring at the girl he had always known to be polite and soft-spoken. He looked at her now, a girl with messy hair, small scratches and bruises all over, sitting in the dirt with her hands restrained behind her. Two policemen stood on either side of her, and Ted couldn't help but feel pity.

"Hey Alice," he said somewhat awkwardly.

The girl was no longer screaming. Her head was down, and her body was shaking.

She was crying softly.

Alice lifted her head slightly when she heard him. Her eyes met his for a brief second, and she dropped her head back to its pitiful position.

"Why'd you do it, Alice?"

"You don't have to say anything ma'am. I urge you not to," one of the policemen informed her.

She ignored his statement.

Between quiet sobs she spoke.

“It was the only way, don’t you see? I had to do it for myself. I *love* my sister! I’ve always loved her! But I couldn’t live like this anymore! I couldn’t continue to live in the shadow...”

Ted narrowed his eyes when she said the word shadow. It started to make sense. Jamie cast a long shadow and Ted realized that Alice must have been jealous all along.

“...but I failed, and now it’s worse. Everyone will feel sorry for Jamie and they’ll hate me!”

She lifted her head once more to look at Ted. They stared at each other for a few seconds. What Ted saw in those tear-reddened eyes saddened him. Such sorrow. She knew what she did was wrong, and she mourned her mistake.

Alice turned her head and stared off in the distance.

After a long sigh of resignation, she gave her final announcement of the night.

“Congratulations, Jamie. You win again.”