

# Shadowed Eden

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## **Shadowed Eden**

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## *Dedication*

To Micheal, Emma, and Ashlyn; and to the greatest big brother I ever had, for all the brainstorming help.



## *What People are Saying*

“Shadowed Eden is a unique and intriguing tale that will keep the reader guessing and turning pages to find out the secrets of this mysterious story, and the suspense doesn’t stop until its surprising end! I highly recommend it.” ~ Melanie Dickerson, award-winning YA author of *The Merchant’s Daughter*

“A truly original premise, *Shadowed Eden*, is an exciting supernatural adventure filled with danger, redemption, and a cast of teenage characters that I grew to love. I enjoyed Clark’s story and look forward to seeing what she comes up with next.” ~ Jill Williamson, author of *From Darkness Hid* and *Captives*



# Part 1

Genesis 3:1

*“Now the serpent was more subtle than any beast of the field  
which the Lord God had made.”*

# 1

*Avery*

Avery watched from the tarmac as the pilot taxied down the dirt runway. The same plane had just brought her and the rest of the youth group to Iraq, and it was already leaving them behind.

Warm air from the jets sent her dark, wavy hair flying, and she brushed it from her face to keep from missing the takeoff. Once the plane was gone, they would be stuck here. Stuck in Iraq with only a few vans to cart them around.

The airplane roared into the sky, and even the locals on the airstrip stopped to watch.

Avery should have felt nervous at being left behind. Being stuck in a foreign country with no way out. Instead, she smiled. No one at the mission would keep their distance because of her past.

“Can I carry that for you?” a man asked. His accent was thickly Middle Eastern, and his caramel-colored skin glistened with sweat.

He reached for her bag but Avery pulled back. “That’s OK. I’ll carry it.”

The man lifted his eyebrows but nodded. “As you wish.” He sidestepped to the next student on the mission trip, and Avery glanced around for Daddy. He’d made it clear she was to ride with him. Avery had insisted on coming on this mission trip, in spite of his



objections. He would chaperone even if she didn't come, and he didn't want her in danger, or so he said.

Putting up a fight wasn't her usual persona, but she was glad now she'd done it. Getting away from home was exactly what she needed to get a fresh start, and the desert area of Iraq was about as different from the rolling green hills of Alabama as she could imagine. Instead of cookie-cutter grocery stores and brand new cars, tarps covered roughhewn poles where locals sold fruits, clothes, and meats. A few vehicles dotted the space around the measly airport, but the newest model looked as if it debuted at least a decade ago. Besides that, there was the humidity—or the lack of it. Already the dry desert air was frizzing her hair and drying out her pores.

Chad, the youth leader, stepped to the front of the group. "Load up!"

Avery hauled her luggage to Daddy's van, and the man from earlier took it from her hands. He quirked an eyebrow—probably wondering why she hadn't let him have it to begin with. She wasn't sure herself, except this was her chance at freedom. At doing things her way without feeling ashamed.

"Hey buddy, here you go!"

Avery turned in time to see a boy from her group toss a duffel bag at the luggage guy. The man reached for it, but he was too late and it toppled into the other stack sitting on the pavement. It knocked the neat pile into a mess.

Bradley cackled and turned away, and Avery shook her head. Unbelievable.

Turning back to the luggage guy, she moved to help. "I'm sorry about him. He's an idiot."

"Thank you," the man said.

“You’re welcome.” She smiled and restacked a few pieces while the man arranged them on top of the van.

After making sure her luggage was secure, Avery climbed inside the fifteen passenger van and found a seat at the window in the second row. Other kids piled in behind her, last of all a girl from her group.

Mallory looked around for a seat, her red hair frizzing as badly as Avery’s. The van was almost full. Their eyes met and Avery managed a smile. She pointed to the empty seat beside her, but Mallory’s eyes darted away. She moved to sit on the first row with the other girls.

Avery sighed and turned back to the window.

The driver—the same man who’d loaded her luggage—climbed inside and started the vehicle.

Avery smiled as the van revved up, and the rest of the group broke into an excited chatter. Daddy still hadn’t made his way to her van. Maybe he’d be riding in the other vehicle after all. She readjusted herself to account for the empty seat beside her, but just before they pulled away, the door opened and Daddy climbed in. He smiled at her and maneuvered into the empty seat.

“Everything’s been squared away,” he said. His eyes glowed with some kind of excitement that she wasn’t used to seeing in him.

Avery opened her mouth to answer him, but Bradley’s voice broke through. “How long until we’re at the village?”

Daddy twisted toward the back seat and held up two fingers. “Two hours. You guys are in for a treat.”

Avery managed a weak smile before turning toward the window. People might warm up to her if her own father didn’t ignore her. And if he hadn’t

practically institutionalized her.

This trip would change all that. She would prove to him she could make it in his world.

They pulled away from the airport and started down a pockmarked, dirt road. A few of the others had brought ear buds, but Avery's were still packed in her suitcase.

She took a deep, cleansing breath. The ear buds didn't matter. She was too busy dreaming of all the things the next two weeks would hold. Today was the beginning of her "start over."

She sighed as they rumbled into the desert. The jostling of the huge vehicle over the rough roads rattled her teeth, but she didn't have the strength to move. This trip had been way too long. Her muscles ached, her eyelids drooped, and a huge yawn erupted from her lips.

"Tired?" Daddy asked.

Avery turned enough to give him a small smile. "Unlike you, oh, mighty archeologist, most of us are not used to travelling the globe."

He smiled and patted her leg. "Get some sleep. I'll wake you up when we get there."

Avery relaxed against the side of the van, but she kept one eye on Daddy. He'd said more to her in the last two days than he had in the entire year before.

She glanced at the other van in the entourage. It drove behind hers on the crazy, unregulated Iraqi road.

"I thought there were checkpoints and stuff around here. Where are all the roadside bombs?"

Leave it to Bradley to ask such insensitive questions. Avery kept her eye roll to herself.

"There certainly might be bombs on this road. We could hit one at any moment." The driver's deadpan

answer silenced the entire van.

Except Avery. She snickered.

The driver caught her eye in the rearview mirror and winked at her.

Chatter resumed a moment later, and Avery tuned it out to watch the desert pass. The sun had begun to sink closer to the sand, and the reflecting light played tricks on her eyes, making it seem as if the sand moved.

No, it wasn't the sand. It was almost as if the air moved—like she could see the wind. She shook her head and blinked, and when she opened her eyes everything was back to normal.

She glanced again at the other vehicle. Some of the occupants were teens in her own youth group, but others had come from churches across Alabama. The *Mission: Education* trip was a statewide effort.

Luca was in that other van.

Avery worked to calm the storm his presence put inside her.

The road turned suddenly, and the van jerked to follow it. Avery gasped as it rocked hard, and her head hit the window. The sun glared off Luca's van, blinding her, and she turned away.

"My apologies," the driver said in his thick accent. Dark eyes met hers in the rearview mirror, and she looked down.

"The wind is picking up," Daddy said.

Avery followed his gaze. Clouds of sand whipped through the air.

"Only a mild sandstorm," the driver said. "It happens all the time."

Avery listened to his carefully spoken English. It was impeccable. She'd been taking Spanish for four

years and still spoke it in a broken lilt.

Daddy spoke seven languages—which he reminded her of often. He never failed to let her know all the ways she disappointed him.

The van jerked a second time, making a few of the others shout.

Avery held on to the seat handle for support.

The radio on the dashboard crackled to life. “Driver two, come in.”

Avery craned her neck but there was nothing to see. Too bad it wasn’t like a GPS where she could read the information for herself.

“I’m here,” their driver said.

“The storm is getting worse ahead. How would you like to proceed?”

“Pull over,” Daddy said. “Let’s discuss this away from the youth.”

Avery glanced at him. Of course the drivers would do as he said—as the only one of the group who had ever been to Iraq before, he was the unspoken leader—but stopping in the desert in the middle of a sandstorm didn’t seem like a great idea to her.

After a few moments, both vans had stopped in the road and the adults gathered in between them.

Avery watched the road ahead, scanning the sandy street for oncoming cars. She hadn’t seen a single one pass ever since they left the airport, but how would they know if one came upon them now?

Sand swirled around them like dirt tornadoes. The drivers had pulled thick scarves over their faces and sunglasses over their eyes. Daddy followed suit, ever prepared. But the other chaperones dodged sandblasts by jerking away or holding their hands over their faces.

At this rate, they would never reach the village

before dark. Her sweater was packed away on top of the van in the towering bundle of luggage. How would she survive a cold desert night?

The group of adults moved toward the other vehicle, and Daddy climbed into it. Someone else climbed out and darted through the sandstorm. Avery's van door pulled open, and Luca appeared in front of her. He took the only open seat, which just happened to be the one beside Avery, the one Daddy had left unoccupied.

This wasn't good.

"The other driver knows the area better," Luca said. Of course, he knew she wanted to know what was happening. "Your dad is riding ahead with him, and we're going to follow."

Avery stared at him, still working to control her emotions at being near him again.

Luca watched her curiously, probably trying to give her time to comprehend what he was saying. "He needed my seat, which is why I'm here."

Finally, Avery talked her brain into responding. "Oh." Brilliant. He probably thought she'd lost her mind in the three months since she'd spoken to him.

Their driver climbed back in, shaking sand from his clothes. It sounded like rain as it hit the hard, plastic floor of the van.

Avery scooted as far away from Luca as she possibly could—which was way too far and still not nearly far enough. She watched through the swirling sand as Daddy's van pulled into the storm. A moment later, their vehicle jerked into gear, and they were off again.

"Does this thing have a GPS?" Benny asked. He leaned up from the back seat, his arm brushing against

Avery's shoulder. Avery let the touch go—Benny had no sense of personal boundaries. She'd learned that long ago, since they'd started going to youth group together in seventh grade.

"I don't know, Benny. Maybe you could ask the driver." She caught Luca's scowl pointed at Benny's arm, and she almost laughed. She scooted away from Benny's wayward arm, which unfortunately put her closer to Luca.

A violent gust of wind smacked into the van, rocking it back and forth. Some of the girls screamed, and Avery gasped as she crashed into Luca.

"Sorry," she muttered, untangling her long, brown hair from his seatbelt.

He helped her up silently, his face serious.

The van continued to rock so hard it felt as if they were back on the plane and flying through rough turbulence.

"Maybe we should pull over," Erin, the youth leader's wife, said. She had to raise her voice above the sound of sand hitting the side panels outside. "We could wait it out and then catch up."

The driver glanced at Erin in the rearview mirror. He took a deep breath, which sounded more like a sigh of frustration to Avery, then pushed the radio button. "Driver one, come in."

Static filled the air.

"Driver one, do you copy?"

Crackle.

Avery frowned, her stomach dropping. She glanced out the window, but now she couldn't see anything of the road. The billowing sand was so thick it was like driving straight through a sand dune.

The van took another violent hit, and Avery

tightened her seatbelt. Where was Daddy? Why wasn't the other van answering?

Vibrations rocked them again, starting as a slow rumble but growing into what felt like an earthquake.

Awkward or not, she reached out and took Luca's warm, strong hand. He didn't protest, just held on tight, his eyes wide with confusion and maybe even fear.

Some of the girls began crying, and others put their heads between their knees.

Avery was on the verge of tears herself when suddenly the rocking stopped.

Even the sand had stopped blowing. Everything was still.

Luca leaned forward and squinted toward the window. A frown turned his full lips down. "Do you see that?"

Avery turned to the window, and her jaw fell open. Before them sat a massive green jungle.

Everyone stared out the window, taking in the foliage in front of the van. Avery gaped at the swaying trees, draping vines, and deep green backdrop of leaves.

Her gaze swung to the driver. "Where are we?"

The driver's eyes were still glued to the jungle. He shook his head, muttering an answer in his native language. Obviously, this place was as new to him as it was to everyone in their group.

Avery scanned her memories of Daddy's maps, trying to remember a large jungle anywhere near the airport, but she couldn't think of any. She watched the jungle for a few moments, but she'd had enough sitting. She pushed past Luca, climbing over his legs and making her way to the door.



"You're going out there?" someone asked. "Are you crazy?"

Avery winced, but she let the comment go.

"What are you doing?" Benny climbed out of his seat, stepping on a blonde girl in the process.

"Watch it!"

"Sorry," Benny muttered, still working his way to the doors.

Avery pushed through the door, and waning sunlight greeted her. Benny climbed out, followed by everyone else in the van.

The jungle stretched in front of them for as far as Avery could see. Trees rose toward the sky, nearly blocking what was left of the sun. The tree line bulged and dipped in places, rolling like the waves of the ocean. Jungle sounds drifted on the small breeze that blew—a jungle clatter that grew louder with each passing second.

"Look," someone said.

Avery turned to the blonde girl from earlier. Her permed hair hung just below her chin, and she had a full, round face. Those features were almost invisible compared to her sparkling green eyes. Avery followed the direction of the girl's pointing finger. Several inches of sand buried the van's tires.

"Were we blown here?" Avery asked. That was impossible. Wasn't it?

Erin pushed through the group with the driver close behind her. "How did this happen?" she demanded.

The driver's face still showed disbelief. Finally, he said, "I don't know."

Erin sighed and looked around. Avery followed her gaze. A jungle rose before them, but miles and

miles of desert stretched out behind them. If there was or had ever been a road, it was gone now.

"Wait," Avery said. "Where's the other van?" It was the first she'd realized they were alone. Daddy was nowhere to be seen, and Chad, Erin's husband, wasn't at her side.

Everyone in the group looked around, searching for the missing van.

"It is possible they were able to stay on the road," the driver said. His accent was much thicker in his nervous state, and it took Avery a second to understand what he was saying.

"You mean they could have made it to the village?"

He glanced around, taking in the emptiness surrounding them. "It is possible."

He wasn't convincing.

Avery scanned the wide span of desert. No sign of a sandstorm stirred in the distance.

How had they ended up here?

The blonde girl started crying. "I'm sorry," she blubbered. "It's just that I've never been away from home before, and now this."

Poor thing.

Avery looked to Erin for help, but the youth leader's wife still stared absently at the desert. Avery took in their group.

Thirteen teens and two adults—it should have been three adults except Daddy had switched seats with Luca.

Erin was useless, and the driver wouldn't be any help in comforting anyone. That left Avery. Daddy was in charge of this trip. It only made sense that Avery would step up. It wasn't like she wasn't used to

fending for herself, and when they found the other van, Daddy would see she wasn't as useless as he treated her.

She moved quickly to the girl and wrapped her in a hug. "It's OK to cry. We'll be fine. When the other group reaches the village, they'll see we're not there. They'll come find us."

The others in the group nodded, comforted by her explanation. It was better than the cold shoulder she usually got from them, even if she didn't know what she was talking about. What if no one came to find them?

She shook off the thoughts. "We're probably going to have to sleep in the van."

Luca stepped forward and hopped onto the van's bumper. It wasn't a far jump considering the van's sunken state. "We need to get out sweaters to keep warm, and if you brought any snacks you can eat them for supper. The other group will probably be here at first light."

Everyone snapped to action, moving to get what they needed from the luggage as Luca pulled pieces down. He stood like a born leader with his head held high, and his shoulders pulled back. He was poised and ready to make things happen. He caught her looking and smiled.

Avery smiled back her thanks. She could put their past behind her—at least for now. It was good he'd been the one to switch with Daddy. Of course, if Daddy hadn't switched then Avery wouldn't have had to step up at all.

"What's your name?" Avery asked, turning to the blonde.

"June," she said, blubbing. "June Sanderson. I

was named after my grandmother.”

Avery smiled and squeezed June's shoulder. “It's nice to meet you, June. I'm Avery.”

June sniffled and wiped her tears with her palms. “Are we going to be OK?”

Avery looked at Luca. Some of the others had begun helping him get the luggage. Even Erin seemed to have snapped out of her funk. They could do this. Maybe.

Avery glanced back at June and smiled. “Yes. We're going to be fine. You'll see.”

## 2

*Luca*

Luca tightened the last rope in place, re-securing the luggage to the top of the van.

The driver smacked the bags and gave the ropes a solid tug. "This is good. Strong."

Luca nodded and climbed down. Everyone had what they needed to get through the night—sweaters, snacks, magazines. He'd even hauled down Erin's thirty-two pack of bottled water.

He had nothing, since his bags were on the other van. A cold, desert wind hit him, and he rubbed his arms to keep warm.

Most of the group huddled around a fire someone had managed to light. Lighters and matches had specifically been on the "Do Not Bring" list. Whoever brought them probably wouldn't admit it. The heat took away the chill as he sat with the others around the fire.

Each face stared at the flames. No one said anything.

Not that Luca could blame them. They were lost in a desert a million miles from home. He slid his thumb across his phone one last time, but no bars still meant no signal. Why did he even keep trying?

He shouldn't be here. Coming on this trip was the last thing his family needed to shell out money for, and