

SHADOWS *of* SYLVAHEIM



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Feather Knight Books

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1

The Ordinary

Jack

Jack woke in a pool of sweat, as if sleeping had now become dangerous. Heart thumping, he stared at the tattered *Bodyjar* poster on his bedroom wall and thought of the irony of the Aussie skateband's lead single, 'Not the Same'.

He'd woken from a nightmare; his right knee had begun to swell, and his body ached all over. Bad dreams and fluid in his joints before rain had happened so often lately that Jack already knew—a storm was brewing.

He staggered down the narrow hallway to the kitchen, brushing back his long fringe with his palm, nose wrinkling at the scent of smoke. "Morning, sis. Nice onesie." His sister Emily sat at the wooden table, dabbing butter three times clockwise on the corners of burnt toast.

"You're just jealous," she chuckled. Bruce, their father, patted her hand, lame as she was in her small kid's unicorn outfit, hair so frizzy she must've plugged herself into a power socket. *Fourteen in age, ten in mentality*, Jack reckoned, *even if she is book smart*.

"Morning, Jack." The voice rose from the ripped lino floor where his mother was busy mopping spilled milk. Wearing her faded tan and white spotted dress, she did not look up.

"Morning, Ma. Why are you wearing those old clothes?"

"I've started cleaning a lady's house, Miss Morgan le Fay. Her boyfriend owns the mansion at the top end of Crystal Rise. Do you know

it?”

“Yeah, I’ve seen the place. Looks like a castle. Seems *he* knows how to take care of his missus.” Jack didn’t look directly at his father. He wasn’t quite that brave. “I promise I’ll find a job soon, Ma. To help out. Even if it’s working at Mr Fausty’s goat farm down the road.”

Lucy looked up and smiled. “Thanks, hun.” Her face creased in thought. “You know, Miss Morgan isn’t exactly conventional. Some of the things I see there are ... unsettling.”

“Like what?” Emily asked, nibbling at her toast.

“Well, for one thing, I’ve never seen her boyfriend. Not even a photo. Then there’s the rain—it makes everything black on the property, like watery ink splashing onto a page. No matter how much I scrub, I can’t get things clean. And she drinks the sap from a plant that has broad golden leaves and bunches of small yellow flowers. Then her persona changes. She’s usually an aloof, cold person, but after she drinks from its stem and roots, she becomes warm and friendly.”

“Maybe it’s magic weed,” Jack said, grinning. “We could sell it.”

Bruce gripped his coffee cup with one hand while massaging his temple with the other.

“Keep your voice down, Jack,” he snapped, “and forget about that plant.”

Bruce usually blamed his migraines on Jack’s grating voice, while also blaming the atmospheric pressure. Their rundown miner’s cottage, complete with rusty iron roof, surrounding goat farms and gumtrees, sat on the edge of a small town among the foothills west of Australia’s Great Dividing Range. And though they lived only a few hundred metres above sea level, Bruce complained non-stop.

Jack fetched a cloth to help his mother, but his belly cramped, and he dropped into the chair opposite his father.

“Another bad dream?” Lucy whispered.

Jack nodded.

“I’m sorry, honey. Your body’s reactions are growing worse, aren’t they?” She sighed and continued scrubbing the floor over and over with the milky sponge. “You know, our dreams are a part of nature, Jack. They have

no intention to deceive us, only to express something in the best way they can, like a riddle. Perhaps we can talk about it later when you feel better?"

"Yeah, but this dream was different. This time—" Jack shuddered, "—there was an accident. You were in a coma and the key to your heart was missing."

Lucy looked down at the chain around her neck. With a delicate hand, she grasped the ornate silver key and heart-shaped lock dangling from the chain's end. "Nope," she smiled, "still here!" Lucy often said the lock and key symbolised her children. She kept them near her heart, always.

Coffee spat from Bruce's mouth and dribbled down his full beard. Holding a weathered hand to his temple, he adjusted his leather eye-patch. He stared at Jack through his one good eye.

"You're giving me a migraine, Jack. Enough about the stupid dream."

"But—" Jack protested.

His father flinched, thumping the table with his giant fist. "I said that's enough, Jackson!"

Jack blinked hard, absorbing the verbal slap. *He never yells at anyone but me. And he knows I hate being called Jackson.* At sixteen, Jack was bordering on adulthood but Bruce still seemed to hate him the way he always had. *He's nothing but a worn-out, angry drifter. A nobody trying to control me.*

As pushback, Jack deliberately called his father "Bruce", not that the surly man seemed to care. With no job, he spent most days lounging around at home drinking wine. Then he'd suddenly leave, sometimes for days. Happier and healthier upon his return, it wasn't long before he descended into old habits. The pattern had happened for as long as Jack could remember.

"Shakespeare would say we have to 'Make haste, Master Jack'," Emily blurted, giggling at her own silly joke while she continued dabbing butter. "Remember to bring your bag and skateboard. The school bus arrives in six and a half minutes." She smiled at her brother, carefully folded the toast, and took a bite from the nonburnt middle. Then she left the table to dress in her uniform, a lucky find in the town's recycling bin.

Jack loved his weird brainiac sister, and showed her through friendly teasing, but he knew he'd never understand her. And her obsession with

time and number patterns, which always made her late, drove him crazy. He sloped off to his room, while his mother continued mopping and Bruce collapsed into the lounge chair.

Minutes later, Jack stood outside Emily's room with his bag and board slung over his shoulder. "Come on, grommet. The school bus will ignite in three and a half minutes," he yelled with a tinge of sarcasm. "We're gonna be late!" An old-fashioned surfing term he'd heard Emily use once. Jack liked the word. Everyone smaller than himself was now a 'grommet'—including his sister.

Keen to get as far from Bruce as possible, he didn't wait for her reply. As he opened the front door, his mother appeared beside him.

"Emily's class has a swimming pool trip today. She's been stressing about it all morning, so I told her she could stay home. Have a good day, hun."

Well thanks for telling me, Em, Jack thought, racing for the bus.

"You're expelled, Jackson Bard." The principal's words echoed through Jack's head as he skateboarded away from the school three hours later. Mind racing, heart pumping, he knew expulsion was a massive overreaction to a simple mistake. But of course, the teachers never believed him.

I can't go home. Bruce'll kill me when he finds out.

Jack considered skating past Ari's house to catch a glimpse of the girl he'd been crushing on since Year 7, but he'd heard she was now working at the hospital. That left only one option if he wanted to stay away from home for hours. Kicking back, he pointed his board down a side street.

His mate Hugo was at Zac's when he arrived—no surprise. Both of them off their heads, dressed all in black, playing God of War on the PS4 in Zac's garage. With dark eyes and goth-punk black hair ruffled like feathers sticking up, they didn't talk much, just stared. The few times Emily had met them, she'd told Jack they looked like 'automaton crows'.

"How's school, Jacky-boy?" Zac grinned, eyes glued to the screen. His wiry hands jerked the controller while an overweight Hugo cheered and commiserated with him.

Jack sighed and described the morning's events. "But I didn't throw that dumb rock. I kicked a stone into the dirt, and—I dunno—it must've bounced off the rubbish bin, then hit Miss Sloane on the leg. You know Sloane, the dragon. But the bin was at least thirty metres away."

Zac and Hugo were still focussed on the screen. Were they even listening? *Whatever.*

"So, Sloane made me sweat for a bit before she marched me to Principal Steinn's office. He gave her this sleazy smile when we went in. Then he made all these stupid threats. Said I was lying and that I'd thrown the rock on purpose. It didn't faze me, I just wanted Sloane and the rock ape out of my face." Secretly though, Jack did care, but only about disappointing Lucy.

Had the stone really ricocheted thirty metres? Jack didn't think so, but he had no other explanation. Gritting his teeth, his face redder than his strawberry-blond hair, he swallowed his anger. Only last week, Sloane had told Jack she wanted him out of school for starting fights, and now she'd succeeded.

"I never pick fights. Just because I usually win, even when I'm sick, everyone wants to fight me. Like that jerk, Glen Rendel. Always trying to prove he's tougher than me. Last time the swamp troll tried, he got a broken arm. Wasn't like I *meant* to break it."

"Aurora High—the best school west of the Great Dividing Range, a place of rugged beauty—so the teachers keep tellin' everyone," Zac said mockingly in his black, ripped denim clothes. "The school's about as beautiful as my hairy butt." Jack and Hugo laughed. Making jokes and ragging on each other, especially when stoned, was fun. And weed helped distract Jack from his crappy relationship with Bruce, his aching joints and belly cramps. But he never really felt comfortable doing drugs, and it gave him asthma, so he kept his pot smoking to a minimum.

Jack burned half a joint, coughed and wheezed, then said with a cheeky grin, "Em used a new word yesterday, Zac. She called you 'a young trustafarian'. Any idea what it means?"

Zac gave a sinister laugh while Hugo, as usual, was clueless. Unlike Zac's family, Hugo's were even poorer than Jack's. And Hugo wasn't the brightest. 'He used to be really smart,' Zac once told Jack, 'then something happened. I can't remember what, but it was like he got kicked in the head

by an eight-legged horse. After that, he couldn't think much at all.' Jack figured it was probably all the weed they'd been smoking. Though Hugo occasionally stood up for himself, he would follow Zac anywhere. And like Jack's sister Emily, innocent and naïve, Jack saw Hugo as vulnerable.

"Maybe your sister thinks I'm a spoiled rich kid who smokes pot," Zac said. "Or maybe I took to smoking pot and following Grateful Dead rip-off bands during the week, then chilling in my parents' condo-garage on weekends."

They all laughed, knowing it was true. To gain 'street-cred' as the local drug dealer's guy with 'all-seeing eyes', Zac was friends with the poorest kids in town while living off his parents' fortune.

"You needn't bother trying to hide your background," Jack said. "Everyone in Aurora knows that the guy with *real* street cred is Mr Glass—now there's a drug lord you don't want to mess with. I've heard if you cross him, then it's all-out war. When he really rages, people say he can make knives shatter, cutting off body parts while he sucks out your soul through your eyeballs."

Zac huffed. "Good steel can't explode, Jacky. Someone's been pulling your leg. Just you wait, one day I'll be as powerful as him. A rich, classy businessman. Cunning and ruthless underneath. Invisible, too. Then I'll have my own Le Fay's Rules."

"Le Fay's Rules?" Hugo asked innocently.

"Yep. It's named after a sexy sorceress with loose morals and ... I can't remember what else. She'll rip your heart outta ya chest, but in a good way." Zac raised an eyebrow at Hugo, who looked confused. "Fine. It's a tribute to Mr Glass' new girlfriend, Morgan le Fay."

"Morgan? Who lives on Crystal Rise?" Jack asked.

Zac sighed like a lovesick puppy. "Yeah. Flowing raven hair, dressed in black leather and lace; she's supersmart and runs a program for 'wayward kids' doing drugs. That's how I met her. Now I'm up to my third offence, my probation officer said I have to do the program. And Miss Morgan," Zac winked at Jack, "has treated me *real* well, Jacky."

"I don't get it, Zac. Kids like you and guys like her boyfriend are the ones selling the drugs! Sounds suss to me. You know, my mum's started working for Miss Morgan. And Ma reckons that something's off about that

woman. What if she's trying to get everyone addicted to something else, like some weird plant?"

Zac frowned as if worried Jack's mother might somehow rat him or Miss Morgan out. "Don't be stupid, Jacky. My father's life-enhancing memory aids might have gone viral, making him rich as guts, but it doesn't mean his 'wayward, precious Zachariah' plans to take over the honourable family business." Zac grinned. "Dishonourable is way more fun. And one day, everyone'll freeze when they speak about 'Arctic Zac' the way they speak about Mr Glass. My father might have the money, but like Lord Glassy, I'll have the power."

Jack understood the lure of danger, but he didn't get why Zac needed the same power rush as 'Lord Glassy'.

He's going to get himself killed or burn out on drugs at this rate. Without school I could end up hanging around here every day. What if Morgan or even Mr Glass comes over?

Jack's emotions swung between excitement and fear, like when he watched grommets try out risky new skate moves at the park.

He lounged around with 'Arctic Zac' and Hugo for a few hours, until Zac said he was bored. "We've got some new stuff, Jacky. It makes Mary Jane and Molly look pretty tame. Tina's way more...stimulating," Zac said, sneering.

"Yeah!" Hugo joined in. "More stimulating."

At the thought of doing stronger drugs, Jack's stomach turned somersaults like when he ripped ollies on his board. Smoking weed to fit in and chill out was one thing, but this was a whole new ball-game. Zac usually left a trail of destruction wherever he went.

"Who's Tina?" Jack asked, feeling like the stupid rock giant, Principal Steinn.

"Molly, Mary Jane and Tina. Come on, Jacky: eccies, weed and meth? Here, try some."

Jack shook his head.

"Go on, try it!" Zac insisted.

As much as Jack hated looking dumb in front of anyone, he hated his friends going for the 'drop to the floor' high more—something Zac had promised they'd never do. For a moment Jack wondered if 'Tina' might

help take away his chronic pain, then he remembered hearing some seriously scary stories about laced weed, bad trips and crackhead junkies who'd do anything for the next fix.

A woman's voice startled him from his thoughts.

"Go home, Jack. You don't belong with your friends on Midgard anymore. Asgard is your true home."

Jack spun around at the ethereal voice, so close it felt like it was *inside* his head. But no-one was there. The ceiling fan blew the makeshift curtain aside to reveal a woman standing outside the window.

Jack jumped, his stomach clenching. The woman appeared younger than Lucy, standing motionless, her fair hair tossed by a gathering wind. She stared directly at Jack through the dirt-smearred glass. Then she vanished.

Creepy, much? Was the weed making him hallucinate now?

Unsettled, Jack made up an excuse and headed home. Skating in the now rising wind, his joints ached, and his right leg swelled even more than at breakfast.

A thunderstorm must be coming.

2

Meditations

Emily

Wringing her hands tightly, Emily began counting in threes, then nines. Today Emily's least favourite teacher, the swim coach Mr Bogle, was taking the class to the local pool. With his broad Scottish accent, skinny body and dark features, he reminded her of a scarecrow.

"You know I'm never absent from school, Mum," she called out from her bedroom. "I'm trying to make myself go, but I just can't, not if swimming's involved. Can I stay home and study instead?"

Emily heard Lucy squeeze the sponge into the sink. "Alright, sweetie. I'll let Jack know."

"Thanks, Mum. I knew you'd understand."

Thinking her mother always had her back, and how relieved she was that *someone* in the family understood her anxiety about water, Emily changed into a pair of jeans and an oversized button-up shirt, tied at the waist. Then she sat at her desk with a set of perfectly aligned books beside her.

She passed a few hours studying until Lucy knocked on the bedroom door. "It's your favourite: egg salad sandwiches. Your father and I have to go out." As Lucy sat on the end of the bed in her frayed cleaning clothes, Emily noted a change in her mother's hair colour.

"Your hair, Mum. It's normally lighter than my espresso curls. Today it looks more like cappuccino mixed with caramel." Her mother smiled.

Maybe she washed it? But Mum never washes her hair on Wednesdays! At the thought of her mother's change of routine, Emily felt the muscles in her throat constrict.

"I've had a call from the school. After I drop your dad off at the disability office, I have to clean Miss Morgan's house for a while, then pick up your brother. Hopefully he's still at school by the time I get there."

"Is Jack in trouble again?"

Lucy nodded. She exhaled deeply and looked down at her worn leather sandals, frowning. "There's more. I don't want to worry you, sweetheart, but do you remember I promised you and your brother that I'd always try to be honest with you, that we'd have no secrets?"

"Yes."

"Well, I already told Jack. The car has been playing up lately. We may need to rely on public transport for a while," her mother said softly.

"There's no money to fix it, Mum. What if the car breaks down on the side of the road? What if...?" Emily asked, panic rising.

Lucy schooled her face into a gentle smile, then gave Emily a reassuring pat on the leg. "Please stop catastrophising, sweet pea. Your father promised Jack he'll fix it. And he will."

Emily sighed, usually only comfortable with her mother's touch. Though sometimes when she felt really overwhelmed, she'd squeeze Jack so hard he could barely breathe. Her father too—when he was well. The decorated war veteran had dragons and devils in his heart, Emily knew, but she loved him anyway. He was family, and in some ways 'different' from others, like her. For Emily, that was enough.

"Don't worry," Lucy sweetly comforted her daughter, "nature takes every obstacle and works around it, and so should we."

Emily considered her mother's meaning. While she pondered, Lucy walked to the bedroom door, then turned and smiled.

"Speaking of nature, I'll get a clipping from Morgan's strange plant today. Perhaps you can tell me what it is?" Emily nodded. "Alright, I'm going to see how your father is going with the motor and I'll see you soon. Don't forget to lock the front door."

"There's nothing to steal," she blurted, then apologised to her mother's sad face.

Emily moved to her bedroom window, feeling a sense of dread she couldn't explain. She was relieved to see her father already fixing the car, tools in hand. Seemingly pleased with what he'd done, he took a step back and smiled. The act reminded her of when she'd scratched her arm so badly it bled. 'Don't worry, Emily. I'll fix it with my "healing hands",' her father had told her before making it better with a warm compress between his fingers. Jack said it was ridiculous for their dad to call his hands "healing" when he couldn't heal himself from his migraines and alcohol sickness. But Emily remembered saying he was just different and needed help. And maybe, like her own way with plants, Bruce really could heal some things. Jack had just scoffed and said she was naïve.

Emily relaxed a little, knowing that Bruce always did things properly, unless drunk. And he always treated Lucy and Emily well, even when intoxicated, though he never let up on Jack. *Why does Dad always pick on him?* Usually, she and her mother could distract Bruce, but sometimes Jack was still caught in the crossfire.

'Going for a skate,' Jack said on the rare occasions he'd discuss it, 'is my only escape.'

Emily watched her parents leave before returning to her studies, but soon ran out of paper. Remembering Lucy kept spare sheets in the chest of drawers in the lounge, she shuffled into the room in measured steps of three. A small, slim notebook lay open on the coffee table, the pages covered in her mother's handwriting. Emily gathered the palmsized book to put it away, but her eyes wandered to the first page: *Lucy's Meditations*. Curiosity piqued, she habitually checked her watch, then sat down to read.

Emily's back slumped as her hands shook. She closed the book.

Mum must have a lot on her mind to leave her journal here. Or perhaps she wanted me to find it? She promised she would always try to be honest with us, so why didn't she say anything about this? Surely, it's a greater secret than the car! Emily thought about what she'd just read.

"...despite his infidelity that always sits between us. And I love my boy ... I knew as soon as I found him, he was my husband's son. I knew he

wouldn't be human. Ordinary. He isn't. But more than these two truths, I knew with every fibre of my being that I would love him."

The words kept ringing in Emily's ears.

What? Was my father unfaithful and another woman gave birth to Jack? And Jack's not even 'human'? What does Mum mean by that? And how does she know? Emily hugged the book close to her chest, her fingers so numb that the journal dropped deep inside her shirt. *Maybe she never said anything because she didn't think we could cope with knowing the truth ... whatever that is ... maybe even Dad?*

To protect the book from being read by Jack or Bruce, she decided to leave it there until she found a safe hiding place.

Forgetting about the paper, she returned to her room. As she flopped onto her bed, Merlin scattered—the old stray cat she'd recently brought home. Emily presumed he'd gone to his new safe place, his cave—the laundry basket. Closing her eyes, Emily tried to rest, to stop the questions circling in her head. She began to doze, slipping into a lucid dream.

She imagined herself walking outside, her bike resting where she'd pitched it yesterday against 'the Frankenstein fence', as Jack called it. Now she dreamt her bike handle was wedged between two broken planks of timber. *Unbalanced, the same as I feel.*

The family's phones were out of credit, as usual, so she left a note stuck to the wire where her bike stood: "Hello all, I've gone to The Springs. *Emily.*"

She wrenched the handlebar free as someone peered over the fence boundary. They ducked behind the rotting palings, but Emily caught sight of their eyes; doe-like, the colour of honey. When she peeked over the fence, she saw no-one. She dreamt she shook her head, and a small butterfly hovered above the palings before it too disappeared behind the boundary.

Emily pedalled fast, humming syncopated rhythms to her favourite song 'Rainbow' by Jessie J. She clicked her tongue, twice in succession on the off-beats, until she reached a pool surrounded by thick woodland. Both fascinated and frightened in her dream state, she wondered, *Is this Bellthyme Forest? And someone's here with me. I can sense their presence.* Without dismounting, Emily suddenly found herself splashing in ankle-deep water. She couldn't see the person beside her, but their spicy, leathery scent was so intense it filled the air.

She awoke with a start. Though she often had lucid dreams, she'd never consciously dreamed of The Springs; the place her mother took Jack to have 'important talks'.

'Your father says it's vital for Jack to go to the forest regularly,' Lucy said. But like Bruce's harsh treatment of Jack, Emily didn't understand why. And it seemed no-one in the family would tell her. She spoke aloud her thoughts of the forest: "Herbaceous, therapeutic, *illusory*?" Emily preferred expansive words, thinking it made her appear more intelligent to her brother, the only true friend she'd ever had besides her childhood imaginary friend. And she wanted to be a writer. Now that intelligence and writing were part of Emily's psyche, she regularly engaged with them.

'Bellthyme Forest was supposedly the home of mythical creatures, and a legendary pool of water shrouded in mist,' Lucy had told her. 'Shy locals call The Springs the "Home of Stony Creek's Holy Well"'. A guarded secret, hidden somewhere in the scrubland. They say its waters are special, magical even. "Throw a coin into the well and your dreams will come true," they said to me.'

Maybe it was just a myth. Emily had only been to the forest once. Preferring to avoid deep water as often as possible, she had never tried to find the well.

Upon waking, she felt a strong need to draw the pool she'd seen and keep it secret. 'Squaring the circle,' her mother called it, meaning sacred geometric patterns can form a path to inner wholeness. Though she was not formally well educated, Lucy had an intense love of all things philosophical, spiritual too, and regularly used it to help Emily and Jack. Also highly creative and imaginative, she often told Emily, 'You should draw what you see.'

Emily sharpened a pencil and sketched the image in an exercise pad she found under the bed. Just like her mother's book, she wrote *Emily's Meditations* on the cover.

She heard the front door open, followed by an unfamiliar knock at her bedroom door. Pencil still in hand, she cautiously answered it to see her father, his eyes swollen and red. Startled, she stepped back.

"What's the matter, Dad?"

"I don't know how to say it. We were in a car accident. A drug-driver ran a red light, hit our car, and then left the scene. The police brought me

home,” Bruce sobbed, holding onto the door frame. “I’m so sorry, Em. Your mother is in a coma in hospital.”

Emily gasped, dropping her pencil. “Just like in Jack’s dream.”

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