

S H A D O W S
o f
L A N C A S T E R
C O U N T Y

MINDY STARNS
CLARK



HARVEST HOUSE PUBLISHERS

EUGENE, OREGON

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SHADOWS OF LANCASTER COUNTY

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Published by Harvest House Publishers

Eugene, Oregon 97402

www.harvesthousepublishers.com

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Clark, Mindy Starns.

Shadows of Lancaster County / Mindy Starns Clark.

p. cm.

ISBN 978-0-7369-2447-4 (pbk.)

1. Missing persons—Fiction. 2. Genetics—Research—Fiction. 3. Amish—Fiction. 4. Lancaster County (Pa.)—Fiction. I. Title.

PS3603.L366S53 2009

813.6—dc22

2008040073

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Printed in the United States of America

09 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 / LB-SK / 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



ONE

BOBBY

 *I'm dead.* The powerful engine gunning behind him drowned out every other thought. He held on to the handlebars of the borrowed motorcycle, crouched low on the leather seat, and accelerated as far as he dared. When the dark car struck his rear tire the first time, he managed to hang on through the jolt, though just barely. Regaining control, he crouched even lower and gripped the handlebars more tightly, adrenaline surging in the piercing cold. In vain he searched the blackness ahead for an escape, for some point of diversion where the motorcycle could go but the car pursuing him could not. Caught on the wide curve of a hilly highway, there were no shoulders here, and no way to know what lay in the darkness off to the right beyond the metal guardrail. Worse, he knew he couldn't swerve back and forth on the blacktop to dodge the next hit, because moves like that on a motorcycle would end up flipping the bike and high-siding him whether the car rammed into him again or not.

A second jolt came just as the guardrail ended, a collision that nearly managed to unseat him. Barely hanging on, he regained his balance, scooted forward on the leather seat, and took a deep breath, conscious of the vehicle still roaring aggressively behind him in murderous pursuit. In a choice between certain death on the road and possible survival off of it, he steeled his nerves and made the decision to leave the pavement no

matter what he might run into. Holding on tight, he shifted his weight and angled the handlebars to the right, veering into the unknown darkness. The action was punctuated by a series of bumps and jolts as his tires went from blacktop to gravel to crunchy brown grass.

Let it be a field, God. Let it be somebody's farm.

The headlamp of the borrowed motorcycle was strong, its beam slicing through the February night air to reveal the unfamiliar terrain he had driven himself into. Before he could discern what lay ahead, however, before he could even slow down or adjust his direction or see if the car had tried to follow, he spotted the looming gray mass in front of him—a solid, four-foot-high cement retaining wall. He knew this was the end.

The sudden stop flung him heavenward, propelling him in a broad arc across the night sky like the flare of a Roman candle. As he went, he thought mostly of the ground far below him, the frozen and unforgiving earth that was going to greet him by shattering his bones or snapping his neck upon landing. He prayed for the latter, less painful option.

Let it end quickly, God.

As his trajectory continued, his limbs instinctively flailing against the void, his mind went to one person: his younger sister, Anna. He hoped beyond hope that his message would get to her, that she would understand what he wanted her to do. For a guy who didn't even own a computer, he found it vaguely ironic that the last thought that raced through his mind just before certain death was of an email. But the message he had sent her was the only chance he had, the only hope that Lydia and Isaac might still be protected. That one email was the only way his desperate efforts might save his wife and son and the unborn child Lydia was carrying.

Let it end quickly, God, he prayed again just before impact. And please, God, please guide Anna to the truth.



TWO

ANNA



The nightmare started up again last night.

That was the first thought that struck me as I turned off the alarm. Somewhere in the early hours of the dawn I had gone there in my sleep for the first time in many months. Now as I sat up and swung my legs over the side of the bed, I couldn't understand why it was back, this nightmare that had plagued me off and on for the past eleven years.

Why now? Why last night?

Sometimes all it took was an external cue, like a house fire spotted from the freeway. An Amish character flashing across the television screen. A news report about a dead newborn baby. But I hadn't experienced any of those things lately. There was simply no reason for the nightmare to have returned like this, out of the blue.

Standing up, I traded my nightgown for shorts and a T-shirt and then padded into the bathroom. As I stood at the mirror and brushed my teeth, I tried not to relive it again now that I was awake, but I couldn't help it.

The dream was always beautiful at first: rolling fields that look like patchwork on an Amish quilt, cars sharing the road with horses and buggies, colorful laundry flapping in the wind. But then there was the farmhouse, the rambling old farmhouse. Without electricity or curtains, as I came closer the windows would turn into dark, empty eyes staring at

me. My nightmare always ended the same: black to orange to hot white. Sirens. Screams. The acrid stench of smoke, of terror, of unspeakable loss. When I woke up, guilt would consume me like flame.

Wishing I could spit out that guilt along with the toothpaste, I rinsed my mouth and then reached for my hairbrush, attacking my long, blond hair with vigor.

It happened a long, long time ago.

You paid your dues.

All has been forgiven.

Telling myself that over and over, I swept my hair into a ponytail, turned out the light, and headed downstairs. In the kitchen, judging by the mess on the counter and the fact that the door was ajar, I realized my housemate was already up and doing her exercises on the back porch. Kiki was always trying out some new fitness trend, the latest and greatest plan guaranteed to shed pounds and inches by the second. I had given up long ago trying to convince her that if she would just come jogging with me a few times a week, she would eventually achieve the results she so desperately sought. Still, I thought as I put away the juice carton and wiped off the counter, on days like today I was glad I could jog alone. I needed the quiet to clear my head and wash away the last remnants of my nightmare.

Once the kitchen was tidy, I grabbed a bottle of water from the fridge and opened the back door the rest of the way; a warm ocean breeze wafted in to greet me. I stepped out onto the uneven slats of the porch and let the door fall shut behind me as I inhaled the salty sea smell of morning. Gorgeous. As someone who had grown up in snowy Pennsylvania, I knew I'd never get used to the year-round warm weather and sunshine of Southern California.

"Howdy," Kiki said cheerfully. She was doing stretches on the far side of the porch, past the square of rotten boards near the door. "Wanna see my new Piloga move?"

"Piloga? What's that? Some cross between Pilates and Yoga?"

"No, it's named after the founder, Manny Piloga. He teaches the fifty-plus class down at the Y."

I smiled, glancing at my watch. It was early yet; I could spare a few

minutes to encourage her efforts—not to mention that a quick chat might help distract me even further from my nightmare. As Kiki sat on the wooden floorboards, I reached for a folded aluminum chair that was propped against the wall and told her to be careful on the floor lest she get splinters in her bottom.

“Aw, I’ve got so much padding, I probably wouldn’t even feel it if I did,” Kiki laughed, adjusting the waistband on her pajamas and stretching her legs out in front of her.

“Hey, I saw that guy at the grocery store flirting with you yesterday,” I reminded her as I sat in the chair. “He didn’t seem to mind a little extra padding at all.”

“That’s ’cause he works in the deli department. He likes it when the scales weigh in heavy.”

I rolled my eyes again, refusing to laugh at her joke, but she laughed loud enough for both of us.

“Okay, check out the ab work I’ve been doing,” Kiki said as she leaned back, arms jutting forward parallel to the ground. Slowly, she raised her legs into the air and held them there. “I can stay like this for three minutes, just long enough for you to tell me about your date last night. A fancy dinner at Harborside, hmm? He must have had something in mind. Maybe a certain question he wanted to pop?”

“Good grief, Kik, it was just our third date.”

“Sometimes true love can speed things along. I got engaged to my Roger during our first date—and we were happily married for twenty-five years before he passed, God rest his soul.”

“Yeah, well, you were one of the lucky ones. Very impressive stance, by the way.”

“Thanks. Manny says it strengthens the core.”

I opened up my water bottle, took a sip, and looked at my housemate, who also happened to be my landlord, coworker, and best friend despite the twenty-one-year difference in our ages. As she maintained her bizarre position, I thought about yesterday evening, about my third and final outing with Hal, or as I had come to think of him, Hal-itis.

“We decided not to see each other anymore.”

She let out a long grunt, though I wasn't sure if it was from exertion or exasperation.

"We' who? 'We' him or 'we' you? Or do I even have to ask?"

"Well, like you expected, he did take me to Harborside for a reason. He told me he wants to get more serious."

"Exclusive dating serious or engagement serious?"

"I have no idea, Kik. His exact words were 'I think it's time we should take this to the next level.' I didn't even want to know what the next level was. I suggested he would be happier with someone who enjoys day-old-coffee breath."

A loud laugh burst from Kiki's mouth. "You didn't say that!"

"No, I didn't. But I thought it. I just told him I didn't think it would be fair to him, because I wasn't interested in a long-term relationship."

"Yeah, right."

"I'm *not* interested in a long-term relationship...with him."

"Uh-huh." She was quiet for a long moment, but her silence was louder than words.

I looked her way to see that she was still holding her pose, though beads of sweat were now forming along her hairline.

"What?" I demanded. "What is it you're not saying?"

"I don't know, Anna, it's just that you're so picky about who you're willing to go out with, which is fine. Not every fellow who comes sniffing around a pretty girl is worth her time or attention. But how come the ones who make it through the first elimination never get to the next round?"

"What am I, a game show?"

"You know what I mean. How come every one of your relationships ends this way, with you breaking it off just when the guy wants to get more serious? How can you be so sure one of these fellows isn't The One?"

I shrugged, wondering how I could explain. I kept dating because I hoped someday to find the man who would make me forget all about Reed Thornton. He had been The One, as far as I was concerned, but I had lost him eleven years ago when the fire that burned in my nightmares had also extinguished my dreams with him. Even though I hadn't seen or spoken to Reed since, I still thought of him often, no matter how hard I

tried not to. Somehow, I had yet to meet the man who could even begin to compare.

“I’m not waiting for the perfect guy. I just want a guy who’s perfect for me. If I can’t find that, I’d rather be alone.”

With a loud groan, Kiki finally collapsed, breathing heavily as she lay sprawled on the floor. I glanced at my watch. I needed to get moving soon if I wanted to get in a full run before we needed to leave for work. Still, as Kiki recovered from her efforts, I could tell she had more to say.

“Go ahead, Kiki. Don’t hold back now.”

With a chuckle, she rolled on her side and propped up on one elbow.

“Fine. You’re a very private person, Anna, and I know you have trouble letting people in. But if you want to find someone, stop giving up so soon. True love starts when you open yourself to chances.”

Chances? It had been a long time since I’d allowed myself the luxury of chances. Once I broke with my past seven years ago and created my new self, my new identity, my whole life had become one big chance. Back then, finding Mr. Right was the least of my worries—especially because my heart was broken from all that had happened with Reed. As time went on and I finally escaped from my past and found peace in my new life here in California, the daily risk factor had greatly lessened. Maybe it was time to take a few chances in life.

“Thanks, Kiki, I’ll think on it,” I said as I stood and moved toward the steps in my bare feet. “Gotta run for now though, or we’ll be late for work.”

Careful to avoid more rotten boards, I made my way down one side of the steps to the sandy beach.

“Without shoes?” Kiki asked, moving into position for another exercise.

“Yep, and no sunscreen either,” I said, grinning. “See? I can take chances.”

I turned, my bare feet digging down into the sand, and took off. My movements were awkward until I reached the damp packed sand near the water. There it was easier to run, easier to find traction in the gritty ground. I tucked in my elbows and sprinted along the water’s edge until I could feel my heartbeat pounding in my chest. I slowed to a jog and ran farther than



I had intended, which was not a wise choice given my bare feet. I would pay for this later, but for now it just felt good. It was calming. Sometimes I thought God used the sand and water and my quiet morning runs as a special gift for me, just to keep me sane.

At the jetty I turned around, picked up the pace, and headed home. As I jogged, I thought about Reed and how loving him had spoiled me for any other man. In the years since I last saw him, I had probably built him up in my mind to be far more special than he actually was. I decided it wouldn't hurt to remember that he wasn't perfect, that in fact he had at least one very serious flaw I knew about—and probably tons more I had never had the opportunity to discover. Maybe I really did need to take a chance or two. Maybe I should stop cutting off every single relationship the moment it began to get serious. Here I was waiting for someone to come along who instantly lit that spark inside of me the way Reed had, someone who made me feel as though the world ceased to exist beyond the intensity of his gaze. But maybe I wouldn't ever find that again. Maybe I should learn to settle for less—either that, or decide to stop looking and find contentment in being single the way Kiki had after her husband died.

As I neared her ramshackle beachfront house, I slowed my run to a walk, fingers to my wrist as I studied the second hand on my watch. Pulse rate was good, lungs open and clear, leg muscles burning nicely. Too bad the soles of my feet were throbbing.

I climbed up the side of the steps, grabbed the empty glass Kiki had left on the porch, and carried it through the open back door to the kitchen. I decided to stop thinking about my love life for now and focus on getting ready for work. I hoped Kiki had finished showering and I could take my turn right away. I wouldn't have time to blow-dry my hair, but at least I could put on some makeup in the car.

“Hey, Kik, you out of the shower yet?” I yelled.

“One more minute and then it's all yours,” she called back, her voice echoing from the bathroom directly above the kitchen.

My stomach growling, I grabbed an energy bar from the pantry and another bottle of cold water from the fridge before leaving the kitchen. I had just unwrapped the bar and taken my first bite when the phone started

ringing. I hesitated at the bottom of the stairs, listening as it went to the machine, knowing I didn't have much time to spare.

"We're not here, leave a message!" Kiki's recorded voice said cheerily from the box on the kitchen counter. That was followed by a beep and a long silence.

"Annalise?" a woman's voice finally uttered, sounding very far away. "Is this the number of Annalise Jensen?"

Annalise Jensen? I hadn't heard that name for years, not since I left Pennsylvania behind, moved west, and became Anna Bailey. Quickly, I dashed to the machine, heart pounding and praying that Kiki hadn't overheard.

"I hope this is the right number," the voice continued in a lilting accent. "I guess I leave a message and wait and see."

One glance at Caller ID confirmed that the woman was calling from Dreiheit, Pennsylvania. I didn't recognize the number, but I recognized the voice and its familiar Pennsylvania Dutch lilt. I steeled myself and answered, closing my eyes as the past came rushing toward me through three thousand miles of telephone line.

"Don't hang up," I said, turning off the machine. "It's me. I'm here."

"Annalise? Is Lydia. Lydia Jensen." My sister-in-law.

"Lydia? How did you get my number?"

I had given this number to my brother in confidence and told him to keep it somewhere private, never share it with anyone—not even his wife—and never use it himself except in an extreme emergency.

"Bobby gave it to me last night. He said to call you if anything went wrong. Otherwise I would never..."

I struggled to listen as Kiki started making clunking noises overhead. What was she doing up there, a tap dance?

"What was that last thing you said?" I asked.

"So sorry. You cannot hear me *gut?* I am calling from my sister's farm, out behind the milk house."

I held a hand over my other ear, closed my eyes, and tried to focus, picturing my sister-in-law standing in one of those Amish phone shanties that looked more like an outhouse than a telephone booth.

"It's okay. What is it, Lydia? What's wrong?"

She exhaled slowly, and as I waited for her to explain, I tried to calm my pounding heart and push away a feeling of impending doom.

“I am calling about Bobby. He...he is *verschwunden*. Missing. He has gone missing, Annalise. I am so frightened for him. I do not know what to do.”

I cleared my throat, genuinely surprised to hear that my brother had abandoned his wife and child. He had always seemed so happily married, but maybe there was trouble in paradise.

“Um, it’s Anna now, not Annalise,” I corrected, leaning over to reset the tape on the answering machine, erasing the part of her message that had been recorded before I picked up. “Anyway, so he left you? Like, moved out?”

“No, no, nothing like that. Is complicated to explain.”

“Go on,” I said, stretching the cord as far as I could to get to the fridge. At least I could make lunches as we talked.

“Well, it started last night. Bobby was working late at the lab, and little Isaac and I had choir practice. When we got home from church, there was something wrong with the apartment. The lock on the door was broken, and it looked like someone had been inside, going through our things.”

“What do you mean?” I asked, setting a pack of sliced ham and some condiments on the counter.

“Closets and drawers were half open. Items were emptied out of baskets. Our belongings were intact, but they were *ferroontzled*—uh, like messy, out of order. Like someone had been here looking for something.”

“Were you robbed?” I asked, wondering what that had to do with Bobby’s decision to leave. I grabbed a loaf of whole wheat from the bread box and began assembling our sandwiches.

“I did not think so. I could not find anything that was missing. Still, I was about to call the police when the phone rang. It was Bobby. Before I could even tell him about the apartment, he said for me to take Isaac and get out of there, that we were in danger. He said for us to go to my sister’s farm and to wait there until he contacted us. When I told him about the broken lock and the *ferroontzled* apartment and everything, he was even more upset. I told him I was about to call the police, but he said, ‘Don’t call the police, Lydia. Just go right now. *Go*.’”

“Did you?”

“*Yah*, he was so insistent, we left right away. Bobby had already talked to my brother Caleb and told him to watch for us, and for him and my brother-in-law Nathaniel to protect us from harm once we arrived.”

“Protect you from harm? Why?”

“I have no idea. I do not understand any of this. I was just glad that Caleb has a cell phone so that Bobby could call us back once we got there—”

“Wait,” I interrupted. “You’re telling me an Amish boy has a cell phone? Since when is that allowed?” I had only been gone from Pennsylvania for seven years, but I couldn’t imagine that in that time the Amish community had gone from having no phones in homes to letting their kids run around with cell phones in their pockets.

Lydia hesitated and then explained.

“Caleb is nineteen, not such a boy anymore. He is on *rumspringa* right now, so the rules for him are bent a bit. He is not allowed to use the cell phone in the house, but in this case an exception was made so Bobby could call back.”

Rumspringa, I knew only too well, was that time in every Amish teen’s life when they were allowed extra freedom and more access to the outside world. The whole point was to let them see what was “out there,” what they would be giving up—and what they would be gaining—if they chose to join the Amish church and commit to a lifetime of living by Amish rules. Bobby and Lydia’s romance had begun during her *rumspringa*, and in the end she had chosen to forgo Amish baptism, leave the faith for a less restrictive denomination, and marry a man the Amish considered an outsider, an “Englischer.” At least she had made her radical decision prior to baptism. Had she been baptized Amish first and then left the faith, she would have been punished through shunning. As it was, though no one in the Amish community had been happy about her decision, at least they were allowed to have contact with her and her husband and children and could remain somewhat involved in their lives.

“So did he?” I asked, trying to get back to the point. “Did Bobby call you again?”

“*Yah*, soon after we arrive at the farm, Bobby called on Caleb’s phone

to make sure we had arrived safely. I asked him what was going on, but he said it was a long story and that he would explain everything as soon as he got to us in just a few hours.”

“And?”

“And those few hours came and went, but Bobby never showed up. Now it is almost ten fifteen in the morning and we still have not seen or heard from him since that phone call last night.”

“So he’s a few hours late—”

“Nine hours, Anna. Almost nine hours since he should have gotten here, twelve hours since his phone call!”

“Maybe he fell asleep at his desk. Maybe he was really tired and went to the wrong farm by mistake.” I didn’t add that it would be an easy error. All the Amish farms in Lancaster County had always looked the same to me.

“No, it is not like that. Something has happened to him. Something terrible. I know this.”

Putting the sandwich fixings back into the fridge, I took a deep breath and held it for a moment. I felt bad for her, but I didn’t know what she expected me to do. Though my brother and I emailed occasionally, I hadn’t spoken to him in weeks—maybe a month, even. He and I had always shared a special bond, especially since the fire and its aftermath, but that didn’t mean we stayed in constant touch.

“Lydia, I don’t know what you want from me.”

“I have no idea, Anna. I just know I need your help—and Bobby specifically said for me to call you if something went wrong.”

“But how can I help from way out here? I don’t have any way of knowing where he might be.”

“This is what you do, *yah*? You find people who have gone missing?”

“Yes, I’m a skip tracer. But—”

“Your brother has gone missing. Please, Anna. Please, help me find him before it is too late.”