

Whispering Tower

Katie Clark

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Dedication

To all my loves, always.

*What People are Saying about Shadowed Eden,
book one in the Beguiled Series*

"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 ONE

II Kings 20:10-11

“And Hezekiah answered, It is a light thing for the shadow to go down ten degrees: nay, but let the shadow return backward ten degrees. And Isaiah the prophet cried unto the Lord: and He brought the shadow ten degrees backward...”

1

Present Day

Skye

Skye stared at Big Ben in the distance, watched it tick away the time, taking her life with it. A few blocks from her hotel window, the London Eye Ferris wheel rose toward the sky. Tourists and locals mingled in the streets around it, preparing to start their day. Too bad she wouldn't be starting hers down at the London Eye, instead of with breakfast in the hotel restaurant.

"You're not ready yet?" Mom's impatient voice came from the door between their plush hotel rooms.

Skye kept her mouth shut. She hated these trips, but she tried not to take it out on Mom. Most kids at school would kill for a parent who travelled the world and took their teen along, but long hours away from home, while Mom worked eighteen-hour days? Not fun. At least at home, she had the soup kitchen where she volunteered and the people who volunteered with her. The people who had become her friends.

Here? She was on her own. Dad had offered to let Skye stay with him, and she'd almost said yes.

Almost.

"I'll be ready." She turned back to the window, her gaze going back to Big Ben.

"Still working on homework?" Mom moved into

the room. She glanced over Skye's shoulder.

Skye looked at her laptop screen. She'd been working through a lesson on ancient Mesopotamia from Mr. Kilpatrick's class. Now, that was something to smile about. The rituals of the ancient peoples fascinated her. She'd gone over the information a few dozen times with her history teacher. He was great about video chatting with her, delving deeper into the customs, languages, and religions used four thousand years ago. He'd even helped her narrow down the best college choices if she planned to pursue archeology. Someone had to help her, since Mom never had the time.

"I'm about halfway through." Really, she should have been done hours ago. The time difference between Tennessee and London had jarred her, and she'd been awake forever. Besides, last time she'd slept was on the plane, and she'd had a bad dream she didn't want to repeat.

But Mom had mentioned breakfast with her business partner and his son, Philip Matthews, and Skye was hoping Mom would let her skip if she hadn't finished her school work yet.

"You'll have lots of time to finish it later," Mom said.

OK, not skipping breakfast.

"Go get ready," Mom called over her shoulder as she moved back to her own room.

Skye stayed put, her gaze going back to that clock. Big Ben, telling time for a hundred and fifty years. If only those fancy clock hands could wind backward. Back to a week ago, when Mom had announced the London trip. Back to just before she'd told Dad, and he'd invited her to stay with him and his new wife,

Gloria. She'd asked Mom, and Mom had freaked. Yeah, she definitely would stop herself from asking that question. Besides, Dad had only invited her out of pity. His eyes had been anything but welcoming.

She winced at the painful memory and quickly turned back to her laptop. After saving her work and shutting down the computer, she moved to the bathroom for a shower. Thick, plush carpet softened every footstep, and floor to ceiling windows lined an entire wall of her room.

Three different shower heads blasted steamy water against the fancy tiles, and Skye took a deep breath. She would make it through this breakfast. Make it through this trip. As always.

She'd already contacted All Nations Church, for whom she'd done benevolence work on past London trips. Keeping busy was the best way to keep her mind off of things like Mom yanking her around, and Dad patronizing her. And staying on the same hotel floor as Philip Matthews—for an entire summer.

The hot water was good at burning away the bad feelings, allowing her body to relax and her mind to wander. Steam swirled through the bathroom, and Skye took another deep, cleansing breath. Everything would be fine.

The billowing steam fogged up the mirror. It reminded her of something.

Billowing sand?

She frowned. The dream. She had been somewhere dry and dusty. Alone?

No, not alone, but she couldn't remember who had come.

Mrs. Garrison, one of the women who frequented the soup kitchen where she helped out back home,

would call Skye's dream *déjà vu*. Skye always smiled along with Mrs. Garrison's crazy beliefs, but she didn't go for stuff like *déjà vu*. Seeing into the future...or past? A little too hard to believe. No, the dream was probably her subconscious working through the stuff she was learning in history.

Whatever it meant, it gave her nothing but bad feelings. Loneliness. Abandonment. Fear.

Yeah. Bad feelings.

She hurried through her blazing shower then dried her hair and threw on the least wrinkly outfit she could find. Looking in the mirror, she held in her sigh. Mom wouldn't like the outfit—she always complained at Skye's lack of interest in fashion—but Skye's black leggings and long black tunic were pretty, in her opinion. Her soft, blonde hair fell in waves just below her shoulders, which Mom also hated.

Skye couldn't help it that she never quite met Mom's expectations.

She gritted her teeth as she grabbed her camera bag and headed to Mom's side of the suite. They'd come to London lots of times for Mom's business trips, but this one was different. Instead of a week-long trip of meetings and schmoozing, Mom and Philip's dad were overseeing the building of Earth Corp's newest skyscraper—*Vague du Futur*: the wave of the future. They would be in London for the last three weeks of school and for the entire summer.

Mom's job being on the fritz also made the trip different. Mom was being edged out by someone, and she suspected it was Phil Matthews, whom she'd been working with for ages.

As much as Skye hated being taken advantage of, she felt sorry for Mom. In spite of all of Mom's faults,

Skye loved her, which was the only reason she'd finally agreed to come along on this torturous trip.

"I'm ready." Skye winced at the snap in her voice.

Mom bent over her suitcase, digging through it. "Great." She stood up, holding a small bag like a prize. "Almost done." She rushed to the bathroom, and Skye got an eyeful of Mom's outfit. Navy business suit, complete with white blouse, pearls, and nude heels.

Yeah, Mom wouldn't like Skye's outfit, even if she didn't mention it.

Skye flopped onto the edge of the enormous bed. These suites were nicer than others they'd stayed at lately. This "wave of the future" building must be pulling in a big payday. Most of the time, the exuberance of the job came in the form of fancy gifts from Mom's clients. Once, it was a purse from Paris. Skye had looked it up online, and it had been worth thousands. Mom had given the purse to her, and she'd pawned it to buy groceries for Mrs. Garrison. Another time, it'd been an old copper bracelet. It'd looked cool, as if it'd come from an ancient dig site. Skye had kept that one for a while, but the next time Mrs. Garrison ran out of food, Skye had hocked the bracelet, too.

But this place? Way more expensive than a designer purse. Mom's side of the suite was as fancy as Skye's. Confusing art pieces lined the walls, swirling in messy waves. A fountain trickled water in one corner, and one side table held a large glass tube filled with colored sand art.

Skye studied the art. The swirly paintings on the walls and the sand art all looked as if it'd been created by a five-year-old. It didn't make any sense to her.

Mom rushed from the bathroom a few minutes later, and they headed to the elevator together. Skye

pulled out her camera and snapped a few pictures of the ornate elevator buttons. Mom quirked an eyebrow but didn't say anything, going back to the e-mails on her phone instead.

Skye hadn't looked at her phone once since leaving the states. Mostly because she knew no one would be e-mailing or texting her. Eighty-year-old ladies like Mrs. Garrison didn't use the latest technology.

The elevator dinged, and Mom led them to the hotel's restaurant.

Skye held her stomach, hating the way it twisted. She'd managed to ignore her impending doom all morning, but breakfast with Philip Matthews? How could Mom do that to her?

Yeah, she and Philip used to be friends, but that was about a million years ago. Before Dad left, and before Philip started acting weird around her. Before he ditched her in ninth grade for a whole new set of friends and started hanging out with the kids who called her "cloudy" Skye.

"We're meeting the Matthews' party," Mom told the host.

He smiled and checked his book. Even this early, he wore a full tuxedo.

Skye glanced at her own clothes again. Maybe she was underdressed.

"You are the first to arrive," he said, smile still in place. "Follow me."

Philip wasn't here yet? Skye breathed out a relieved sigh. That was good. Maybe he'd have more success at getting out of the breakfast than she had—because there was no way he was not trying to get out of it. She may not have hung out with him for three

years, but she still knew him.

The Philip Matthews she remembered went after what he wanted, and she doubted he wanted to eat breakfast with her.

2

Philip

Philip yawned as he flipped channels with the TV remote. The time change between America and Great Britain was catching up to him, but he would beat it. The luxurious hotel suite helped. A lot.

The beds were enormous, with thick white comforters and a million pillows. Philip could practically get lost in the bed alone. That was exactly why he was still there, wearing his sweat pants and a t-shirt.

The change of pace was precisely what he needed after the school year he'd been having. His latest breakup had been a disaster. Mari had called him on all his mess-ups—right in front of two dozen other students. At first, he'd blown it off, but her words kept buzzing through his head.

He knew why. She was right. He'd become a jerk.

The sound of running water came from the bathroom as Dad showered, and Philip took a deep breath. This would be the perfect summer vacation, giving him the opportunity to work out all his issues. Perfect, sans the school work he had to do online, of course.

Dad had insisted he keep up. Why would any guy need to know about ancient Middle Eastern religious rituals? Doing school work only reminded him of school and the constant pressure that he had an image to protect. That any girl agreed to go out with him at

this point was a miracle.

Glancing around the posh hotel room, he retracted his thought. He knew the reason the girls kept coming. Money, plain and simple. He lived in the biggest house in the area, drove an awesome car. He had the promise of a new one when they returned home, but only if he "behaved." Whatever that meant. Of course, girls flocked to him, at least girls like Mari, who were after popularity and fun. He shouldn't have treated her so badly, though. Mari was nice, underneath all her makeup.

The water stopped, and a moment later, Dad stepped from the bathroom. He was already dressed in khakis and a polo shirt, but water dripped from his hair. "Ready to start your first day in Europe?"

"I plan to stay in bed all day, order room service, and stop by the pool later this afternoon."

"Don't think so, sport." Dad nudged the bottom of Philip's foot. "Up and at 'em. We're meeting Mrs. Guthrie and her daughter for breakfast."

Breakfast with Skye? "I think I'll pass, Dad."

Dad's eyebrows shot up. "Really? Because I thought you actually wanted that new car." He shrugged and turned away. "No problem. Suit yourself."

Philip bounded from the bed and grabbed the jeans he'd tossed over the side of an arm chair. "I'm coming, but you're playing dirty."

Dad grinned at him. "You can play however you want when you're the parent."

"Keep that in mind when I put you in the old folks' home."

Dad's deep, rumbling laughter made a strange tightening in Philip's chest. When was the last time

they'd talked and laughed together? Maybe this trip would be good in more ways than one.

Besides, once Dad left for work, Philip could return to bed. He had months to explore the city. No hurry.

He and Dad finished getting ready and headed to the elevator to ride down to the hotel restaurant. Even the elevator was lush with a thick, fancy carpet. The dark mahogany panels and crystal-like buttons added to the exquisite feel. He could definitely get used to this place. It was the first time he'd come on a business trip with Dad. Usually, he talked Dad into leaving him home for the short trips, but since this one was longer—and in Europe—Philip had convinced Dad he needed to come. It would be educational, and all that.

Dad hadn't cared one way or the other.

The elevator stopped with an expensive-sounding ding, and Philip remembered who they were meeting. Keeping his shoulders straight, he strolled from the elevator and toward the restaurant with confidence, or at least as confident as he could pull off. He hadn't eaten with Skye in a few years, not since Skye's Dad left. Back then, the idea of helping her through that—when he wasn't over his own mom leaving—was too much. She was the first girl he'd left in a lurch, but not the last.

The thought left a sour taste in his mouth.

They rounded the corner, and Skye and Mrs. Guthrie sat at a table near a sunny window. A small plant decorated the middle of the table, and fresh buds were just peeking out from their green shells.

Philip kept his shoulders straight, but his stomach tightened. Just as he'd treated his girlfriends, he'd been a jerk to Skye. He hoped she didn't spit in his

expensive spritzer water when he wasn't looking.

"Morning, Catherine," Dad said. He was always so calm, not as if he planned to con her out of all the accolades for their current job. Philip had heard him on the phone before they'd left the states, which was one of the reasons he'd decided he didn't want to be like Dad after all.

Skye stared out the window. She seemed serene enough, but she gripped her linen napkin so tightly that her knuckles turned as white as the material.

"Philip." Mrs. Guthrie smiled. She moved to hug Dad, which was weird. "I doubt I can eat a thing, I'm so excited."

Philip slid into the seat across from Skye. She didn't look at him, and he didn't speak to her. Dad and Mrs. Guthrie barreled ahead with work talk while Philip toyed with the menu in front of him.

Half the foods were listed in French—which he'd taken in school but never actually learned. Mrs. Guthrie spoke perfect French. When they were little, and his family would go to the Guthries' home for dinner, she would go on and on in French, wowing them all. Skye wasn't half bad at it herself, if he remembered right.

Keeping his head bent toward the menu, he peeked out at her. She was looking at him, and he quickly looked away. Too late, though. She'd seen him.

"We've got some fun stuff planned for you kiddos," Dad said.

Wait. What? Dad had planned stuff for him...and Skye?

"There are a multitude of educational tours available around here," Mrs. Guthrie said. "Since you're still technically in school, we thought it best to

keep you busy learning."

Philip glanced at Skye. Her eyes looked worried, and her lips were thin and white. If he'd guessed right, he'd say she wasn't real happy with the idea.

"Mom, I've got other stuff planned," Skye said.

"It's not up for discussion." Mrs. Guthrie leaned over and pulled a stack of brochures from a bag hanging on her chair. She tossed them onto the table. "Here, your first tour starts today at two."

Philip glanced at Dad. Why was he doing this to him? Were their parents sending them on tours for the rest of their trip? Forcing them to hang out?

He wasn't sure even a new car was worth that.

Dad nudged him with his shoulder. "Be a team player, won't you, sport?"

Philip thought of the shiny black convertible he'd been drooling over for months. He forced a smile. "You bet, Dad."

Skye eyed the brochures as though they were diseased.

"It'll be fun," Mrs. Guthrie insisted.

Skye shook her head. "I have plans, Mom. I've already committed to them."

Mrs. Guthrie waved a hand. "You can reschedule. Education is important."

Wow, talk about a total blow off.

Skye's nostrils flared, but she didn't put up a fight.

"You'll have time for your other plans," Mrs. Guthrie finally said. "But until school is out, you'll focus on your education. Then, tonight you and I will have a nice dinner."

Skye rolled her eyes. "Whatever, Mom."

They sat in silence for a few awkward seconds, and Philip couldn't take it anymore. "Don't worry,

Mrs. Guthrie. We'll work it out."

Mrs. Guthrie smiled at him. "Thank you, Philip. You are always so sweet."

Sweet. That wouldn't be the word used by his ex-girlfriends. Or Skye.

Once breakfast ended, Dad and Mrs. Guthrie headed out to work. Philip and Skye made their way back to their rooms.

"It's not like it's the end of the world," Philip said as they waited on the elevator. This didn't have to be terrible. If he wanted to change his attitude—and his image—he might as well start by making things right with his former best friend.

Skye kept her arms crossed and stared at the elevator buttons. Her long, blonde hair hung in loose waves around her shoulders, and she wore the ever-present black shirt and pants.

"Come on. We don't even have to talk to each other. How bad can it be to see the sights?" He wasn't sure why he was trying. Spending time with Skye wasn't his idea of fun these days. She could stop acting like a martyr.

The elevator arrived, and they stepped inside.

"In case you didn't hear me before, I had other plans." She spoke to the buttons, her voice quiet but firm.

The elevator dinged with each floor they passed, until they reached the seventeenth. Philip shuddered. He hated heights. "Like what? Don't tell me you know people in England."

She spun to him, her eyes narrowed. "Unlike you, I prefer helping people. Once I realized there was no getting out of this disaster, I started looking for ways to spend my time. I signed up to help the poor, working

with the All Nations Church."

"What?" She had to be kidding. Sure, she'd always had a big heart. Once, they'd rescued a toad that had fallen into the swimming pool during a backyard barbecue. She'd refused to let anyone touch it unless they swore on their mother that they wouldn't hurt it. He'd totally agreed with her back then, but signing up to serve with a bunch of strangers in a foreign country seemed a bit extreme.

The elevator doors opened, and Skye left him behind without another glance.

"Come on, Skye." He hurried after her and grabbed her arm, but she jerked it away.

"Stop acting like we're old friends. We're not."

"OK, so what? We're in England for the summer, and our parents are forcing us to spend time together. We can make the best of it, can't we?"

Her expression changed, morphing from irritation to anger. "What are you suggesting? If you think for a second that I'd hook up with you—or anyone—then you've lost your—"

"What? No! Gosh, Skye, of course I'm not saying that. But the least you could do is be civil."

She stared at him, wary but seeming to consider his words. Finally, she sighed and stepped back. "Sorry. OK, we can be civil, but that doesn't mean I want to pretend we're best buds."

Girls were so frustrating.

But guilt nagged at the back of his mind. Maybe he didn't have a right to ask anything from her. Hadn't he given up the right to friendship a long time ago? Not to mention, his motives now weren't totally pure. Being nice to her would get him a new car. "Got it. No best buds. I'll see you downstairs this afternoon then?"