



Chapter 1

Night of the Shadows

Never take the underpass after dark. That had been drummed into Leanne ever since she'd been walking to school by herself. She peered into the darkness beneath the main road that snaked through the grim Larkrise Estate. She had no choice – she was already late!

She sprinted into the tunnel. The overhead lights flickered, making the ripped posters on the walls seem to dance. *Just keep moving*, she told herself, shifting the backpack on her shoulder. Her dad's heavy bolt cutters inside clinked against the heavy metal torch.

She ran up the ramp on the far side and hurried to the bus stop, where Hamid was waiting.

"What kept you?" he demanded, looking around nervously.

"Dad went to bed late," she said, pushing her long flame-red hair behind her ears as she caught her breath. "Let's get going."

Leanne led the way across a deserted playground and through a line of trees. And then they saw it rising menacingly into the ink-black sky.

“The Shang Tower,” whispered Leanne, casting her eyes up the unlit floors of the apartment block. Although she knew the building was deserted, she had the strangest feeling someone was watching them from up there. A shiver went through her.

“Hard to believe it’s going to be blown up at dawn,” said Hamid. “Think it’s safe?”

“Don’t worry,” she said as they reached the chain-link fence around the demolition site. “Dad says they don’t put the blasting charges in until the last minute. For tonight we have the place all to ourselves.”

Hamid glanced nervously at the ‘SECURITY PATROLS: KEEP OUT’ sign as Leanne set to work snipping an opening in the fence. Hamid held it open so she could slip through, then followed close behind.

They ran towards the tower. The ground was uneven, churned up by the diggers that had been busy clearing this part of the Larkrise Estate over the last six months. *The Shang’s all that’s left of the old slums*, thought Leanne as she ran between the shadows. *And tomorrow at dawn even that will be dust.*

She reached the main doors to the tower first. There was a chain looped between the handles, fastened by a heavy padlock.

But it was no match for the bolt cutters....

As the door slammed shut behind them, Leanne shone her torch around. The entrance hall was covered in rubbish and debris left behind when the building had been cleared. There was a rank smell in the air, but it was the graffiti that caused them both to catch their breath.

Across one wall someone had spray-painted *EVIL LIVES HERE* in red lettering as tall as a man. Clearly one of the Larkrise graffiti artists had a dark sense of humour.... But it gave Leanne the same chill she’d felt earlier.

“Tell me again why we’re doing this?” Hamid asked.

It would be about the fiftieth time she’d told him the story, but Leanne guessed her friend needed reassurance.

“There’s treasure hidden on the top floor,” she said. “My granddad told me about an antiques collector who lived up there. He hid his valuables in the walls.... Under the floorboards.... He was terrified of being robbed. Then one day he died suddenly. His treasure was never found.”

“Perhaps it wasn’t there.”

“Perhaps no one was actually *looking* for it! C’mon, Hamid!” said Leanne. “If we don’t find anything, we’ll just go home. But wouldn’t you hate for all that stuff to be blown up with the tower? Imagine how much it could be worth!”

Hamid frowned. “How much?”

“Enough to get our families off the Larkrise, for a start.”

Hamid’s expression softened at that, and Leanne knew she had him once again. He hated living on the estate even more than she did.

“So what are we waiting for?” he said finally. Leanne grinned and led the way towards the far side of the lobby.

“This should lead to the stairwell,” she said, pushing open a green door, with a screech of uncoiled hinges. She was relieved to see concrete stairs leading up in the torch beam.

They climbed in silence for a while, aware of every creak and groan from the empty building. A moaning wind whistled through the broken window panes.

“What was that?” demanded Hamid. Leanne angled the torch towards a scuttling sound above them. Shadows danced in the beam.

“Probably just a rat,” she said.

“That’s it! I’m out of here,” said Hamid.

Leanne turned. “Wait!” she said, grabbing his arm. There was something moving in the darkness below them. All she could see in the torchlight was its shadow. It seemed to grow in size as it approached, moving up the walls. Long shadowy fingers stretched out towards them.... “Up!” cried Leanne, pulling Hamid along with her now. But as they turned, the beam of her torch illuminated a second shadow on the landing above them. It was leaning down

over the railing... fingers extending.... A screeching sound filled the air....

Leanne yanked open the door labelled *Seventh Floor* and pushed Hamid through. They pulled it closed again as something slammed against the other side, screeching wildly. The force of the blow almost knocked Leanne off her feet. She braced as the door was hit again.

“What *are* those things?” whispered Hamid.

Leanne shone the torch around, picking up a litter-strewn corridor. Her mind was racing. All thoughts of getting to the top floor forgotten – now all she wanted to do was get out of the tower.

“Look!” said Hamid, breaking her train of thought. He nodded at a door at the far end of the corridor. It was slightly ajar, allowing a thin, yellowish light to escape from inside.

The stairwell door rocked again. This time the force was enough to tear one of the hinges free. Leanne raised her torch and the beam picked up a shadow finger creeping through the crack towards them.

“Nothing casts a shadow like that!” said Hamid as they backed away.

“I don’t think anything is *casting* the shadow!” Leanne gasped. “The shadow’s all there is.” At that moment, the stairwell door hinges gave way completely.

Leanne and Hamid sprinted down the corridor, leaping over

discarded packing boxes and other, nastier, things as they went. The screeching of the shadow monsters sounded terrifyingly close behind them, but Leanne didn't look back. As they reached the open door, a grey-haired man appeared as if he had been waiting for them. They dashed into the flat and he slammed the door shut after them, throwing a deadbolt to hold it in place.

Leanne pressed herself to the wall, staring at the closed door... expecting the shadows to start pounding it down.... But there was only the faint sound of a frustrated screech from the other side.

"It's okay," said the man quietly as he removed a cloth from his tweed jacket and started cleaning his wire-framed glasses with a cloth. With his smart appearance and shock of white hair, he had the look of a professor. "That should keep the Shades out for a while."

Hamid, was crouching on the carpeted floor, breathing heavily. "Shades?"

"Those shadow creatures that chased you up here," said the man, matter-of-factly, stepping past Hamid through a door that led to a tiny lounge. "Come on. We haven't much time."

Hamid looked at Leanne and hissed, "Who *is* this guy? He gives me the creeps!"

She grabbed his hand and pulled him to his feet. "I'd rather be in here with *him* than out there with... well, who knows what, wouldn't you?"

Leanne led the way into the lounge. In contrast to the rest of the tower, it was clean and well-kept. Light was provided by dozens of candles set around the room. Their flickering glow illuminated walls covered with framed photographs, some colour, some black and white. There were hundreds of them.

"They're photos of the tower," Leanne said. Many were images of the building itself – empty rooms, corridors, stairs – but some showed people. Men, women, children, families, workers, gangs of kids.... But these weren't the type of happy shots people posted to Facebook. Every person stared from their photo with a blank expression. The appearance unsettled her. "Did you take them?"

"Some of them," said the man, who was busying himself with a worn leather satchel at a table in the centre of the room. "Some I collected over the years."

"Who are they?"

"Former residents of the tower," he said, then shook his head and muttered, "or something like that."

Hamid came to Leanne's side. "How come you're here?"

The old man smiled for the first time. "I could ask the same of you two."

Leanne and Hamid exchanged a sheepish look. She began, "We're... uh—"

"Let me guess," the man interrupted, "looking for hidden treasure. You wouldn't believe the number of people who have

been lured in over the years by that old tale.” His smile turned into something darker, almost a grimace. “The tower has a way of trapping people. Looks as if it’s found two last victims.”

Hamid pressed his face close to Leanne’s ear and whispered, “This guy’s nuts!”

“No, perfectly sane,” said the man. He stepped forward and offered a bony hand for Leanne to shake. “Solomon Burke,” he continued, as she took his hand. “But you can call me Sol. I’m the last remaining resident of the Shang Tower. I’ve lived here since it was built, more than sixty years ago. Over time, I came to realize something....”

Sol paused for effect, staring down at them, blue eyes sparking with intensity in the candlelight.

“Something evil lives inside this tower,” he said. “Something that has claimed the lives of dozens of people over the years. Maybe hundreds. Their souls are trapped here. Two of them tried to attack you in the corridor just now.”

Leanne shook her head slowly. “You’re saying those things out there... are ghosts?”

Hamid tugged on her arm and hissed, “*We have to get out of here!*”

“Hungry ghosts,” continued Sol, turning back to the table. “They died here and now they serve the evil that dwells in this place.”

“What *is* this evil?” asked Leanne, intrigued.

“I’m not sure exactly,” said the old man, “but I know it was brought here by an antiques collector.”

“The one who lived here in the tower?” asked Leanne, remembering her grandfather’s story.

“Yes,” said Sol. “He discovered a fascinating artefact on an archaeological dig many years ago in China. It contained a force of great power. The collector brought it home, and it’s power has grown in this place. But the evil is trapped here in the tower, as are those whose lives it has claimed.” He looked back at Leanne and Hamid sharply. “But don’t take my word for it... ask them.”

He waved an arm expansively around the rows of photographs. Leanne’s gaze followed the gesture, noting the faces seemed to move in the candlelight.

Wait... they *were* moving!

“Help us!” a woman cried from a black and white picture. She was holding a baby in her arms.

“Set us free!” called two little girls, sitting side by side in another photograph.

“Don’t turn your back on us!” demanded a man with wild, accusing eyes.

“Save us from this evil!” another begged.

Soon the room was filled with a cacophony of voices calling from Sol’s library of photos. As Leanne moved to cover her ears,

the old man made a cutting motion with his hand. The photographs fell silent immediately, although the mouths of the people still moved wordlessly.

WHAM

The front door of the flat was hit hard by the Shades. Sol moved into action, grabbing three photographs from the walls and laying them out in a triangle on the tabletop.

“The door won’t hold much longer,” he said. “We have to leave *now*.”

“Leave?” demanded Leanne. “We can’t go out there!”

Sol shook his head and pointed to the photographs on the table. “Through these. Notice anything about them?”

Leanne and Hamid stepped forward and looked down at the photographs. One showed a family portrait, a mother, father and twin boys aged about eight. Another showed a man staring intently out of the picture at them. The third showed an empty room filled with antiques that made Leanne think immediately of the story of the collector.

“There’s a shadow in them all,” said Hamid. Then Leanne saw it too – a dark blur behind the family... and around the man... and in the empty room.

“Well spotted,” said Sol. “A trace of the evil in the past.”

The Shades slammed against the door again. Sol fished inside his satchel and removed a brass key. As he waved it over the

pictures, they began to take on more definition and depth, like a 3D image. They seemed to grow beyond the frame. “The portals are opening!” explained Sol.

There was a crash as the front door gave way. Suddenly the room was a maelstrom of swirling air, that extinguished half the candles. In the remaining light, Leanne could see the Shades crawling slowly across the floor towards them

“What do we have to do?” she demanded.

“I’m beginning to think you were sent here tonight for a reason!” Sol yelled over the sound of the screeching. “There’s three pictures... Three of us... Three pieces of a puzzle to solve... and we just might destroy the evil in this place forever!” He handed the key to Leanne. “You need to choose where we start!”

More of the candles went out. The room was almost in total darkness now and the Shades were moving in...

The collector, thought Leanne as she reached for Hamid’s hand and pulled him towards the picture of the antique-filled room. As she moved forward, Solomon’s bony fingers closed on her shoulder. The picture expanded before them, filling Leanne’s vision as she held out the key. There was a rush of air... a powerful sensation of being pushed across an invisible barrier....

And then they were in the picture.

Leanne released Hamid’s hand and looked around the room, which was similar to Sol’s in layout but completely different in

appearance. There was plush carpet underfoot and the space was crammed with antiques, most of them Oriental in appearance: porcelain dragons, plates with blue-tinted pictures and ornate tapestries with Chinese writing. Leanne turned, expecting to see Sol's simple apartment behind them... but the portal had closed.

"Look at all this stuff!" Hamid said in a hushed tone, picking up a carved ivory box from a nearby table. "This must be the collector's apart—"

"Don't touch anything!" snapped Sol with unexpected urgency, but it was too late!

As Hamid flipped open the lid, a puff of black smoke escaped from the box and enveloped him. He staggered back, knees buckling. Leanne caught him before he hit the floor, gently laying him down.

"Hamid, wake up!" cried Leanne, trying to shake him awake. Her friend was out cold. She looked at Sol. "What's wrong with him?"

"He's breathing, but unconscious." Sol gave her a hard look. "The Tower is a place of many secrets and dangers. We need to be more cautious."

The sound of approaching footsteps made them both look round in alarm.

"The collector!" whispered Leanne.

"We need to get out, Leanne," urged Sol. "It would be a bad

idea for all three of us to be found here."

"What about Hamid?" she asked.

Sol shook his head. "The important thing is for us to get away – our mission is vital. We'll have to leave him behind." Then, seeing the concern in Leanne's eyes, he added, "For now at least."

The footsteps grew louder as they approached the room.

Leanne looked round desperately, weighing up her possible options...

And now you decide...

What does Leanne decide to do?

A) Drag Hamid into a nearby cupboard and hide from the owner of the apartment

B) Leave Hamid and make a run for it with Sol – the mission is more important

C) Stand and face whoever is approaching

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