

Shadow Ridge by M.E. Browning

EXCERPT

Chapter One

Detective Jo Wyatt stood at the edge of the doorway of the converted garage and scanned the scene for threats. She'd have the chance to absorb the details later, but even at a glance, it was obvious the occupant of the chair in front of the flickering television wouldn't benefit from her first-aid training. The stains on the ceiling from the gun blast confirmed that.

Officer Cameron Finch stood on the other side of the sorry concrete slab that served as an entrance. "Ready?"

The only place hidden from view was the bathroom, and the chance of someone hiding there was infinitesimal, but someone always won the lottery. Today wasn't the day to test the odds. Not when she was dressed for court and without her vest.

She pushed the door open wider. Her eyes and handgun moved in tandem as she swept the room.

A mattress on the floor served as a bed. Stacks of clothes took the place of a real closet. A dorm-sized fridge with a hot plate on top of it made up the kitchen.

Jo avoided the well-worn paths in the carpet and silently approached the bathroom. Its door stood slightly ajar, creating enough space for her to peer through the crack. Never lowering her gun, she used her foot to widen the gap.

No intruder. Just a water-spotted shower stall and a stained toilet with the seat up. A stick propped open the narrow ventilation window above the shower. Too small for even the tiniest child, but an open invitation to heat-seeking raccoons.

"Bathroom's clear." She holstered her gun. The cut of her wool blazer fell forward and did its best to hide the bulge of her Glock, but an observant person could tell she was armed. One of the drawbacks of having a waist.

She picked her way across the main room, staying close to the walls to avoid trampling any evidence. A flame licked the edges of the television screen—one of those mood DVDs of a fireplace but devoid of sound. It filled the space with an eerie flicker that did little to lighten the gathering dusk.

Sidestepping a cat bowl filled with water, she stopped in front of the body and pulled a set of latex gloves from her trouser pocket.

"Really?" Cameron asked.

Jo snapped them into place, then pressed two fingers against the victim's neck in a futile search for a pulse—a completely unnecessary act that became an issue only if a defense attorney wanted to make an officer look like an idiot on the stand for not checking.

The dead man reclined in a high-backed gray chair that appeared to have built-in speakers. In the vee of his legs, a Remington 870 shotgun rested against his right thigh, the stock's butt buried in the dirty shag carpet. On the far side, a toppled bottle of whiskey and a tumbler sat on a metal TV tray next to a long-stemmed pipe.

"Who called it in?" Jo asked.

"Quinn Kirkwood. I told her to stay in her car until we figured out what was going on."

Jo retraced her steps to the threshold, seeking a respite from the stench of death.

A petite woman stood at the edge of the driveway, pointedly looking away from the door. "Is he okay?"

So much for staying in the car. "Let's talk over here." Not giving the other woman the opportunity to resist, Jo grabbed her elbow and guided her to the illuminated porch of the main house, where the overhang would protect them from the softly falling snow.

"He's inside, isn't he?" Quinn pulled the drawstring of her sweat shirt until the hood puckered around her neck. "He's dead." It should have been a question, but wasn't. Jo's radar pinged.

"I'm sorry." Jo brushed errant flakes from a dilapidated wicker chair and moved it forward for her. "Is there someone I can call for you?"

She shook her head.

"How well did you know—"

"Tye. His name is—was—Tye Horton." Quinn played with the tab of her hood string, picking at the plastic that kept the ends from fraying.

Jo remained quiet, digesting the younger woman's unease. She was all angles: sharp shoulders, high cheekbones, blunt-cut dark hair, and canted eyes that looked blue in the open but faded to grey here in the shadows.

A pile of snow slid from a bowed cottonwood branch and landed with a dull plop. The silence broken, Quinn continued to fill it. "We have a couple classes together up at the college. He missed class. I came over to see why."

"Does he often cut class?"

"He didn't cut class," she said sharply. "He missed it." She pulled out her cellphone. "The project was due today. I should tell the others."

What would she tell them? She hadn't asked any questions. The pinging in Jo's head grew louder. "Did you go inside before the officer got here?" She looked at the woman's shoes. Converse high-tops. Distinctive tread.

Quinn launched out of her seat, sending it crashing into the porch rail. "I called you guys, remember?"

"It's a simple yes or no."

The smaller woman advanced and Jo fought the impulse to shove her back. "No, Officer—"

"Detective Wyatt."

The top of Quinn's head barely reached Jo's chin. "Tye and I were classmates with a project due, Detective. I called him, he didn't answer. I texted him, he didn't respond. He didn't show up for the game last night, which meant something was wrong. He never missed a game."

Football. Last night Jo had pulled on her uniform and worked an overtime shift at the Sunday night game. Despite the plunging temperatures, the small college stadium had been filled to capacity.

"Did you check on him afterward?" Jo asked.

"No." Color brightened Quinn's pale cheeks. "By the time the game ended, it was too late. After he missed class today, I came straight over. Called the police. Here we are. Now, can I go?"

"Was Tye having any problems lately?"

"Problems?"

"With school? Friends?"

"I shared a class with him."

Another dodge. "You knew he wasn't at the game."

"I figured he was finishing up his end of the project. Are we done? I've got class tonight."

"I need to see your identification before you leave."

"Un-fucking-believable." Quinn jammed her hand into her jacket pocket and removed an old-fashioned leather coin purse. Pinching the top, she drew out her driver's license and practically threw it at Jo.

"I'm sure you understand. Whenever there is a death, we have to treat it as a crime until we determine otherwise."

The air left Quinn in a huff of frost. "I'm sorry. I'm just..." She dipped her face but not before Jo saw the glint of tears. "I'm just going to miss him. He was nice. I don't have a lot of friends in Echo Valley."

"Were the two of you dating?"

The sharpness returned to her features. "Not my type."

"Do you know if he was in a relationship?"

"Not that I know of."

"Would you know?"

Cameron joined the women on the porch and extended his hand to Quinn. "I'm Sergeant Finch."

Jo sucked in her breath, and covered it with a cough. The promotional memo hadn't been posted even a day yet.

"I'm sorry about your friend," Cameron added.

Quinn crossed her arms, whether for warmth or for comfort, Jo couldn't tell. "Your badge says Officer. Aren't sergeants supposed to have stripes or something?"

"It's official next week."

"So. Really just an officer."

Jo bit the inside of her cheek to keep from smiling. Served him right for acting like an ass.

"I wouldn't say just." Cameron hooked his thumb in his gun belt.

“Of course you wouldn’t.” Quinn drew a deep breath and let it out as if she feared it might be her last. “What happened?” she finally asked.

Jo spoke before Cameron could answer. “That’s what we’re here to find out.” She opened her notebook.

Quinn sized up the two officers like a child trying to decide which parent to ask, and settled on Cameron. “Will you get me the laptop that’s inside? It’s got our school project on it.”

“I’m sorry,” Jo answered. “But until we process the scene, everything needs to stay put.”

Quinn sought confirmation from Cameron. “Really?”

Jo shot him a look she hoped conveyed the slow torturous death he’d suffer if he contradicted her and compromised the scene.

Cameron placed his hand on Quinn’s forearm. “I’m certain it won’t take long and I’ll personally deliver it to you as soon as I can.”

“Thanks.” She shook off his hand and addressed Jo. “Am I free to go?”

Prickly thing. Jo handed Quinn’s license back to her. “I’m truly sorry about your friend. May I call you later if I have any questions?”

Cameron stepped closer, all earnestness and concern. “It would be very helpful to the investigation when she realizes she forgot to ask you something.”

The coin purse snapped shut. “Sure. Whatever.”

“Thank you,” Jo said, then added, “Be careful.”

Quinn jerked. “What?”

The wind had picked up, and waves of snow blew across the walkway. Jo pointed toward the street. “The temperature drops any lower and it’ll start to ice up. Be careful. The roads are going to be slick.”

Quinn bobbed her head. Hunched against the cold, she climbed into her bright yellow Mini Cooper.

Snow had collected on the bumper and Jo noted the plate. She’d seen the car around town, its brilliant color and tiny chassis a contrast to the trucks and four-wheel-drive SUVs most locals drove.

The car crunched down the driveway. Jo returned to the task at hand, ignoring Cameron as he followed her.

Two buildings—the main residence and the converted garage—stood at the center of the property. The driveway dumped out onto an alley and the hum of downtown carried across the crisp air. Dogs barked. Cars slowed and accelerated at the nearby stop sign, their engines straining and tires chewing into the slushed snow. A sagging chain-link fence ringed the property, pushed and pulled by a scraggly hedge.

Built in the days when a garage housed only a car and not the detritus of life, the building was barely larger than a tack room. A small walkway separated the dwellings. She followed the path around the exterior of the garage.

Eaves kept snow off the paint-glued windowsill on the far side of the outbuilding. Rambling rosebushes in need of pruning stretched skeletal fingers along the wall. Jo swept the bony branches aside. A thorn snagged the shoulder of her blazer.

She studied the ground. Snow both helped and hindered officers. In foot pursuits, it revealed a suspect's path. But the more time separated an incident from its investigation, the more it hid tracks. Destroyed clues. This latest snow had started in the early hours of the morning, gently erasing the valley's grime and secrets and creating a clean slate. Tye could have been dead for hours. The snow told her nothing.

As she stood again at the door, not even the cold at her back could erase the smell of blood. The last of the evening's light battled its way through the dirty window, failing to brighten the dark scene in front of her.

She tried not to let the body distract her from cataloging the room. Echo Valley didn't have violent deaths often. In her twelve years on the department, she'd investigated only two homicides, one as an officer, the second as a detective. Fatal crashes, hunting accidents, Darwin Award-worthy stupidity, sure, but murder? That was the leap year of crimes and only happened once every four years or so.

Cameron joined her on the threshold and they stood shoulder to shoulder. He had a shock of thick brown hair that begged to be touched, and eyes that said he'd let you. "Why so quiet, Jo-elle?"

The use of her nickname surprised her. Only two people had ever called her that and Cameron hadn't used it in a long time. "I don't want to miss anything."

"What's to miss? Guy blew his brains out."

"It's rarely that simple."

"Not everything needs to be complicated." He laughed. The boyishness of it had always charmed her with its enthusiasm. Now it simply sounded dismissive. Perhaps it always had been, but she'd been too in love to notice. "Hey, you got plans tonight?" He tried to sound innocent. She had learned that voice.

"Other than this? I don't see as that's any of your business."

"Of course it's my business. You're still my wife." He stared into the distance as he said it. A splinter of sun pierced the dark clouds and bled across his unguarded expression.

Yearning.

Jo stood as if on ice, afraid to move lest she lose her balance.

He seemed to wake up, and after a deep breath, he surveyed the room. "The landlord is going to be looking for a new tenant. You should give him your name. It's got to be better than living with your old man."

Fissures formed beneath her and it took her two blinks before she recovered her footing.

"I need to get my camera. I'll be right back."

She left him at the door. The December chill wormed through her wool dress slacks as she trudged the half block to her car. She drew breath after breath of the searing chill deep into her

lungs to replace the hurt, the anger, the self-recriminations that burned her. She sat in the passenger seat and picked up the radio mic. She wasn't ready to face Cameron. Not yet.

To buy herself some time, she ran a local warrant check on Quinn. Something wasn't quite right about the woman. A warrant might explain things.

Dispatch confirmed Quinn's address, but had nothing to add.

Jo grabbed her camera bag and crime scene kit and schlepped back to the scene, prioritizing her actions as she went. She'd need to snag another detective. Interrupt a judge's dinner to get a search warrant. Swab the victim's hands for gunshot residue. Try to confirm his identification. Hopefully, the person in the front house would return soon so Jo could start collecting background on the deceased. Take overview photos of the exterior first. Inside there'd be lights. Then evidence. Identify it. Bag it. Book it.

She reached the door before she ticked through all the tasks. Cameron was circling the chair.

Jo stopped on the threshold, stunned.

"No wonder they didn't promote you." Cameron peered into the exposed cranium. "If you can't tell this is a suicide, you got no business being a cop—let alone a detective."

"Get out."

"We're not home, sweetie. You can't order me out here."

"Actually, I can. Detective, remember? This is my scene and you're contaminating it."

He laughed. "Sergeant outranks detective."

"I think it's already been established that you're not sporting stripes."

"Yet. Couple more days."

Three. Three days until he started wearing the stripes that should have been hers. Three days until he outranked her. Three. Damn. Days. "And until then, Officer Finch." With exaggerated care, she took out her notebook and started writing.

"What are you doing?"

"Making a note of the path you've taken. Try to retrace your steps. I'd hate to have to say how badly you mucked things up." She paused for effect. "You getting promoted and all."

"You're such a bitch."

"Is that how you talk to your wife?"

He picked up the overturned bottle on the TV tray. "Johnnie Walker Gold." He sniffed the premium Scotch whisky. "And here I would have pegged him for a Jack fan, at best." Cameron tipped the bottle back into place and retraced his steps.

The latex gloves did nothing to warm her fingers, and Jo shoved her hands in her pockets. Had he changed or had she? "When did you become such an ass?"

"When'd we get married?" He shouldered past her, swinging his keys around his finger. Outside, the streetlamps flickered to life. "I'll leave you to it. Even you can see it's a slam dunk."

She didn't want to agree with him. "It's only a suicide when the coroner says so."

"Oh, Jo-elle."

There was that laugh again, and she hated herself for warming to him.

"You've got to learn to choose your battles."

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