

# SHADOW DAYS

Cedar Hollow Series, Book 4



by

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Thomas-Jacob Publishing, LLC  
USA

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ISBN-13: 978-0-9895729-6-5

ISBN-10: 0-9895729-6-X

First Edition

First Printing: November 2014

Printed in the United States of America

## **Dedication**

To all who have come to love Cedar Hollow and its residents, I thank you. Writing this book felt, in many ways, like coming home.

With a special thank you to W. Michael Franklin, for allowing me to build upon the character of Sheriff John Moore. Sheriff Moore's character was originally developed in Mr. Franklin's short story, *The Sheriff of Cedar Hollow*.

## **Acknowledgments**

Many thanks to my editor, Smoky Zeidel, and to my beta-readers: Jim Bessey, Kae Bender, and Bill and Patty Franklin. I couldn't have done it without you. Any leftover mistakes are solely my own.

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*My days are like a long shadow. I have withered like grass.*

~ Psalm 102:11

## Chapter 1: Emily Holt

I don't think it's too much of an exaggeration to say I lost my mind in the early morning hours of April 18, 2013. I wasn't sorry to see it go; it had been fighting to get away from me for the better part of a decade, and I was exhausted. Besides, I figured it was finally my turn.

I'd felt for years as if my mind were shrinking, slowly shriveling up and crumbling away. It was a sneaky process, but I knew. I'd once prided myself on my ability to hold my own during a conversation, whether it was about global subjects such as religion and politics, or more local matters such as who'd just been laid off and which farmers' market offered the best tomatoes. But more and more often over the years, I'd found myself losing my train of thought halfway into a comment, or I'd call one neighbor by another neighbor's name.

It bothered me, this encroaching mental dullness; it angered me, too. I'd been angry for years. I couldn't help feeling as if the fact I'd spent so many years maintaining sanity for two was to blame. After all, to my way of thinking, that divided my own in half. It's difficult enough to navigate through life maintaining one's own sanity; just imagine having to maintain someone else's as well.

True, I'd never been a certified genius, and I'd always had a bit of flightiness, but I'd been sharp enough that the numbers representing my IQ score had always managed to hover close to those signifying my weight, and that's saying something the last few years. I was relatively certain that was no longer the case, though, and not just because I'd put on a few pounds. Yes, I was angry.

*Hold it together.* That was the crux of it all, really. It's an interesting turn of phrase, isn't it? It conjures up all sorts of visual imagery. I have a ridiculous mental picture of me, dressed in my usual attire of flip-flops and mommy jeans, standing face to the wind on an unnamed cliff somewhere, cartoon arms stretched enormously long to encircle my home and family. There I am, *holding it together* against...what? Life? What an absurd idea. If my experience is anything to go by, that's an absolutely pointless battle. There's no winning against Life. That bastard'll run you right over and laugh on his way out the door.

These thoughts weren't something I'd mentioned to anyone close to me, possibly—probably—because there *wasn't* anyone close to me. My children, who no doubt loved me, were nearly grown, both in college and focused not on the messy past they'd left behind, but on the shiny futures their expensive educations were supposed to ensure. I had no close friends; it's difficult to maintain friendships when your whole life is about keeping a secret. And my husband, God rest his soul, was dead. Greg had died unexpectedly exactly one year prior to the humid spring morning on which I lost my mind.

There are those who no doubt believe my husband's passing caused the unraveling of my sanity, and in some ways, they're probably right. Just not in the ways they think. Not even my children know all the facts behind Greg's death, or his life either, for that matter. Far from it. Some days I think I should tell them, other days I know to leave well enough alone.

All that aside, I must say it was liberating to let go of everything, positively invigorating, to tell the truth. Who knew it could feel so glorious? Well, I suppose Greg had known, but he'd kept that secret to himself, and if you think *that* didn't help stoke my anger....Well. At any rate, when my mind finally let go, it snapped so loudly I could hear it. It sounded like freedom.

I'd been lying in bed as I had for months, since just after Greg died. I could see the future stretching ahead of me, and it looked exactly like the past year. I'd grow older, of course, but nothing would change. I'd continue to miss my kids and they'd continue to move both farther and further away from me, exactly as they'd done since the day they were born. I'd call them; they'd return my calls out of a sense of obligation. I'd continue to buy groceries on Fridays, do yard work on Saturdays, and clean house on Sundays, and I'd still run out of cereal, the weeds would return with a vengeance, and mildew would reclaim the tiles. I couldn't stand it, could not *stand* it, I tell you, could not *bear* seeing that endless tunnel of sameness. And then...*snap*. The weight was gone.

*Poof.*

I literally jumped out of bed and threw on the first clothes I could find: a pair of shapeless grey sweatpants my children despised and a brown plaid cotton blouse my husband had hated. Both made me laugh, not a sane laugh, I'm sure, but a good one. Then I dug through the closet, throwing shoes and boxes and blankets aside until I found exactly what I was looking for: red leather cowgirl boots bought on a whim eons ago, back when I was young enough to think of life in terms of *someday* instead of *too late*.

A hat, I told myself. That had been one of the *somedays*. *Someday I'll buy a hat*. Then and there, I promised myself I'd buy a hat at the earliest opportunity, a cowgirl hat, red, to match my boots. The fact that sweatpants and cowgirl boots don't typically go together didn't bother me in the least, but I wasn't exactly firing on all cylinders, as my late husband would have said.

*Sometimes I don't think I'm firing on all cylinders, Emily*. The memory surfaced unbidden, and I smacked it away. *No shit, Sherlock*. Not the nicest mental response to my husband's ghost, but the best I could manage at that moment. I shoved the spilled blankets and shoes back into my closet and knelt on the floor to survey my boots. I wasn't even sure they'd still fit; I couldn't remember the last time I'd worn them. I thought it was probably the last time I'd gone dancing, which would have been before the kids were born. I was sure it was before I could feel my belly pushing against my thighs as I knelt on the floor.

Once upon a time, long, long ago, I had been a woman of style, though that may be hard to fathom given the choices I made that morning. But it's true; style had been my profession, and even as I squeezed my calves into those boots, I somehow knew the remnants of my old career were still lurking inside of me, just waiting to be released. They wouldn't, however, be released that morning. I haphazardly threw some clothes into a suitcase, neither noticing nor caring what they were or how they landed.



Finally, I picked up my purse, fished out my car keys and left, backing out of the garage into the soggy dawn, steering carefully down the drive without bothering to set the alarm or lock the gate.

For the first time in over forty years I didn't even make my bed; I was that rebellious. I cranked up the radio, searching between stations before settling on Billy Joel's *My Life*. That's right, I said loudly to absolutely no one. It's my life. Leave me alone. Leave me the...phooey. I couldn't quite bring myself to say *that* word yet; you know the one. But the sentiment was there.

I had no idea where I was going, but I headed north. With a starting location of Jacksonville, Florida, north seemed full of possibilities. I'd drive to the end of the road, and then....Well, that remained to be seen. And that was precisely the point.