

Secret Shadows Book 1 of Order of the Shadows  
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ORDER OF THE SHADOWS DUOLOGY

— Book 1 —

# SECRET SHADOWS

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# Chapter 1

A strange, almost electrical hum fills the university's historical library archives as a sensation of dread creeps down my spine. Despite every fiber of my being begging me to ignore it and move on to my hidden nook, I glance down an aisle to find a student a few feet away with a cart of books. She wears faded jeans, an oversized sweatshirt, and her blonde hair in a high ponytail. Instead of shelving a book, she flips through it. Beside her, a spectral old woman hovers, her long black dress swirling in the non-existent wind.

Somehow, despite my low vision, spirits are more vivid to me than anything else, as if magnified, so they're clearer, but I wish they weren't. The woman's bony hand swats at the book. The girl doesn't flinch when the spirit continues to bat at it, causing her hand to swish straight through it each time.

"Do your job properly, young lady," the woman says.

I make the mistake of studying her too long because within seconds, the woman flickers and stands inches before me.

"You can see me?" She jabs a finger at me as I tip my head in acknowledgment and take a step back. "Tell her to do it properly. There's no time for dilly-dallying."

I back farther away, desperate for the girl not to notice me, but my luck runs out when she lifts her head and turns.

"You lost? Need help finding something?"

"No, it's okay. Looks like that's going to take you all night." I point to the stack of books piled high on the cart.

The girl glances at her watch, places the book on the shelf, then rolls the cart toward me. "Nah, my shift is done." She passes by and turns back to me. "You sure you don't need anything?"

"I'm good. Thanks."

She bobs her head and strolls back the way I came, with one cart wheel clacking as she goes.

The woman spirit huffs and hurries after the girl. "Lazy and irresponsible."

To check my location in the archives, I lift my phone and use the camera to zoom into the signs on the bookcases. The numbers assure me I'm not in the right place yet, so I hurry deeper into the archives, grateful the spirit left me alone.

Months ago, I had no idea of our family's inherited ability to see spirits until after my sister Val died in a car accident, and I gained the ability.

Some spirits seem nice, but others don't understand they're dead, so speaking to them isn't always wise. Over time, I've learned vengeful spirits are the ones I need to steer clear of and defend myself against.

I slip my hand inside my jeans pocket until my fingers brush Val's cross. Thank goodness I didn't forget it like last time. My shoulders relax as I search for the hiding spot I found weeks ago when the semester started.

I glance over my shoulder to ensure no one followed me, especially the spirit, and only find more rows of shelves.

Turning, I scurry down the aisle until there's a dead end with a small alcove to my right, and release a slow, shaky breath as I settle into my private getaway. No one will find me here.

But the sense of unease returns with vengeance, so I slip my backpack off and pull out a small spirit mirror I found in Val's old puzzle box. Val loved solving every puzzle box she

could find and hid various things in them. The mirror doesn't look like much, but the simple circular piece of obsidian is an essential tool for me since it can repel some spirits. Stronger spirits aren't affected, but I find it helpful to always keep it on me. The mirror's surface reflects the light in a deep, inky black, and the uneven edges are rough against my skin. Having the mirror and iron cross within reach always helps relieve the tension in my chest.

I stare back at the way I came. No one is there, even though the nagging sense in my gut tells me I'm wrong. Shaking my head, I shrug off the odd sensation. I don't have time to worry about another spirit. Carefully, I slide out a ragged brown leather journal I found amongst Val's things after she died from my backpack. Setting aside one of my favorite antique metal bookmarks on the table, I open to the page I left off on yesterday.

The musty scent of yellow, brittle paper hangs heavy in the air while my family's ancient journal taunts me with answers I have yet to find.

When Val died several months ago, I shattered into a million pieces, and I couldn't put myself back together. I couldn't get out of bed for weeks. When I started seeing spirits, I thought I was hallucinating due to trauma and grief. But then, while reading the journal, I discovered how the supernatural world exists beside ours, hidden by a veil. Most don't see the supernaturals, but some of us, like women in my family, do.

In the beginning, I read old entries from other family members, including our mother, but always avoided Val's. Every time I saw her handwriting, tears filled my eyes, and I could never bear to read her words.

As I embrace my family lineage, the journal pages continue to give me a purpose with whispered warnings of the supernatural and Val's strange, broken, coded words. With each entry I read and the others I decipher, I discover more about my family's abilities, supernaturals, and Val's secrets.

I'm grateful for assistive technology as I open my phone's magnifier app to help me read Val's tiny handwriting. If I didn't have access to this app or an extremely strong handheld magnifier, I'd never be able to read Val's entries. I wish she didn't write so small, but it was normal for Val.

Using my forefinger to guide me, I skim through one of Val's entries, searching for the secret code we used when we were kids. For some reason, Val hid coded words scattered like breadcrumbs throughout her entries, and they continue to taunt me as I painstakingly decipher bits and pieces each day.

Some of Val's phrases I've deciphered so far make little sense, as though they're a mere part of a bigger message.

*Don't trust or tell anyone.*

*Keep it hidden*

Keep what hidden? And why leave several secret phrases in various entries instead of one long message? Even more questions nag at me. Knowing how desperate Val must have been to hide what she needed to tell me sends icy terror through my veins.

"What were you hiding, Val?" I mutter to myself.

I continue to use the magnifier app to help decode another line hidden in a messy entry. It's the longest sentence I've uncovered so far.

*The Order of the Shadows vows to protect all, yet sometimes I don't feel safe.*

My breath hitches. Why didn't she feel safe? Everyone who attends the university has heard of the secret society, but I've always thought it was a rumor. That is until I read several of Val's journal entries in which she mentions pledging for the Order. I still can't believe Val was a member.

A low hum vibrates through the library, a symphony of distant voices, keyboards clicking, and the soft thud of books settling on tables. It's a faint reminder of the world outside my haven. I'm grateful this corner of the library offers a fragile shield against prying eyes. Decoding Val's messages in my dorm room feels like deciphering secrets in a fishbowl, even though I doubt my roommate Lucy is a threat. Lucy reminds me of Val so much I can't help but trust her. Yet, the weight of Val's frantic tone etched onto the journal's fragile pages sends my pulse racing, and doubts of who I can truly trust needle me.

I pause when Val's entry takes a turn, causing me to reread a portion.

*Before joining the Order, if anyone had told me supernaturals were real, I wouldn't have believed them, but I do now. I helped Rowen and Asher find an infected forest Nymph. It was as if she was decaying before our eyes. Her rotten stench still sticks in my nose. If only the Guild could find a cure. This was the third time this week we had to deal with an infected supernatural.*

Infected supernaturals? It doesn't make sense. Aren't they immortal? How are they getting sick?

This isn't the first time Val talks about Rowen in the Order. My chest aches as a knot twists in the pit of my stomach, making me so nauseous I have to take a deep breath and slowly release it. I still need to talk to Rowen. Being in the Order means she's probably sworn to secrecy, but I don't care because it also means Rowen knows Val had special abilities, and I could have them, too. She should've warned me. Hell, Rowen should've helped me understand all that's been happening since Val died, but she hasn't. She's left me all alone to deal with it.

Taking another deep breath, I shove the tornado of emotions aside. Despite everything, I need to stay calm and play this right. Rowen could get me into the Order. And I need to be in it. Maybe then I can find answers about my new abilities. The journal has a ton of great information, but I can't sit here and ignore the fact there are others out there who could understand what it's like to have these abilities and not be able to tell those close to me like Uncle Will and Aunt Mia.

Scanning over the entry again, I'm with Val, not believing at first. If Val had told me any of this a year ago, I would've thought she was lying or making things up.

I have yet to encounter any of the supernaturals Val or my other family members have mentioned in the journal, but I have seen some ghosts who met gruesome deaths, and I wish I'd never seen them.

My neck screams in protest when I stretch, the ache mirroring the one which burrows deep within my soul. Val's tiny script strains my eyes, even with the aid of my phone's magnifier app. I need a break.

Perhaps one of these dusty tomes can offer more answers to the questions that have gnawed at me since Val's death.

Google hasn't been helpful. All the articles and blogs it pulls up suggest I'm haunted, so I'm grateful I found the journal. I've learned so much about spirits and some supernatural beings. Enough to defend myself when spirits get pushy.

A strange thrill, a flicker of something akin to joy, sparks as my fingers brush the spines of the books lining the shelves. Blue, black, red, a vibrant spectrum that shouldn't exist in this tomb of aged paper. It snuffs out as quickly as it ignites. No. Happiness is a luxury I can't afford, not with Val's absence, a gaping hole in my heart. The ache of my soul blossoms until it tightens around my skull, morphing into a throbbing headache. And the single doubt returns, burning brighter than any spectral form I've seen.

If I can see spirits now, why hasn't Val come to me? Why hasn't she spoken the messages hidden within the journal's pages to me?

As I'm about to turn down another aisle of bookcases, my phone rings. Uncle Will's photo pops up on the screen, and I sigh. He refuses to text or video chat. He says a good old-fashioned phone call works just fine.

"Hey," I whisper.

"Mia couldn't come in tonight, and we're slammed. Could you spare your uncle a couple of hours?"

Wishfully, I stare at the bookcase of books which hold the promise of answers and snatch two off the shelf—a book on the occult and another on the afterlife. Kneeling and scanning the books with the magnifier app, I let out a breath.

"Nori? You there?"

Slamming the books shut, I shove them back onto the bookcase. "Sorry. I'm here. I just need to drop my stuff off at the dorm first."

"Take a car. I don't want you walking alone."

I rub my forehead. Uncle Will means well, and I don't look forward to walking to the pub in the dark, but I can't afford to order a ride and don't want to tell him since things seem tight for him, too. Especially since he may be unable to help me afford school for much longer, and I've barely started my first semester.

"I'll be there as soon as I can." I hang up before he can argue about me getting a ride.

My mind wanders as I trudge back to my secluded nook. Of all the university's libraries, I thought this one could offer me some information and solace. Yet the books only mention details I've discovered from previous research.

Some spirits linger earthbound, consumed by rage or a thirst for vengeance. Certain items such as salt, iron, a talisman, and the obsidian mirror can help repel them. At first, I didn't understand why Val had the mirror, but an entry on spirits informed me of its helpful use.

Not only did the journal educate me on physical defenses to use, but I also now understand why Val chose certain tattoos. One she had must have helped keep spirits away from her. I'm deathly afraid of needles, though, so tattoos are not an option for me.

The Hattaway House journal lies on the table, a silent sentinel. My pulse races as I snatch it off the table. I never should've left it unattended. From now on, I can't be so flippant and leave it where anyone can find it.

Despite the deep desire to know more and discover what Val was trying to hide, I shove the journal, obsidian mirror, and notebook into my backpack and slip it over my shoulders as the library lights flicker a sickly yellow. I close my eyes, waiting for the white spots to disappear. Even though they aren't bright, flashes like this still bother my light-sensitive eyes. When I open them again, a primal dread washes over me, cold and unwelcome, like a spectral hand squeezing my heart.

A man stands nearby, or I should say once a man. He's now something sculpted from nightmares.

His silver glasses are slick with crimson blood and rest on a half-missing and crooked nose, while the blood stains mirror the gaping hole in his forehead. He reeks of decay, and something far fouler assaults my senses, making my eyes water. His closeness reveals every terrifying detail of him. The shattered lenses and brain tissue oozing down his face to the blood drenching his shirt — it all burns into my brain.

I inch to my left to escape the gruesome spirit, but his bloody hand reaches out, fingers like skeletal claws. My breath catches, a strangled gasp in the suffocating quiet, and I scramble backward, desperate to put some distance between us.

*He's only a ghost. He can't hurt me.* I tell myself repeatedly as I reach into my jeans pocket for my only line of defense.

The spirit proves me wrong by yanking my braid, so my chin juts upward. "Nori."

I freeze in place, stunned by this spirit. When he tugs my hair harder, it breaks me out of the daze, and I continue to scrounge in my pocket. Finally, my hand closes around the item I'm seeking – Val's iron cross with a fleur-de-lis design on each end and a flower in the center.

He leans so close I gag from his stench. "She awaits you." His voice is thick and garbled, as if he's choking on blood.

"Fuck off!" I thrust the pointed end of the cross at his cheek, and he bursts into a gray dust cloud.

Spinning on my heel, I retreat toward the library exit. My pre-owned Doc Martins echo on the marble floor and up the stairs to the exit as I glance over my shoulder to ensure the spirit isn't following me.

## Hattaway House Journal

### Vengeful Spirits

**Entry translated by Evelyn Hattaway, 1650 Original transcript possibly dates back to the 12<sup>th</sup> century.**

*Often tethered to unfinished business, spectral entities can manifest with terrifying consequences. I believe knowledge is our best defense, so I have gathered information on apparitions and methods for achieving peace. Please note, not all spirits will respond to the methods below, but they are our best defense.*

*Vengeful ghosts are typically the remnants of individuals who died with unresolved anger, grief, or a desire for retribution. They appear in their earthly form. Their presence can drain the vitality of a location, causing chills, poltergeist activity, and rarely physical harm.*

*While complete eradication isn't often an option, there are ways to weaken and appease a vengeful spirit.*

**Iron:** *Iron possesses a unique property which disrupts a ghost's spectral form. Hanging iron horseshoes or placing iron filings around doorways can act as a barrier, hindering their movement. Also, a talisman made of iron can serve as a good defensive tool.*

**Mirrors:** *Ghosts tend to have an incomplete self-image. Mirrors can confuse and disorient them, offering a temporary reprieve from their haunting. However, some vengeful spirits may become enraged by their reflection.*

**Obsidian Mirror:** *In many cultures, it's believed obsidian mirrors have the power to repel spirits. This may be due to the material's association with the spirit realm and its ability to absorb negative energy. Additionally, the mirror's reflective surface acts as a barrier between the physical and spiritual realms.*

**Salt:** *Salt is associated with purification. Scattering salt around the perimeter of a haunted location can disrupt a ghost's energy, making it a less hospitable environment. You may also use it as a defensive tool if you find yourself in a dangerous situation.*

**Talismans:** *Certain objects imbued with religious or personal significance can hold power over a ghost, especially if the living person cherishes the object. Placing a deceased loved one's favorite necklace or a religious symbol near the haunting can offer a sense of solace, potentially weakening the spirit's hold.*

**Important Note:** *These methods **do not** always guarantee success. In some cases, the spirit requires assistance in resolving their earthly conflict. Historical research, communication, and even offering an apology on behalf of those responsible for the spirit's suffering can help them find peace and move on. However, if a spirit has the power to harm others, you must spread salt on their bones and burn them. I beg you to only do this as your last resort.*

*Ghosts are not inherently malevolent. By understanding their motivations and employing these techniques, we can navigate their presence and achieve a peaceful resolution. Remember, patience and empathy are key.*