

Shadow of a Doubt

s. l. rottman

Also by S. L. Rottman

HERO
ROUGH WATERS
HEAD ABOVE WATER
STETSON



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Chapter One

My fifteenth birthday marked the seventh year that Daniel had been gone. We didn't jump any more every time the phone rang or someone knocked on our door. But there were times when the house got quiet, and I knew without asking what Mom and Dad were thinking about.

Even though I was a lot younger than my brother, we had been very close. He was my best friend. I guess he was my only friend. For nearly six months after Daniel left, I hadn't spoken to anyone, unless they spoke to me first. And then I only answered with one or two words. Mom took me to a psychologist after the first month of this behavior, but the shrink was convinced that I was mourning in my own way, and that I would get over it in time. He suggested my parents find a new activity to interest me.

They tried everything: model planes, drum lessons, even bird watching. Dad focused on sports, and I suffered through three days of karate, a week of swimming, two soccer practices, and almost two weeks of basketball before he finally gave up. Nothing worked. Without Daniel, nothing was interesting.

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When I was ten, I found the library. We weren't supposed to be inside during recess, but the new librarian was a pushover for anyone who would sit quietly and read. I loved the peaceful and safe library much more than the chaotic noise of the playground. I almost ate fantasy books. The idea of different worlds and creatures fascinated me. Maybe I thought that in a different world trust and love could remain unbroken.

My fifteenth birthday also marked my first year of high school; I was finally a sophomore. I was eager to get to the new school. Junior high had been boring and predictable. In high school, I could pick some of my classes and get into subjects that actually required thought. Plus, two other junior high schools fed into the high school, so I'd be meeting new people. At Watson Junior High, I had stayed pretty much to myself, but I hoped to change and make new friends this year.

I showed up for high school registration dressed the way I normally did: black jeans and a black T-shirt. The new twist was the black leather jacket I had purchased with my birthday money. I had begun wearing nothing but black in the middle of the eighth grade. I liked the way it worked with my dark hair to make me look really pale. I was almost six-one, and the black accentuated my scrawny height. I had overheard some people say I looked like a vampire. I didn't really mind. I thought vampires were cool.

Dad had quit bugging me about the way I dressed, mostly because he was convinced I was following a trend. Mom, however, still hated it. A couple of weeks before school started, she bought me three new brightly colored shirts, some blue jeans, and a pair of

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khakis. She left a new outfit on my bed that first morning, hoping I'd wear it. She offered repeatedly to take the morning off and go with me to registration, but I kept telling her I'd be fine.

Even though my parents didn't like the fact that I wore all black, I knew they wouldn't do anything about it. They'd been like that ever since Daniel left. They'd tell me what they wanted me to do or not do, but they never told me I *had* to do anything. The only thing that they really insisted on was that I always tell them where I was going and when I would be home. If the plans changed or if I would be late, I was expected to call. I never really challenged their authority anyway. I sensed that it would be a terrible thing for all of us if I did.

Once, when I was ten, I was a few minutes late coming home from the library. When I got there, Mom was already on the phone with the police. She had called the library, and they had told her I wasn't there, so she'd panicked. For a long time after that, I had been afraid to be late. Now I figure being on time or calling if I'll be late is the better alternative to putting one or both of my parents in the hospital from a massive heart attack.

My fifteenth birthday wasn't any big party, but it was memorable for all of us. We were about to enter uncharted waters.

Daniel had been fifteen when he ran away.

A big banner above the door said, Palmer Panthers Welcome You! but the atmosphere at the school didn't seem overly friendly. I passed several tables where kids

were signing up for clubs and activities. A bunch of cheerleaders in short skirts were selling T-shirts in one corner. I got in line in front of the registration table. The woman sitting behind it called "next," and I stepped up. Her neutral expression didn't change when I gave her my last name.

"Thompson...let's see. Oh yes, Thompson. Ernest—?"

"Shadow," I interrupted.

"Excuse me?"

"I go by Shadow."

She glanced down at my card and raised an eyebrow. She looked me up and down, studied the classes on my schedule, and began shaking her head. "Yes, well...um...Shadow, there appears to be a problem with your schedule. Step over to the line behind the next table, and they should be able to straighten it all out for you."

"What's wrong with my schedule?" I asked.

"They've put you in trigonometry and college prep chemistry."

I took my card and glanced at the rest of the classes. "My schedule's fine," I said. "Where do I go next?"

"Are you sure? You're—" She stopped and tried again. "We offer personal finance, auto shop, life science... That schedule is very..." She hesitated, as if she suddenly realized there wasn't a nice way to tell me it was a difficult schedule without making it obvious that she already thought I was an idiot.

"It's fine," I repeated. "Where do I go?"

She directed me over to the yearbook photographer. Although they assigned registration times alphabetically, everyone else seemed to have a group of friends to stand in line with. I saw a few people I recognized

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from Watson, but I didn't know any of their names, which was just as well. I wouldn't have known what to say to them anyway. I watched people watch me while I waited in line. I could tell the rest of the adults were forming the same opinion of me that the secretary had.

I'd been looking forward to a fresh start in high school, a chance to break out of the box I had put myself in. But it looked like nothing was going to change.

A guy wearing a black trench coat, combat boots, ragged jeans, and a Megadeath T-shirt came up and tapped me on the shoulder.

"Yo, you got a cigarette I could bum?"

"I don't smoke."

"Serious?" He seemed to be shocked. "Sorry, man." He turned around and walked off.

I sighed. Maybe someday I'd meet somebody who could actually wait until they knew me to form an opinion about me.

"Next," the photographer called, sounding incredibly bored.

I stepped up and sat on the little stool.

"Okay," he said, not looking up from the camera, "put your feet on the tape on the carpet, and turn your chin this way."

I complied.

"Good. Now take your sunglasses off."

"That's okay, I'll leave them on."

"I can't take your picture until you take your glasses off."

"Why?"

"Is there a problem here?" A very official-looking man dressed in a suit came up to see what was going on.

"I don't think so," I said.

The photographer made a face. "He won't take his sunglasses off."

"You have to take your sunglasses off," the man said.

"Why?" I asked again.

For a moment he seemed dumbfounded that I wasn't obeying immediately. "Because we don't allow students to take their pictures with their sunglasses on."

"Okay," I said, sliding off the stool, "Then I won't have my picture taken."

The man in the suit scowled. "You have to have your picture taken."

"Why? I'm not buying any."

"We need it for the yearbook."

I shrugged. "I probably won't buy one of those either," I said. I could tell the man in the suit was trying to control his anger.

"We need it for the school ID card."

"Fine," I said, getting on the stool again.

"Take your sunglasses off!" the photographer growled.

"Four people in front of me had their pictures taken with their glasses on."

"Those were corrective glasses, not decorative ones," the photographer said quickly.

"How do you know these aren't corrective?" I asked.

The man in the suit folded his arms across his chest. Without taking his eyes off me, he said, "Just take his picture."

Click. The camera flashed and I slid off the stool.

"Next," the photographer said in a relieved tone.

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"Thanks," I said as I walked past him. "Now the rest of your day will seem easy!" He gave me an irritated look. I started toward the next line, the one to get my locker assignment.

"Just a moment." The man in the suit was still frowning.

"What?" I asked. I carefully kept my tone calm.

"What's your name?"

"Shadow."

"Shadow? Do you have a last name to go with that?"

"Thompson."

He stared at my face for a moment. "Daniel Thompson's brother?"

Embarrassed by the sudden tightening of my throat, I just nodded at him.

"Well, Shadow Thompson, my name is Mr. Barnett. I'm the Dean of Students. Do you know what the Dean of Students does?"

"You deal with discipline problems."

"Among other things, yes. So let me make this simple for you, Mr. Thompson. Classes start next week. If any teacher asks you to remove your sunglasses, or your leather jacket, or any other accessory you may have on, you will do so immediately. If you don't, you will begin the year serving detention for defiance. Is that clear?"

I nodded again.

"I have the feeling we'll be seeing a lot of each other this year," Mr. Barnett said.

"I doubt that'd be good for either of us," I muttered.

"What was that?" he said sharply.

Before repeating my remark, I took a good look at his face and decided that this was going the wrong

way. "Nothing," I said. I went and stood in the next line.

"You are a dead man."

I turned around to find a short guy with big glasses and an even bigger nose standing behind me. His head came only halfway up my chest. I had to laugh.

"Is that a threat?" I asked.

"Not from me. From Mr. Barnett. He picks a target and he won't forget it. Your next three years here are going to be hell."

"How do you know?"

"My brother. He graduated a couple of years ago. He had a run-in with Barnett his first year, and Barnett never forgave him."

I shrugged. "I don't plan on talking to Barnett any more," I said simply.

"Good luck," he snorted. "I've heard it's not always that easy." After a few seconds' pause, the little guy asked, "What's your name?"

"Shadow. Shadow Thompson."

"Good to meetcha, Shadow," he said, pushing his glasses further up on his nose. "I'm Vernon Thomas."

"Next." The lady didn't even look up to see if I had stepped forward or not. "Name?"

"Thompson."

"Ernest Thompson?" Before I could reply, she was holding a card out for me. "Locker number 815. Next. Name?"

Vernon hustled up and gave his name. I stood off a few feet, looking around to make sure I had done everything I needed to do.

"Locker number 814. Next. Name?"

Vernon looked over at me. "Looks like we're neighbors," he said, grinning.

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"Yeah, it does."

He looked at his watch. "I've got fifteen minutes to kill."

"Waiting for a ride?"

"No. I saw a sign saying that there's a meeting for the forensics team at ten-thirty in room 28. I'm going to check it out."

"Forensics?"

"Yeah, you know, speech and stuff."

"You like speaking in front of people?" I asked. I had gotten Cs in English class every semester we had to give a speech. I did not enjoy speaking in front of large groups.

"Not a lot," he admitted. "My cousin did it a couple of years ago and said it was really cool. Plus, I like to argue. Debate is part of the forensics team."

I raised my eyebrows. "A team that lets you argue? That could be interesting."

Vernon tilted his head toward the hallway. "Want to come? It's open to everyone."

"I don't know. I'm not good with speeches."

"I bet you could argue if you gave it a try. You sure didn't back down for the photographer or Barnett."

I shrugged. "All right." I wasn't going to join the team, but I had nothing else to do. I wanted to try to make a few friends this year. This was a good place to start.

As we walked to room 28, we checked our schedules and found out that although we had most of the same classes and teachers, we had them at different hours. We did have chemistry together, and the same lunch period. We also discovered that he lived just two streets away from me.

"How come I never saw you at Watson?" I asked.

"I went to a private school."

"St. Mary's?" I asked. The big Catholic school was the only private school I knew of in the area.

"Yep." He let out a long gusty sigh. "I fought with my parents every night last semester, trying to convince them to let me come to Palmer this year. I'm here strictly on a trial basis." He lowered his voice, presumably in an imitation of his father. "One screw-up and you're off to St. Mary's so fast that your butt won't feel the road rash till it's sitting in a desk in Sister Catherine's classroom."

I laughed. "Guess you don't want to screw up."

Vernon laughed back. "Well, I certainly don't want to get caught!"

There weren't many people in room 28. In fact, there were only three.

"Is this the room for forensics?" Vernon asked.

The two guys with their heads bent over a Gameboy ignored us, but the girl in the corner nodded before returning her full attention to her book. The room had a dull feeling about it. The desks were in rows and there were only one or two posters on the walls.

"Well, we are a little early," Vernon whispered, trying not to show his disappointment.

I raised my eyebrows but sat down at a desk next to him anyway.

For the next five minutes, the room was silent except for the occasional beeps from the Gameboy. Six more people stuck their heads in the door to take a peek, but only two of them came in, scuttling nervously to desks in the front row. We were all scattered around the room. It was obvious that this was not a meeting for the social butterflies.

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I consulted my schedule again and realized that this was going to be my English room. From behind my sunglasses, I looked around, trying to get a feel for the teacher.

"What are you doing?" Vernon whispered.

"Why are you whispering?" I asked.

He shrugged and shook his head.

"I'm just checking out the room. Looks like it belongs to a pretty traditional teacher."

"You never can tell," Vernon said. "Sometimes people surprise you."

"True," I agreed, feeling hypocritical. Being classified as a stoner or a troublemaker simply because I wore all black was a pet peeve of mine. I resolved to give my English teacher a chance.

After another ten minutes, I was ready to leave. But just as I started to get up, four more guys and a cheerleader walked in. Even if the first guy hadn't been carrying a stack of papers and the second one wearing a Palmer Wrestling shirt, I could have picked them out as upperclassmen. They walked with a swagger and assurance that no one else in the room had.

"Okay." The one wearing the Palmer Wrestling shirt clapped his hands loudly to get our attention. When he turned and faced the room, he discovered how unnecessary that was. "Seven? Only seven of you?" The disappointment was plain on his face.

"You're all here for forensics, right?" the cheerleader said.

One of the newcomers shook his head. "I thought this was for the chess club."

"Nope," she said. "Wrong room."

"Oh," he said. He gathered up his stuff and left.

"Great," Palmer Wrestling said. "Now we're down to six new recruits." He sighed and pointed to the clipboard and papers the other guy had set on the desk. "Sign up, leave your address and phone number, and take a flyer. We'll see you next Wednesday after school."

The guys with the Gameboy stood up immediately and started for the desk. The girl in the corner picked up a purple backpack with a hot-pink fanged smiley face on the front and stuffed her book into a side pocket.

"We waited just for a sheet of paper?" Vernon complained. "Can't you tell us what this is all about?"

Palmer Wrestling looked at him. "That's what the flyer is for," he said, his tone adding the unspoken "moron."

"Then why have a meeting?" I asked. "Why not just pass out the flyers at registration?"

"What is it you want to know?" the cheerleader asked, cutting off Wrestling's reply.

The two guys finished filling in the information, grabbed a flyer, and left. The girl with the book stood and slung her backpack over her shoulder, listening intently. Another guy also stopped to hear what was going on.

"How often do we practice?" Vernon asked. "How long do we practice?"

"Come on, Tess, let's go," said Palmer Wrestling.

"Go ahead, Pat. I'll be there in a minute." Tess, the cheerleader, turned back to us, but Pat didn't leave. "You'll practice every Wednesday from three to four-thirty as a team," she said, "and on your own as often as you need to. Next year, if you're still serious about

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forensics, you can take the class as an elective, but for sophomores it's an after-school activity."

"Okay," said the girl with the purple backpack. "So what exactly are we practicing?"

"It depends on what you choose to compete in. You can do debate, either Cross Examination, which is with a partner, or Lincoln-Douglas, which is on your own. Or you can do different interpretive selections. There's original oratory, humor, drama, poetry, and extemporaneous."

"We compete? Even the beginners?" Vernon asked, sounding a little anxious. "When? How often?"

"About once a month," one of the other upperclassmen said. "On Saturdays usually, but sometimes there are weekend meets that go Friday and Saturday."

"But sophomores rarely get to compete," Pat said, "so you don't need to worry about it."

"Unless the team stays this small," Tess added. "We may end up using everyone."

"How do we decide what to compete in?" I asked.

"Look," Pat broke in, "all of that'll be figured out at practice, okay?"

I looked at him. "How are we supposed to know if we want to sign up for something when we don't know what it is?"

Tess laughed. "You guys should sign up. You've got the stubborn determination you need in debate, and you dig for information. Besides, if you don't like it, you can always quit." Her tone held a challenge.

Before we could say anything, the girl with the purple backpack spoke up again. "How many people do we speak in front of?"

"It depends on what's going on," Tess said. "Right

before a meet, you might run through your presentation in front of the whole team during practice. Otherwise, you might only do it in front of one or two people at a time. At some of the meets, only the judge and a couple of parents are there to watch; at others you can have an audience of up to fifty people."

"Any other questions?" Pat made it plain the answer had better be no. We were wasting his time. After a moment of awkward silence, he snapped, "Then sign up if you want to. Otherwise, go home."

Vernon and I looked at each other. I didn't really plan on staying with the team, but Vernon seemed to be waiting for me.

I shrugged and walked to the desk. "I thought we were supposed to be talking and debating," I said, signing my name with a flourish. "Isn't that what forensics is all about?" I grinned at Tess. She smiled back.

"You could use that killer dimple in interpretive readings too," she said. "Maybe you'll have to do both."

I didn't answer. The dimple was the reason I never smiled in pictures. I hated it.

Pat was looking at my name on the list. "Shadow? What, were you named after a favorite family pet?"

"I hope you don't write your own speeches," I told him, "because you're not very original." And then I walked out the door. It had been a long time since a comment about my name had gotten to me—turning fifteen had me thinking about Daniel too much.

Vernon caught up with me a few minutes later, just as I was leaving the building. "Hey, man, wait up."

"Sorry," I said.

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He laughed. "You've got guts. Standing up not only to Barnett, but also to some senior who thinks he's tough. That girl was right, though. You should be on the team. You're good with words."

"I hardly said anything!"

"Yeah, but what you said and how you said it!"

I looked at him and snorted. "The whole time all I could think was, please, God, don't let my voice crack now."

Vernon laughed again. "It sure didn't show."

I shook my head and kept walking.

"Where're you going?"

"Home."

He stopped. "My mom's picking me up in front of the school in about ten minutes. We could give you a ride home."

Again I shook my head. "Thanks, but I'd rather walk."

"You sure?" Vernon looked a little hurt.

"Yeah."

"Okay. See you next week, I guess."

"See ya."

I knew Vernon was probably thinking I was brushing him off. I didn't mean to come across that way, but I didn't know how to tell him that without sounding really corny. No matter how often I tried to make myself act like the people I saw around me, I just couldn't get it right. I had hoped things would be different at a new school. But maybe I was wrong. Maybe there was just something wrong with me.

I didn't have to be home for another hour. I decided to stop at the library on the way home to see if they had the new Robert Jordan book. Along the way, I thought

about the forensics team. Forensics sounded like it could be interesting, and having an after-school activity might get Dad off my back about getting involved in sports. At six foot three, he had always been a basketball junkie. He couldn't understand why I didn't want to play, especially since I was already so tall.

I wasn't sure I could speak to an audience at all, though, even a small one. Plus, it seemed clear to me that there was at least one complete jerk on the team. Did I really want to deal with that?

But it would be something new. And I was pretty sure Vernon and I could be friends.

Besides, if I wanted to change, joining the forensics team was almost the biggest leap I could make.

As I walked into the library, I took my sunglasses off, tucking them in the pocket of my jacket next to the forensics flyer. It was nice and cool in the library, an important detail when you dress in all black.

I browsed in the general fiction section, looking for something to catch my interest. They didn't have the new Jordan book yet. I prefer fantasy usually, but I'll read almost anything except romance or westerns. A couple of years ago I got into sci-fi. The first time a Star Trek conference came to our town, I was so excited I went all by myself. I didn't make it an hour. It was too depressing to see those geeky older guys walking around by themselves; it was even more depressing to think that could be me in a few years.

I pulled three books off the shelves, and went looking for a study carrel to use. I like to read a few pages of a book before deciding to check it out.

As I walked around, I realized I wasn't going to get a carrel. I finally spotted a small table in the back. Only

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one person was sitting there, facing the other way. On the table I saw a purple backpack with a pink vampirish smiley face on the front.

"Hi," I said. "Mind if I join you?"

She looked up, startled, and then shrugged. "That's fine," she muttered as she went back to reading.

I picked up the first book and leafed through a few pages.

"So where did your name come from?"

"What?" I looked up, confused.

"Your name. Is it a nickname?" A man at another table looked over, and she lowered her voice. "Where does it come from?"

"I believe you can find it in almost any dictionary."

She just stared at me for a second and then she went back to her book.

"No, wait, I'm sorry," I said. The man at the other table shushed us.

"I'm not trying to make fun of you," she muttered. "I was just curious."

"Yeah, well, I'm curious too," I whispered. "What's your name?"

"Robin."

"As in the first sign of spring?"

She made a face at me. "I wasn't trying to make fun of you," she repeated. "Sorry I bothered you." She turned away from me in her seat and looked back down at her book.

Twice in the last hour I had pushed people away without meaning to.

"Robin, wait a minute," I said. "I didn't mean it."

She looked at me doubtfully.

"When I was little, I always followed my br—I

always followed people around. So I got called Shadow and the name kind of stuck."

"And now you want to look like one." The man at the other table made a lot of noise as he packed up his stuff, giving us dirty looks the whole time.

"I guess," I said, surprised that she had made that connection. "So what do you think of the forensics team?" I asked.

"I was glad you and your friend spoke up," she said, sidestepping my question. "There sure wasn't much information on the flyer."

"You going to join?"

Looking down, she nodded. Her dark brown hair fell over her face. It was long and shiny, but the way it clung to her head made her look kind of shy and mousy.

"What do you know about this club that I don't?" I asked, trying to get her to look up and smile.

She glanced up at me, barely. "It'll be good for my career."

I blinked. "You have a career?"

She rolled her eyes at me.

I tried again. "I mean, you already know what you want to do? What?"

Robin shook her head. "Nothing. Forget I said anything." She tried to concentrate on her book. I wouldn't let her.

"Seriously. How can forensics help your career?"

"It makes you learn how to speak in public, and helps you learn how to use your voice and choose the right words to get your point across effectively. The way you say something is often more important than what you actually say. It can also give you poise and expand your vocabulary."

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"Wow. You should have written the flyer." I raised my eyebrows. "Is joining forensics your choice or your parents'?"

"I changed my mind," she said suddenly. "I *do* mind if you sit here."

Grinning, I said, "It's too late. I'm already settled."

"Fine. Then *I'll* leave." She started to gather her stuff.

"Wait, wait, wait. I'm sorry, okay? I'll sit quietly and you'll never even know I'm here."

She glared at me but leaned back into her chair and opened her book.

I managed to keep my word...for about three minutes.

"Really, what career are you interested in?" I whispered.

She ignored me.

"Let's see. Public speaking...hmmm. A politician?" She didn't blink. "No, you couldn't be that slimy." Her eyes were still focused on her book, but they weren't moving across the page. "An actress? No, then you'd just take drama or be in the plays. What else? A TV anchor?" She was still trying to ignore me, but I thought her lips twitched with a suppressed smile. "Or maybe a lawyer? No, You don't look bloodthirsty enough to be a lawyer. Hmmm." I definitely saw a smile. "You know, this would be a lot easier if you would give me a clue."

"You're not supposed to be talking, remember?"

"Oh, yeah. Well, that's one of my faults, my poor memory. Do you think forensics can help with that?"

"I think you need more help than forensics or any other school activity can give you. I think you need professional help." She began to gather her stuff again.

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“Okay, okay, I’m sorry. I’ll be good this time.”

“Too late,” she said.

“Please!”

She took pity on me and smiled again. “I really do have to leave. See you next week.”

“So you’re definitely joining forensics?” I pressed.

“I’m definitely going to think about it.” She took three steps from the table, but then stopped and looked back at me. “Will you be at practice next week?”

“Will you miss me if I’m not?”

She continued walking and said over her shoulder, “See you around—maybe.”

“Bye!” I said as she walked away.

Yeah. I had to give forensics a try.