

THE
SHADOWED
ONYX

A DIAMOND ESTATES NOVEL

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*This book is dedicated to the tireless parents
who stand in prayerful watch over their families,
and to the teenagers who appreciate it.*

Acknowledgments

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An old Cherokee once told his grandson about a battle that rages inside every person, no matter their age, ethnicity, or lot in life. Even their sex, their financial status, their heritage—none of it matters in this battle for souls.

That old Cherokee said, “My son, there is a battle between two ‘wolves’ that exists inside every one of us.”

The little boy leaned in and listened closely, as he tended to do when Grandfather spoke.

“One of those wolves is Evil. It is everything bad in a person: anger, envy, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, and lies. . . all lies. The other is Good. It is joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion, and faith.”

The grandson pondered the concept for a moment. Then he turned his concerned gaze up to his grandfather’s aged face, so full of wisdom, and he asked: “Which wolf wins?”

The old Cherokee simply replied, “The one you feed.”

—a Cherokee legend

..... Chapter 1

Are there any spirits in this room with us?” Joy Christianson stared at Raven, whose face glowed in the candlelight from the black tapers flanking the game board on the floor between them. Raven’s eyes drifted closed, and her fingers danced atop the same wooden triangle that lay motionless beneath Joy’s.

The tallest candle flickered, casting a somber spotlight, illuminating the letters that would spell messages from beyond. The flame bent to the left as though a birthday child begged for a wish.

Peeling her gaze from the candle, Joy followed her new friend’s instructions and squeezed her eyes shut. It was Raven’s house, after all. Her house, her rules.

The game piece—that’s all it was, right?—trembled and then slithered across the Ouija board. Joy’s eyes snapped open, and she jerked back. “Very funny, Raven.” Joy inched away as though gnarled fingers would reach from underneath, grab her ankles, and pull her to the great beyond. “I don’t even believe in this stuff.” She slid her hands under her legs. No way she’d put them back on that thing.

Raven raised one eyebrow and cocked her head. “Oh? You don’t, huh? Then I suppose that’s someone else’s heartbeat I can hear all the way over there? What about the rapid breathing

and. . ." She yanked on Joy's arm and inspected her hand. "Sweaty palms?" She returned to the ready position and waited. "People aren't usually scared of things they don't believe in."

Something *was* out there. Joy could feel it in her bones.

Something existed beyond the reality she knew. Something other than what she'd always believed in, other than God. But did she want to communicate with whatever—whoever—it was? "I don't know, Ray. I. . . I might not be ready for something like this. Besides, it's just a game." Joy needed to get out of there. Pronto.

"It is so not just a game." Raven shrugged. "You can think that if you want to. But then you might as well give it a try, if it's only for fun, that is."

Okay, now what? Joy could play along and pretend she didn't believe in that stuff, or she could admit her terror of all things supernatural and leave Raven's house immediately. The whole Ouija-board thing was probably totally fake, but then why the shivers, and, most importantly, why had that thing moved?

Perfectly explainable. The shivers were simply a product of her own nervousness, and the triangle thingy moved because Raven pushed it on purpose. Joy really didn't know Raven all that well. She certainly hadn't been someone Joy spent time with before. . . well, before. Until they locked sad eyes across a crowded lunchroom. Had it been a mistake to strike up a friendship with Raven just so Austin wouldn't bother her?

Raven flipped her dark brown hair behind her shoulder, though the top layers fell in front of her pale face like a dark curtain. She placed her fingers on the triangle's wooden edge and tipped her chin toward Joy. "Come on. What are you waiting for? There's activity here, and I'm going to prove it to you."

"What are you saying? You think there are ghosts or. . . what?"

One corner of Raven's mouth curled up, and she winked. "Or something like that. Let's go."

Joy pushed the sleeves of her fuzzy pink sweater up to her elbows and gathered her hair into a long ponytail, rolling a hair tie from her wrist to secure it out of her face.

Deep breath. Only a game.

She cracked her knuckles one at a time then reached her hands toward Raven's. Joy barely let her fingertips rest in position on her side of the piece. Her bright pink nails glared in contrast to Raven's black ones just inches away. The candle teased the black stone in Raven's skull ring with glints of light.

Joy trembled.

"Oh Great Spirit here tonight, will you identify yourself to us, please?" Raven slowly opened her eyes and gazed into the dancing candle flame nearest the door.

Joy begged her muscles to lift her fingers from the game's surface, but she couldn't move. What if something were there? What if—

Joy's fingers jerked an inch and then gently glided along the board as the triangle headed toward a letter. Raven again? Or did something more sinister propel it? She stared at the fingertips across from hers. They didn't appear to be applying any pressure to the planchette at all. Yet it continued to move.

"We mean no harm. Who is with us here?" Raven's voice sounded strange. Calm. Gravelly.

The bedroom door stood open only a few feet away, letting a bit of a glow into the dark room from a night-light near the hallway bathroom. Joy could make a mad dash, but she'd have to jump over the candles and the game to get to the door. And then what? She'd be out in the strange, empty house with all the worked-up spirits while Raven stayed back and made friends with the nice ones? No thanks.

The glass part of the triangle stopped over a letter.

“M,” Raven whispered.

Was it okay to talk out loud? The thing paused for the briefest of moments then slid away, finally resting over the letter *E*.

“Me? Is that what it’s saying? What does that mean?” Joy shook her head, blond wisps sticking to her lip gloss. “I’m done. Seriously this time.” She stood and reached over Raven’s head to twist the switch on the lamp beside the bed, dousing the mood with light.

“For now.” Raven licked the thumbs and forefingers of both hands and squeezed the flames, extinguishing them with a sizzle.

“No, for good. I’m not messing with this stuff anymore. It freaks me out.” Joy shivered and pulled her bulky sweater tight around her body. Never again. She’d have to find her answers another way. There *had* to be another way. But first she had to figure out what her questions were.

Raven shrugged as she folded the board and slid it under her bed. “There’s not a lot you can do about it now. You’ve had a taste, and you’ll want more.”



“Hey! Joy’s back.” Coach Templeton waved from the other side of the volleyball court.

Several players stepped aside as Joy jogged toward her, trying not to inhale the familiar gym aroma so she wouldn’t totally lose it. What was it about smells that drove emotions harder than other senses?

“Good to have you back.” Heather flipped her long brown ponytail behind her and patted Joy’s shoulder as she passed. “Just in time for State next week. We could sure use you.”

One foot in front of the other. Keep moving toward Coach. Don’t look at anyone, especially Heather. Don’t think about the

State Championships. Don't think about anything.

"Yeah. Glad you're here."

Who said that? Joy couldn't turn her head to see. She had to stay focused.

"Right. Me, too."

Joy nodded but kept her eyes on Coach. It was the only way Joy had a prayer of getting through the practice. Who was she kidding? It was the only way she'd get through the next five minutes. She ducked under the net and met Coach midcourt.

"How you holding up, kiddo?"

Way to go right for the jugular. Joy's eyelids were hummingbird wings as she fought back the ever-present tears. "I'm good, I guess. I mean, look at me." She gestured the length of her body. "I'm perfect. But Melanie. . .well, she's another story." The tears rolled down Joy's cheeks. She could do nothing to hold them back.

Coach slipped an arm across Joy's shoulders and steered her toward the gym office. "Go on in and have a seat. I'll be right there." She turned toward the team stretching on the court. "Lauren, time to do your job as the. . .um. . .newly appointed captain. . .so put everyone through some drills. I'll be right out."

Captain. Melanie's position. Mel had loved knowing that the team had thought so highly of her to vote her as captain. Well, why not? She was the best person Joy ever knew. And Melanie felt the same about Joy. They'd sure told each other plenty of times. Until a week ago.

And now Coach had simply handed Melanie's position over to someone else. As if Mel hadn't existed. No matter how deserving a player and teammate Lauren was, she wasn't Melanie. Never would be.

Coach Templeton closed the door, sealing out the sounds of bouncing balls and shoes squeaking on the gymnasium floor.

Noises that reverberated until they blended into one perfect sound called volleyball practice. Would Joy ever love the game again? Could she let herself love anything again?

“So. How are you, really?” Coached perched on the edge of her desk, inches from Joy.

Alone. Dead inside. “I don’t know. What you’d expect, I guess.” Joy shrugged her shoulders.

“Well. It’s only been a week. I know how hard this must be.”

Joy nodded. Coach couldn’t possibly imagine. Not unless her best friend had committed suicide. Not unless she had been the one to find her dead and then have to break the news to her best friend’s parents. No. Probably not. That stuff only happened in Lifetime movies. Or Joy’s life.

“Are you seeing anyone?” Coach almost whispered.

Joy recoiled. “You mean dating?” What kind of question was that? Like Joy would ever date again.

Coach shook her head. “No. No. I mean like a counselor.”

Joy shrugged. “My parents offered. But I think I’ll be okay with the help of my church. I don’t need a shrink.” Yeah right. . . church. If anyone could help, it would be Raven. If Joy dared go there again.

“God is great, but even He talked about getting counsel from wise people and all that good stuff. You should really consider it.” Coach peered into Joy’s eyes. “I think you have what’s called survivor’s guilt. It’s normal. But it stinks.”

You think? Joy nodded. “I’ll talk to my mom about it.”

“That’s all I ask. Now. You ready to play some V-ball?”

The thought of stepping out onto that court among her friends—Melanie’s friends—without her there brought bile surging up Joy’s throat. She whipped her head side to side. “I can’t. Not yet. Can I try another time?” She searched the room for an escape. Great. One way in, one way out.

“That’s fine, kiddo. Baby steps. You’ll play next time.”
Coach stood. “Do you have a ride home?”

Joy nodded. “I have my car.” Her trusty VW Bug followed her everywhere.

“Come on, I’ll walk you out so you don’t get a barrage of questions on your way.” Coach slipped her arm across Joy’s shoulders and steered her out the door.

Questions wouldn’t be such a big deal, if only there were answers.

Starting with: *Why?*



“I see dead people,” Joy whispered to her reflection in the laptop screen. What was the name of that movie? She scanned the listings Google shot at her. “There it is. *The Sixth Sense*.” Joy shivered at the memory of watching that movie huddled on the couch. Austin on one side, Melanie on the other.

Maybe she should watch it again, this time for educational purposes. The little boy in the movie believed dead people only saw what they wanted to see. . .and he had said something else interesting. What was it he’d said? Joy snapped her gum and drummed her fingernails on the desk. Come on, think.

Oh. Right.

They don’t know they’re dead. Could that be true?

Joy shifted on her bed and pulled her laptop closer.

New search. *Séances*. She’d heard the term, but didn’t really understand. Did people just talk at spirits, or was there two-way communication? Or more?

Ooh. There was an interesting link. She clicked it.

Having had it drilled into her head to avoid stuff like spirits and séances, even horoscopes, since she was a little girl, Joy only wanted to know if they were real. In and out. No dawdling on the website. She glanced over her shoulder as though someone

watched her every move.

Joy leaned in a little closer to study the images that popped up on the screen. Spirits. Ghosts. Humans sitting around talking to the spirits and ghosts. Come on. That couldn't be real. Did people actually fall for that stuff?

Ouija boards. She opened the page. Yep. That picture was exactly what she played with the other night with Raven. Was it just a game?

A clunky knock sounded at her bedroom door.

"Who is it?" Joy tried to keep the irritation from her voice.

"It's me."

"Bea!" Joy jumped from her bed, almost knocking her computer to the floor. She rushed to the door and threw it open to find her cousin on the other side. She pulled Beatrice into a tight embrace.

"Hi, Joy." Bea spoke in her typical monotone. "It's been so long since I've seen you. Where have you been?"

"I know. I'm sorry I've been. . .um. . .away." Since the funeral. No excuse for the time before that. Joy took her cousin by the hand and pulled her into the room. "But I'm glad you're here now."

"My mom said you're sad. Why?" Bea stuck out her bottom lip.

"Oh. I'll be okay now that you're here. Let's not talk about the sad stuff. Okay?"

Beatrice grinned her lopsided smile. "Good. I don't want to talk about sad things. Want to play UNO?"

More than anything. "Sure. I'll get it set up." Joy reached under her bed and lifted the game.

Beatrice wandered around Joy's room, checking things out before she settled down for a game. Joy smiled as Bea touched her clothes and tinkled her jewelry together. She picked up

Joy's bottle of Daisy perfume, sprayed the air, and then leaned in. She sniffed and wrinkled her nose as the mist tickled her. Beatrice lifted a pair of leather boots. "Can I try these on?"

"Of course." It so didn't matter that she'd stretch them out.

Beatrice slipped off her sneakers by the bed and bent to pull on a boot. She gasped and lifted her arm to point at the computer screen. "What is this?" She stumbled over her words like she did whenever she got upset.

Joy followed Bea's finger where it pointed at the images on Joy's screen. "Oh. That's nothing to worry about." She waved her hand hoping to brush off Bea's fears.

"Those are scary and ugly and not right." She scowled. "God is telling me they're not right."

Hmm. Beatrice was just a little girl in so many ways. Yet she thought she had an in with God that she could know when He was speaking to her?

"It's no big deal. Just research for school. Don't worry about it." Joy dragged her finger across the mouse pad, and then clicked twice to remove the images from the screen. One window closed, and the one behind it popped open to a YouTube video of a séance. No!

Beatrice gasped and pointed. Her hand clamped over her mouth.

"No. No. Don't worry. Look. I'm closing it." Joy shut the laptop.

Beatrice dropped her jaw and shook her head. She backed from Joy's bed toward the door.

"Look, Bea. It's fine. Don't worry. Don't leave." Now what? Maybe Joy could distract Beatrice with food or something.

"That stuff is bad." Beatrice stared at the closed computer.

Did she understand what she'd seen? She couldn't possibly. If she didn't really understand it, then where was her reaction

coming from? Even with Down syndrome, Beatrice had always had an uncanny instinct about anything that had to do with Jesus or the bad guy, as she called them.

“How about we just play the game? Okay?” Joy grabbed the stack of cards and separated them into two decks. Come on. Play along, Bea.

Beatrice’s eyes brightened. “Yes. But first we have to pray.”

“Okay. . .um. . .about what?”

Bea clasped her hands together. She bowed her head and closed her eyes. “Dear Jesus. . .” She opened one eye and looked at Joy. Seeing Joy not in the accepted prayer position, Bea raised her eyebrow and waited.

“Oh. Sorry.” Joy lowered her head and waited.

“. . .please don’t let any bad stuff into this room or into Joy’s heart. And help me win UNO. Amen.”

Joy fought back a smile. So insightful, yet so innocent. That was her Bea. Joy dealt the cards out between them and set the discard pile right in the middle. Hmm. What if it had been a Ouija board between them? What different scenes the two games created. Night and day—light and dark.

“You first, Joy.” Beatrice stuck her tongue out one side of her mouth and clomped down with her teeth. Down to business.

Joy put down a yellow six. All was forgotten. Beatrice simply must have been reacting to the scary pictures and the sound coming from the website. But then why the prayer?

Her innocent cousin arranged her cards like it was the most important task she’d ever accomplish. Joy would bet anything they were lined up red, blue, yellow, then green—some things never changed. Beatrice glanced up and grinned a lopsided smile at Joy.

Joy smiled back. No. Beatrice couldn’t possibly know there

was anything spiritually questionable about what Joy had been doing. Could she?

But then again, if Raven could hear from dead people, maybe Beatrice could hear from God.