

Out of Shadows

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Excerpt:

A feeling of dread crept over her. For the first time in her life, Dovina was afraid of the dark. She, who'd visited cemeteries around the world, who'd tromped through the Black Forest in Germany in search of a local legend, who'd even visited Bran Castle—what most folks thought of as Dracula's Castle—for heaven's sake, was afraid in a small stretch of woods in upstate New York.

A sound trickled into the air around her. It sounded like someone breathing heavily. Impossible. Even if she wasn't alone, she wouldn't be able to hear a person breathe unless they were right beside her. That thought unfroze her feet and she spun in a circle. This was no longer fun.

She hurried down the path, retracing her steps. "One foot in front of the other." She'd be back on the main road in no time. From there, it was a short walk back to her car.

A twig cracked, the sounds echoing through the air. She froze and listened. Nothing but the mournful sound of the wind whistling through the trees. She felt it in the soles of her feet first, a vibration that grew stronger with each passing second. Then she heard it, the hard clomp of a horse's hooves on dirt. Living on the family ranch for several years, she was very familiar with the sound.

She looked behind her, pointing her flashlight into the impenetrable gloom. The horse trumpeted as the sound of his hooves got closer. She caught a glimpse of movement in the distance. Then her flashlight went dead.

"Oh shit." Stuffing her keys in her coat pocket, she whirled and started to run. No pretext at being anything other than terrified. If this was local kids trying to scare a solitary female tourist, they were doing a hell of a job. And what if it wasn't a kid? What if it was some crazy person? Or worse?

Heart pounding, legs and lungs pumping, she raced through the trees, branches slapping at her arms and face. The sound of her labored breathing drowned out the pounding of hooves, but she could still feel the vibration in the ground.

Something flew past her in the woods. She didn't stop, didn't pause. Dovina was running for her life. A dark mass appeared on the path ahead of her. She stumbled to a stop. Tripping over a rock, she fell to her knees, barely catching herself on her hands. Gravel tore at her palms and she cried out.

She jerked her head up, unable to believe what was before her. A large black horse with reddish eyes and steam coming from its nose rose up on its hind legs. The rider, a huge black shadow, raised one arm. The moon caught a glint of metal. A sword? He was holding a sword. She blinked twice to be certain.

The horse came back down and the clouds moved away, letting the full light of the partial moon illuminate the specter before her. She shook her head in disbelief. It couldn't be. She'd seen him clearly for a brief second and he had no head.

Impossible. It couldn't be. Yet it was. She'd talked to people all around the world in person and via email, many of whom claimed to see vampires, ghosts, werewolves and other creatures of myth and lore. But never had she seen anything resembling the paranormal herself. Until now.

Her logical mind was scrambling to find a rational explanation, while her survival instincts were screaming at her to run. She ignored her brain, jumped to her feet and ran. She's figure it out later, right now getting out of here alive was paramount.

Dovina whirled around and raced back toward the bridge. It was believed that the horseman couldn't cross water, so if she could get over the bridge she should be okay. At least she hoped she'd be okay. She really didn't have a choice, not with him blocking the path back to civilization.

Sweat coated her body as she ran faster than she'd ever run in her life. For once, she wished she were less of a bookworm and more of an athlete. The bridge got closer as pounding of the horse's hooves got louder. A maniacal laugh cut through the dark. She heard the swish of his blade as he brandished it through the air.

She was going to die.

Damned if she would. Dovina dug deep and pushed harder. The muscles in her legs cramped, her lungs screamed as she managed to quicken her pace. Her heart was pounding at a furious rate as she scrambled toward the bridge. She jumped onto the wooden structure, not stopping until she was on the other side.

Only then did she glance behind her.

As if he'd been waiting for her, the horseman appeared on the far side of the bridge. Again, laughter filled the air. "You cannot escape me. I will have you." His deep booming voice echoed through the woods, coming from nowhere, yet everywhere at the same time. The horse reared again and she took a step back.

The horseman reined in the horse and urged the great beast forward. It's foreleg stepped on the wooden structure. *Oh god*, the water and the bridge wasn't going to stop it. Real or ghost, it didn't matter. It was after her.

The horse had placed only one hoof on the bridge when a massive shadow appeared in front of her, blocking her view of the horse and rider. Dovina blinked and the shadow coalesced into the body of a man. She shrieked, certain the horseman had dismounted and was almost upon her.

It was then she saw his head. Whoever this man was, he at least had a head. "Run. He has a sword." For some reason, she felt compelled to warn this stranger who'd put himself between her and the deadly horseman.

"So do I," came his gruff reply.