

My shadow's my only, only companion and at night he leaves too ...¹



One: Men Always Have Hidden Agendas

Glancing down at her watch, she cursed under her breath. She was going to be late. *Again.* Nothing could ever be simple, could it? Certainly not for Claire Jenkins. *Never* for Claire Jenkins. Something always seemed to come up and complicate her life. She cursed again. Glancing in her rearview mirror she determined to risk a speeding ticket and gain a few precious moments. Pressing down on the gas pedal she had a moment's confusion, and then an enormous wave of dismay. Rather than speeding *up* the car was slowing *down*. Claire floored the gas pedal and heard the distinctive shudder and cough of the engine as it quit all together. Cursing loudly and passionately, she coasted the car toward the side of the road, coming to a slow halt. Putting her head down on the steering wheel, she let out a blood-curdling scream that rattled the car windows. *Not now. Not again. Not today.* Would she, could she, *ever* catch a break?

This was the third time in as many weeks that the car had failed her. She shifted into park, turned off the key, took a deep breath and sent up a plea to the great car fairy in the sky. Turning the key, Claire tried to start the engine. Nothing. *Nada.* With her throat still sore from her screams, she put her head down on the steering wheel again and burst into tears.

“Got a problem?” Claire heard over her sobs through the closed window. Tap. Tap. Tap. “Hey, lady! I said, *‘Got a problem?’*”

Hastily she wiped her sopping wet face and sniffed loudly. An enormous man with a days' growth of salt and pepper beard, a hard hat, and sunglasses was bending down and peering into her none too clean window. “It just died,” she said through the closed window. “I don't know what's wrong.”

He nodded. “Pop the hood,” he said as he straightened and walked to the front of the car. They stared at each other for a few moments through the window, he expectantly, her suspiciously.

¹ “Valleys Fill First”, words and music by Aaron Tate and Ed Cash, Caedmon's Call, Long Line of Leavers, 2000, Cumbee Road Music

Claire had a flash of regret that she'd taken this meandering back country road in an effort to gain a few more precious moments. There was little traffic. She was alone. Weren't there always stories about women who were attacked and killed in circumstances like this? With her luck ...

"Look," she heard him say to her as he put his hands on his hips above his tool belt, "if you'd prefer, I'll just go. Do you have a cell phone? Can you call a road service? I don't want to cause you any further *distress* ..."

Did he look like a killer-man-rapist? She knew for a fact that they didn't skulk around with "I'm a rapist and proud of it" on their tee shirts. But she also knew that no man, *ever* could be trusted. Rules Number One through Three of the Claire Jenkins Rules of Survival Book: *Men always have hidden agendas. Men will do anything to achieve said hidden agendas. Stay away from all men.* She looked at her watch again. Tyler would be waiting for her, and she really had no choice. She popped the hood.

"Try turning it over," she heard him shout.

Again, nothing happened.

He slammed the lid down and came around and squatted down by her car door. Even squatting he looked enormous. "I'm not an expert on cars," he spoke in a voice louder than normal to be heard through the closed window, "but it's pretty obvious that you're out of gas." Claire gaped at him in astonishment. It couldn't be. She could not have been *that* stupid. And then she looked at the fuel gauge. He was absolutely right. She put her head down on the steering wheel and fought the wave of anguish that threatened to well up inside again. She was such a complete screw up.

"Do you have a cell phone?"

She shook her head. *She couldn't afford one.*

"I can let you borrow mine ..."

She shook her head. *There was no one she could call.*

"Is there someone you can call?"

She shook her head. The tears started then as she stared out the front windshield, totally oblivious to anything but the disaster of her life. Nothing, *nothing* had ever gone right in her life. Except Tyler. And she was doing her level best to destroy that as well.

"Look, lady, I can't just leave you here. What do you want to do? Come on, pull yourself together and think."

Think, he said. Claire worked to repress the cloak of self-pity and loathing that she was working so hard to weave around her and did as the guy said. *I should call the school*, she thought in a flash. At least she could let them know of her situation and they would keep Tyler safe until she got there. She turned to look at the man still peering at her through the dirty car window. He looked kind enough ... He'd appeared concerned and willing to help. Claire knew for a fact that those were the ones you should trust the least.

She wiped her face with the back of her sleeve, released the lock and opened up the door. He stood and stepped back, as if sensing she needed a wide berth. God, he was massive. She peered up at him and saw her reflection in his sunglasses. "If I could borrow your phone, I could call my son's school and tell them I'm going to be late (*again*, her head said) to pick him up. That way he won't worry."

He nodded, seemingly pleased that she wasn't still spiraling down into the pit of despair. "Hang on, I'll go get it."

She stood by her useless car and watched him hoist himself up into his truck. It was a power company truck, one of the huge ones with a cherry picker on top and lights and all manner of tools and contraptions attached to every available space. Claire watched him walk back to her in an easy loping gait, tools clanking musically at his side, his hand extended with the phone. "Thanks," she said and was embarrassed that she had to sniff loudly to keep her nose from running.

The secretary at the school, Ms. Briggs, was snotty. But to the best of Claire's knowledge, Ms. Briggs was always snotty. Perhaps that was part of her job description? *Intimidate all parents who have the potential to cause complications over the course of a typical school day.* When Claire finished explaining her situation, Ms. Briggs said condescendingly, "Ms. Jenkins, I believe that Principal Thompson has talked with you about your *numerous* late pick-ups of Tyler."

"Look Ms. Briggs," Claire ground out, conscious of the mountain of a man standing within earshot, "I'm doing the best I can. My car is old and unreliable. Please tell Tyler to wait in the office and I'll be there as soon as I can get a tow truck."

Remain firm and unbending despite any and all extenuating circumstances. In the face of confrontation forge on fearlessly with whatever difficult information that must be delivered. "I believe that Principal Thompson wished to speak with you about an incident with Tyler on the playground today at recess," Ms. Briggs said rather smugly.

Oh God, not again ...

"Yes, well, I'll be happy to speak with her once I get there, okay?" She hung up before Ms. Briggs could say anything else.

She looked up at the silent man leaning casually with arms crossed against her useless car. She hated having to ask anything of anyone. Why did her life always seem to be pushing her into situations just like this one? "Is it okay if I call a tow truck?"

He studied her for one brief flash and then said, "Got money to do that?"

She felt of wave of anger wash through her. "What business of it is yours?" she shot out. How dare he!

He shrugged. "I could offer you a ride."

Claire gave him an impatient look, struggling to keep herself from diving off the edge of control she was tottering on. "Oh yeah," she heard herself say in a tone dripping with venom and sarcasm, "you really want to drive all the way to Hillside Elementary School, wait for me while I get reamed out by the principal for something my kid did, and then drive us home? I had no idea that the power company gave you guys so much free time. That must be why my utility bill is so high."

He grinned at her then. A smile whose size was in compliment with the rest of him – huge. "You're pretty feisty considering I'm only trying to play the Good Samaritan. For your information, I've just finished a double shift, eleven to seven and seven to three so I'm done for the day. All I've got to do is return my truck and go home and catch some much-needed zzz's. But if you're not interested in my offer then go ahead and call your tow truck. From the look of this car, I'd guess you've got the number memorized." He leaned back against her car again, slumped his head forward

onto his chest, and appeared to go to sleep.

She didn't have the money. Not in cash, check, or credit card. Why was she being so ornery? Because this kind of thing *always* happened to her and she was just *sick* of it, that's why. Because nobody did *anything* for *nothing* and consequently she never accepted charity, that's why.

The clock was ticking. Reality loomed its ugly head: Tyler was waiting and Claire had no choice. She would have to make nice and accept his offer. Her skin literally crawled. She cleared her throat and sniffed again. *What she wouldn't give for a lousy tissue.* "Look, it's been a bad day and it seems to have the makings of getting worse. *I'm sorry*, okay? I appreciate your stopping, and I would like to take you up on your offer." There. That should do it. She extended her hand, trying to be mature, "My name is Claire. Claire Jenkins."

He picked his head up and studied her for a moment. He looked down at her extended hand, but didn't accept it. "Name's Paul. Paul Williamson. Get your stuff and then I'll help you into the truck. Make sure you lock up that wreck. You wouldn't want anyone to steal it." He chuckled at his own joke.

Mr. Paul Williamson was waiting for her on the passenger side of the truck with the door open. He pointed, "See the step there? See the handle? Grip that, step there and then hoist yourself into the cab." He grinned at her. "If you start to fall, don't worry, I'll catch you." The thought of him touching her sent Claire into such a panic it must have shown clearly on her face. As she looked into his sunglass shaded eyes, he said, "*I'm kidding*," and shook his head in exasperation.

She made it up and in and was quite pleased with herself that she did it on the first try *without his help*. Claire was amazed at the different perspective from so high up and was looking out the front windshield when he climbed in and settled himself behind the steering wheel. He smiled at her as he started up the truck and pulled out onto the road. "Whole different world up here, huh?"

"Tyler's going to go nuts," was all she could say.

Turned out he knew exactly where Hillside Elementary School was. "Done work there a while back," Paul said by way of explanation. She noted that the inside of the truck was surprisingly neat. No discarded coffee cups or empty food bags. He seemed content to drive in silence.

"Do you make it a habit to rescue stranded roadside travelers?" she asked, growing uncomfortable with the quiet.

He never looked at her. "Only the pretty ones," he said with an absolutely straight face. That shut her up for the rest of the ride.

He parked the truck in the school parking lot and she walked in, mentally preparing herself for Tyler's impatience, Ms. Biggs condescension, and the principal's impending lecture. Why did she always feel like *she* had done something wrong and that *she* was being sent to the principal's office?

"Mom!" Tyler said when she walked into the office. His left shoe was untied (as usual) and there was a new rip in the knee of his trousers. *Great.* She could see in his face the effort it was taking for him to sit in his chair and act cooperative. *Uh oh. This must be really bad ...*

"I'm sorry I'm late, big guy," she said as she ruffled his sandy blonde hair. "The car broke down again." She leaned over and whispered, "This time it's all my fault though. I ran out of gas. Can you believe it?"

“Oh, Mom,” he rolled his green eyes like he was twenty-three instead of seven.

Claire looked at the stern countenance of the school secretary. “Ms. Briggs, does the principal still want to see me?”

The computer keyboard continued to click. *Always keep nervous parents on the edge and uncertain. Never let them acquire the upper hand.* Finally, Ms. Briggs stopped typing and looked up at her. “One moment and I’ll see,” she said. She acted like she was the secretary for Donald Trump, not some tiny elementary school in central New Jersey. “Principal Thompson? Ms. Jenkins is here, do you still wish to talk with her about lunchtime’s *incident?*” She listened for a moment. “Fine, I’ll send her in.” She looked at Claire. “You may go in,” she intoned and went back to typing on her computer.

“Tyler, you wait here,” Claire said in a firm voice. “Start your homework.”

“I don’t have any.”

They exchanged glances. Two pairs of green eyes looked at each other; one pair tired and impatient, the other pair manipulative and shifty. Claire glared at him. This was the afternoon dance they did every day. The teachers assured her that he had homework each and every night, Monday through Thursday. And each and every night Tyler came home insisting he had none. *Honest, Mom.* Sometimes, if she was lucky, Claire managed to find a mangled math worksheet down in the deep, dark, dank recesses of his backpack. But rarely. “I *know* you have reading to do, I *know* that you have to have spelling words to study, I *know* you’ve got to have at least some kind of math homework ...”

Tyler looked at her with the innocence of a saint. “Honest, Mom, I don’t have any. I got it all done in school.”

Claire was too old for this and she was only twenty-five.

Parents need to be continually reminded of the valuable service that the school system provides for them. “Principal Thompson is waiting, Ms. Jenkins. She has a very busy schedule you know,” Ms. Briggs spoke without looking away from her computer screen.

Claire glared at Tyler and then at Ms. Briggs. *I’ll fight this battle later without an audience,* she thought as she walked into the principal’s office.

“Hi, Principal Thompson. You wanted to speak with me?” Claire fought down the urge to grovel. To stand up straight. To try to look innocent in the face of impending doom. She hoped her eyes didn’t look manipulative and shifty ...

Claire was greeted with a practiced smile. “Hello, Ms. Jenkins. Won’t you come in and sit down? Let me shut the door.” Principal Thompson always looked impeccable. Whether it was 8 a.m. during morning arrival or 8 p.m. at an evening function. There was never a hair out of place, never a drop of sweat on her face, her nails were always professionally manicured and even her lipstick always appeared fresh. Claire looked down at her waitress uniform and stained white sneakers.

It was so obvious that they lived on different planets.

Trying to sound adult and professional, Claire said, “I understand from Ms. Briggs that there was a problem with Tyler at lunchtime today?”

Principal Thompson seemed to collect herself, took a deep breath, and then looked directly

at Claire. "Yes, and this incident transcends all the other incidents for it directly impacts another student's emotional and physical well being. It is a very, *very* serious situation."

"What's he done?" Claire breathed with real trepidation, all efforts to maintain her composure evaporating. Dread and despair filled her.

"While on the playground at lunch recess, Tyler accosted another boy and pulled his pants down in front of everyone. The boy was so traumatized that he was sent home to recover. As you can imagine, this is not a situation that we can simply address with words and admonitions. I've spoken with another principal in the district, as well as the Superintendent of Schools, and even though Tyler is only in second grade and seven years old, it has been determined that he will be suspended from school for three full days. That means he will not be permitted on school grounds until Monday."

Claire just sat there for long moments, unable to think of what to say or how to react. Finally she choked out, "Did you speak with Tyler about this?"

"Yes, we did. Both myself and the school nurse, Mrs. Lane, did."

"And? What did he say?"

"Very little, to be quite honest with you. He said nothing other than to admit that the account that the lunch aid had given us was correct and he had indeed done what he had been accused of. He offered no defense or explanation of his actions whatsoever. And the child he accosted insisted that the attack was completely unprovoked. There were a number of children who were in the immediate vicinity of the incident. When we talked with them none could provide us with any additional details."

Principal Thompson looked pointedly at Claire. "Perhaps over the course of his suspension, he will provide you with some more insight. Should he do this, I'd appreciate your letting me know."

"I'll talk with him tonight after I finish work ..."

"Yes, I suggest you do."

Claire struggled with what she had just heard about her son. Tyler had always been kind, loving and sensitive. He was a regular kid though: mischief happened when he got bored, retaliation happened when he was attacked. His sense of humor was not so well developed simply because there was very little to laugh about in their lives. Jeeze, what was going on in his head that he'd do such a thing? Claire looked at Principal Thompson, "He's never done anything like this before. Harm another child, I mean, has he?"

Principal Thompson shook her head. "No, all the other prior incidents have involved simple mischief and testing of the rules. I really do not believe that Tyler is a malicious child, Ms. Jenkins, but this situation cannot be brushed under the table and forgotten. An entire lunch period of children witnessed your son's brutality and another child's humiliation."

Principal Thompson hesitated and then continued. "There is one other thing, Ms. Jenkins. I'd like the school psychologist to talk with Tyler. His disruptive behavior seems to be escalating. I believe it would be wise that we make use of the avenues available to us within the school system to see if we can shed some light on what's going on in Tyler's head."

"You think he needs a shrink?"

Principal Thompson leaned forward toward Claire. She was wearing a huge diamond ring and had, what looked like, a very expensive gold watch and gold bracelet on her wrist. “Can I be frank with you, Ms. Jenkins?”

Is there any way I could possibly stop you? Claire nodded.

“What your son did borders on criminal harassment. There is now zero tolerance for abusive, threatening behavior on school grounds. The parents of the young boy whom Tyler accosted could, conceivably, press criminal charges against your son. It is in your own as well as Tyler’s best interest for you to appear cooperative, concerned, and contrite regarding this incident. Am I making myself clear?”

Claire nodded again.

Principal Thompson seemed to soften just a bit. “Besides Ms. Jenkins, don’t you want to know what’s causing all of this? Wouldn’t you like the opportunity to get a handle on things before the situation gets so uncontrollable it becomes hopeless?”

Who the hell did this woman think she was, sitting there with her polished nails and diamond jewelry? Claire felt the tears coming like the inevitability of a tidal wave, when the sea water is drawn far away from the shoreline and you *know* something horrible is going to happen. *Don’t cry now, Claire. Save it for later. You know you can do it.* She nodded again but could not find any words. She didn’t dare. Who knew what would come out of her mouth if she opened it? She could curl Principal Thompson’s hair with the curses she desperately wanted to spit out. Blindly she reached for her purse and hurried out of the office.

“Ms. Jenkins!” she heard the principal calling after her. “Wait! We haven’t finished discussing-” Claire didn’t even slow down.

She rushed past the evil Ms. Briggs, grabbed Tyler’s arm with one hand and his backpack with the other, and rushed out of the office out into the bright sunshine.

“Mom ...”

“Don’t say a word to me,” she gasped unable to fight the tears that were streaming down her face. *Wouldn’t you like the opportunity to get a handle on things before the situation gets so uncontrollable it becomes hopeless?* Principal Thompson had no idea. *The situation had been uncontrollably hopeless for years.* Probably her whole life.

Welcome to my world.

Tyler, unable to be quiet for longer than thirty seconds, was not particularly fazed by her words or her tears. “I know I’m not supposed to say a word to you, Mom, but how are we getting home? I don’t see the car.”

Oh God, *oh God*. Not only did she have to face her potentially criminal minded son, she had to deal with this stranger acting like a - what did he call himself? – a *Good Samaritan*. She looked up frantically and was horrified to see him walking slowly toward them. He’d taken off his hard hat and tool belt but still wore his sunglasses. She was so done in. She just stood there still clutching Tyler’s arm and watched him approach.

“You okay?” he asked when he got within earshot.

“Who’s this guy?” Tyler asked her with a tinge of hostility.

Claire couldn't speak. She was completely and totally done in. She just stood there, still crying. *I'm done, I'm done ... I'm done.*

"Hi, Tyler, my name is Paul Williamson. I came by your mom when she was stranded on the side of the road and offered her a ride."

"We're gonna ride in that truck?" Tyler's excitement was evident, always willing to seize the moment, capitalize on a good opportunity.

Claire numbly registered Paul's smile at her son. "Yeah, you think you can handle that?"

"Can you put me up in the cherry picker?"

"No, sorry, I can't." Paul looked at her. "Claire? Come on, I'll take you two home, okay?"

She just looked at him. She could hear him saying to her - not an hour ago - *Come on, pull yourself together a bit and think.* She walked down the steps still clutching Tyler's backpack and dragging him along with her.

Once they were all settled in the truck, Paul asked, "Which way's home for you guys?"

"Oh, we don't go home *yet,*" Tyler volunteered, a font of information. "Mom's got to go back and finish her shift at the diner. It's the *All American Diner* on Route 28. Do you know it? It has really, *really* good chocolate chip cookies, but disgusting green beans."

Paul hesitated, and then asked Tyler, "What do you do while your mom works?"

"Well, if I've got any homework - which I hardly ever do - I work on that at one of the empty tables. If I don't have homework, I play my Gameboy, or if the weather's nice there's a basketball hoop in the back for the busboys when they're on break."

"What time is Mom's shift over?"

"Nine."

"*Nine p.m.?*"

"Yeah, it's not so bad. I get a free dinner every night and any dessert I want as long as I eat my *greens,*" Tyler said with an obvious shiver of revulsion.

The tears had stopped. Claire had continued to stare out the front of the truck since she had climbed in, but felt Tyler glance at her. His voice dropped down into a conspiratorial whisper as he continued to speak to Paul. "Mom's usually pretty busy around dinner time so I can usually scam it pretty good." She heard Paul chuckle in spite of himself.

"Claire?" Paul addressed her. "Is Tyler right? Am I taking you two back to work?"

She had to pull herself together. *C'mon girl, you've done it a million times.* She took a deep breath and looked at him. "Yeah, you're taking us back to my job."

Paul knew where the diner was, so she was spared having to make any more conversation. While they drove she struggled for composure; crabby/hysterical waitresses made really lousy tips. Outside the diner, Paul came around to help her and Tyler down.

She had pulled herself together enough to make eye contact with Paul and say, "Thanks for your help. You get the Good Samaritan Badge of Honor."

He studied her for a moment and she felt uncomfortable under his scrutiny. "You're welcome. I'm glad I was able to stop. I don't believe in coincidences, so it was a pleasure to be of service."

She was too wiped out to ask him to explain what he meant. As she walked up the steps of the diner Paul called out to her, “Hey! How will you guys get home?”

Claire hadn’t thought of that. Finally, she shrugged. “I’ll ask one of the girls to give us a lift. They’ve done it before. They’ll probably have to do it again.” The noise of the diner drowned out the sound of the truck engine pulling out of the parking lot.

Tyler was on his best behavior at the diner that night, suspecting the confrontation awaiting him once they got home. Each time she looked over at him he seemed to be obediently doing what was expected of him: reading, working on a school paper, eating green beans (with the requisite shiver), and then playing his Gameboy.

When it got close to the end of her shift she approached Sally, the cashier. “Who’s off at nine, tonight? I need to catch a ride home.”

“How come?”

Sally was Chief Gossip in the diner. She was Dan’s youngest daughter and the hostess/cashier. Dan owned the diner. Sally’s most distinctive feature was the big wad of gum she was continually chewing and popping. If you needed info you sought her out; if you had a secret you avoided her. “My car. It died this afternoon on my way to get Tyler. It’s a problem I’ll have to deal with tomorrow. It’s sitting on the side of some country road on the way to Tyler’s school.”

“That’s funny,” Sally said with a frown glancing out the window, “Dan said to tell you that the next time you park your car in customer spaces he’s going to dock you.”

Claire turned to follow Sally’s glance, looking out into the parking lot. Sure enough there was her car parked underneath the flickering fluorescent lights. She looked at Sally who gazed back at her, popped her gum, and shrugged.

Even though she still had two tables, she walked out into the cool spring evening and over to her car. There was a white envelope under the windshield wiper. She opened it and read:

Claire,

You left your keys in my truck. I took it as another opportunity to be of service.

Paul

Enclosed in the envelope were her keys. She got in behind the wheel, put the key in the ignition, and turned it over. The car started right up and she took note that there was a full tank of gas. No one ever did kind, helpful things for her. She didn’t allow it. Claire was an independent, self-supporting woman. She and Tyler might live close to the poverty line but it was her own sheer determination and willpower that kept them from the brink. She didn’t need anybody. Never had. Never would.

But the guy had been nice. He’d helped her out of a difficult spot and briefly had made her life slightly less complicated. “Thanks, Paul,” she said into the darkness, “Thanks a lot.”

And she meant it.