
SHADOWHALL
ACADEMY
THE
WHISPERING WALLS

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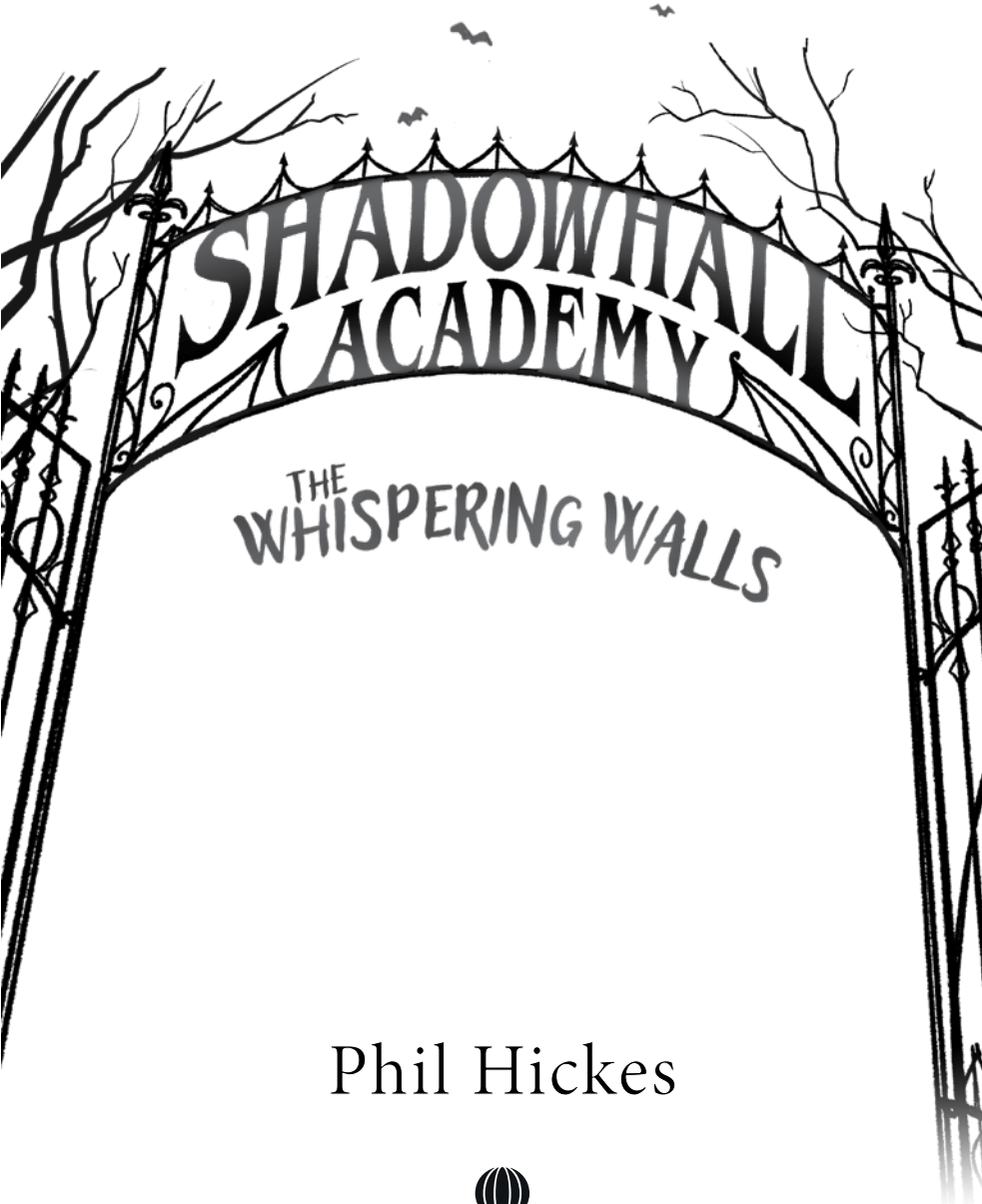
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Phil Hickes

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Chapter 1

Suffolk, England, September 1987

Lilian Jones sat in the back of her dad's Ford Escort and watched her old life slowly disappear. Everything she had thought set in stone was crumbling away. Her home. Her friends. Her treasured bedroom in the attic of their cosy house, where all her precious things were neatly laid out. Her seashell collection, ordered in size from large to small. Her colour coded jars of marbles, which she never actually played with, but simply enjoyed looking at. Her bookshelf, the authors arranged in alphabetical order, just like in a library. All this and more was now a hundred miles behind her. On the radio, Madonna was urging everybody to *get into the groove*, but Lilian wasn't in the mood right now.

"Could you change the station, Dad?" Lilian asked.

"Everything okay back there?" her dad asked, reaching for the tuner.

"Fine thanks," Lilian's little sister Susan said, her voice happy and light, like the first day of spring.

"I was asking Lilian," their dad said. "I know you're alright, Susan, you're not the one starting a new school."

"Oh, sorry, Dad," Susan said, before throwing a guilty look in Lilian's direction. "Sorry, Lilian."

"Don't worry, Susan, it's me that's about to get eaten alive," Lilian said. "Not you."

Lilian hadn't meant to sound so harsh and didn't like seeing the hurt expression on Susan's face. It was only because she was struggling to keep her own emotions concealed. It felt as if any minute all her features might slowly start to slide down her face, like melting snow. But she wasn't about to do that in front of her little sister. Susan always looked to her for approval and Lilian was happy to supply it. It felt good to be looked up to. Neither did she want her dad to know that she was scared and nervous.

Lilian's mother had gone to boarding school and always wanted Lilian to do the same. Then, Shadowhall Academy had caught her mum's eye. Lilian immediately had her

doubts. Just because her mum had *had the most amazing time ever*, didn't guarantee she would, too. And what about her friends, Joey and Sarah, who she went exploring on the beach with, finding more seashells to add to her collection? But then her parents had shown her a brochure for the academy and she couldn't help but feel her heart leap a little. The school was huge, with sloping lawns, its great Gothic turrets silhouetted against the skyline like something from another time. It had gleaming wood-panelled classrooms. A gigantic library. A majestic dining hall. Sports fields. Dormitories. An impressive cast of immaculately educated teachers. Everything perfectly organized, just like Lilian liked it. She'd always wanted to go somewhere exciting and different – well, here was her chance. And so, after a little resistance, she'd agreed to give it a go.

Yet thinking about something was different from actually doing it. And for the first time in her life, Lilian had to admit that maybe she wasn't quite as adventurous as she imagined herself to be. Shadowhall opened its doors to students as young as eight, so many of the other girls had already been there for years. Maybe they would all be so close that it would be impossible for Lilian to make friends? She wondered if perhaps it would have

been safer to have stayed in her bedroom, pottering about with seashells. Because right at this moment, she was fighting the urge to beg her dad to turn the car around and take her home.

Too late now.

Her dad was slowing down, and before long, the wide, grey, monotonous motorway had been replaced by leafy country lanes. Lilian sighed and glanced over the fields. The trees had begun to change out of their green summer uniforms into the red, gold and oranges of autumn.

"I love autumn," Susan said. "It's so colourful."

"That's because everything's dying," Lilian said.

"Oh, Lilian, don't ever change," her dad said.

"Well, it's true," Lilian said. "Those are the signs of decomposition and death. There's no point pretending otherwise."

"I just like the colours," Susan sniffed. "They're beautiful."

"Are you sure you're alright, Lilian?" her dad asked again. "I know you're nervous but that's fine. Starting a new school, away from home, is a big deal, and what you're feeling is totally normal."

How did her dad know? Lilian thought she'd done a good job of putting a brave face on things. Obviously not.

"I'm fine, Dad, honestly," Lilian lied again. "I just want to get there."

"Well, won't be long now. Hang in there."

Lilian slid back in her seat, aware that her sister kept glancing over at her, as if she wanted to say something but wasn't sure whether she would get her head bitten off again. Lilian hoped she would stay quiet. Although her sister was only three years younger, Lilian still thought of Susan as like a teddy bear – all soft, blonde fur, made from love and care and kindness. At this precise moment, if her sister said anything nice, Lilian feared she wouldn't be able to fight the tears any longer. Her carefully built dam would burst.

Yet as her dad had promised, it wasn't long before the car began to climb up a hill and they came to an impressive set of tall, wrought-iron gates. Right on top, made from the same blackened iron, was a ferocious-looking creature growling at the outside world. While Lilian's dad got out to ring the bell, Lilian studied the creature.

"Is that a *dog* with two heads?" Susan asked.

"I think it's a gargoyle," Lilian corrected, suppressing a tiny shudder.

"It's terrifying," Susan said, with a horrified look. "Why would you put that on the gates of a school?"

"Because it wasn't always a school," Lilian said. "It was someone's house before that. It said so in the brochure."

"I wouldn't want one on *my* house."

"I think it's interesting," Lilian said. "Better than a pair of garden gnomes."

"I like garden gnomes," Susan said. "They look after the vegetables and flowers in your garden."

"They eat raw goldfish," Lilian retorted. "Just scoop them out of the pond and munch…bones and all."

"That's not true!"

Thankfully, before Lilian had time to torment her little sister further, their dad had returned and got back into the car as the gates began to slowly swing open. Discussions about murderous garden ornaments were quickly forgotten as they drove slowly through the gates, the turrets of Shadowhall Academy looming in the distance.

"Wow," Susan said. "This place is like a palace."

It was impressive, Lilian had to agree. Much more so in real life than in the brochure. Huge oak trees lined the road, beyond which the fields stretched away towards some woods, the tips of the leaves showing off the golden glow of autumn. There was a small lake, in the middle of which was an island with a strange domed building on it.

Lilian didn't have time to study it further as a group of girls came running past their car, all identically dressed in navy and gold running outfits. They all looked so impressive, like a troop of warriors training for battle. For the first time since they'd set off, Lilian felt her fear replaced by something else. A flutter of excitement. A surge of hope. This place *was* amazing, her sister was right. This was officially the start of an adventure and Lilian had a sense that, just maybe, she had made the right decision.

Her dad brought the car to a halt in front of the main entrance, and even before the engine had died, a tall lady was descending the steps to greet them. Dressed in a smart suit, with her hair tightly pulled back, she wore a stiff smile and had cold, grey eyes. She looked as if she'd been carved from stone.

Lilian's dad climbed out, the two sisters lingering slightly behind him.

"Mr Jones? We spoke on the telephone. I'm Marilyn Strange, headmistress of Shadowhall Academy."

"Pleasure to meet you," Lilian's dad said, stretching out a hand. The woman grasped the tips of his fingers and gave them a hasty shake, as if she was touching a handful of dead fish.

"And hello to you," Ms Strange said, locking her fearsome grey eyes on Susan. "Oh, you're not Lilian, are you?"

"No, I'm Susan. Hello, very nice to—"

"I'm Lilian," Lilian interrupted. Taking a deep breath, she stepped forward and offered her hand. "Pleased to meet you."

"Welcome," Ms Strange said, her eyes narrowing as she appraised Lilian from head to toe. "It's nice to finally meet you, Lilian. I hope you'll be very happy here."

"Thank you," Lilian said. "I'm sure I will."

Lilian wasn't entirely sure this was true. After meeting Ms Strange her stomach felt like a bowlful of jelly. But she thought saying, "Actually, I feel scared sick," probably wasn't appropriate right now.

"Excellent," Ms Strange said. "A positive attitude. That will get you far here, young lady. Just to remind you that while the girls who are already resident here arrived back yesterday, there are going to be other new arrivals starting the autumn term today, too, so you won't be alone. Well, I'll give you a moment to say farewell to your father and sister, then I'll show you to your dormitory."

Saying that, Ms Strange retreated to the top of the steps, clasped her hands and bowed her head, as if not

wanting to intrude. It seemed they would be getting straight down to business.

A little self-consciously, Lilian turned to Susan.

"I know the exact position of everything in my bedroom, Susan. And I mean, *everything*."

"I know you do," Susan laughed. "But I don't want to go in your bedroom, so you don't have to worry."

"Bye then."

"See you at Christmas."

They hugged. Lilian felt her sister's hands tighten around her back for a moment. There was a soft breath on the side of her neck. Susan always smelled sweet, like custard and cake. Lilian tightened her grip a little, before pushing her sister away.

"I mean it, no trespassing." Then she turned to her dad. "See you, Dad."

She felt her dad's arms do the same as Susan's, only they held her tighter and for longer.

"I'm proud of you, Lilian," her dad said in a soft voice. "Me *and* your mum. And if you don't like it, you don't have to stay. Just say the word and we'll be up here like a shot to fetch you back."

This was the final straw. Lilian felt a warm tear trickle slowly down her cheek, and quickly wiped it away on her

dad's jumper. He smelled of the woody Old Spice aftershave he would splash all over himself in the bathroom.

"Thanks, Dad," she mumbled through a mouthful of wool. "I'll be fine."

"I know you will."

Lilian blinked her eyes clear and turned to gaze up at the intimidating building in front of her. Then her dad handed over her suitcase with both hands, as if its contents were extremely fragile, and gave her a final squeeze on her shoulder.

"Bye, love. Call us when you've settled in, okay?"

Then she was waving goodbye, taking a deep breath, and waiting to see what her new life would bring.

The first thing it brought was a very long and confusing journey through the school – not helped by Ms Strange flinging her arms this way and that as she pointed things out.

"The chemistry lab. The music room. Toilets. Changing rooms. The art studio. The workshop. First aid…"

And on it went, a confusing barrage of rooms and places that Lilian knew she would never remember. It was

so much larger than her old school. What was even more distracting was the sea of faces that passed her on the way, the schoolgirls murmuring, "Hello, miss" to Ms Strange before flashing Lilian a quick look, each one sending its own silent message.

Not another new girl.

Ha, you look terrified.

Get out of the way.

I feel sorry for you.

What are you looking at?

It was a bewildering journey, a dizzying succession of narrow corridors that all looked the same, distinguished only by various aromas of talcum powder, bleach, and frying bacon. Lilian began to feel quite light-headed and by the time they'd ascended two sets of stairs she felt ready for a lie-down.

"Now then, I want you to meet Marian Dawson," Ms Strange said. "You'll be sharing a dormitory. She'll show you around and help you find your bearings. Marian has been at Shadowhall for three years now so you're in good hands."

They'd stopped outside an office door. A girl stepped forward and gave Lilian a warm smile. She was smaller than Lilian, who was tall for her age, and had spiky, frizzy

black hair which sprouted out in all directions.

"Hello, nice to meet you," Lilian said, feeling a spasm of nerves in her stomach. This was the first girl she'd met at Shadowhall Academy. "I'm Lilian. Lilian Jones."

"Nice to meet you, too, Lilian. I'm Marian. Everyone calls me Maz."

"*Marian*," Ms Strange said, emphasizing her full name, "will show you to your dormitory and help you get acquainted with everyone and everything. In the meantime, if you have any problems, you'll find me here. I shall see you at supper."

And with that Ms Strange swept into her office like a winter breeze.

"What do you think of it so far then?" Marian said as she led Lilian along yet another corridor.

"I'm not sure yet. I've never seen so many girls in one place."

"There are day girls and there are boarders," Marian explained. "Day girls are called that because they live nearby so they go home at night. Us boarders don't get to escape I'm afraid."

Lilian wasn't sure she liked the sound of that, but Marian gave her a smile.

"Okay, we take a left here," she said, leading Lilian up

a wide staircase and down yet another corridor that looked exactly like all the others.

"I don't think I'll ever remember where everything is," Lilian said. "It's so big."

"Oh, you'll get the hang of it soon enough," Marian said. "It's funny. It all feels very small to me now, like being trapped in a snow globe."

Lilian gave Marian a sideways glance.

"What do you mean?"

"Just how something large can start to feel very small after a while. But I'm a goth so don't listen to me; we always look on the dark side of life."

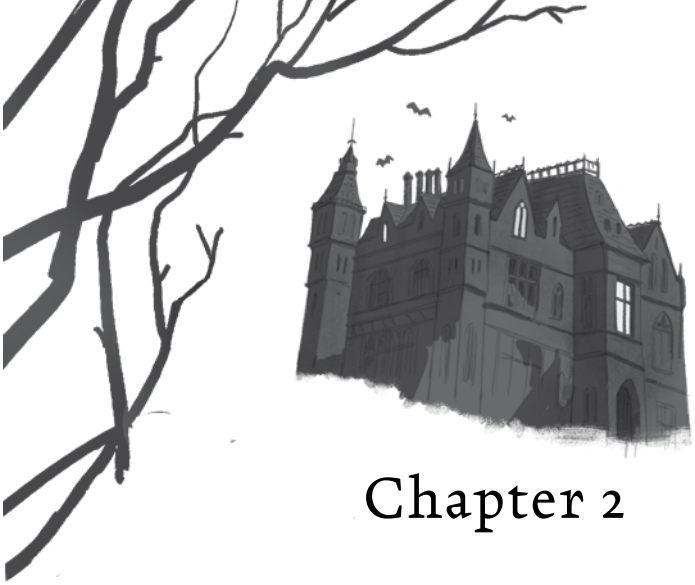
"A goth?"

"Yeah, you know. We like graveyards and bats. Listen to The Cure. Always wear black, at least when we're not made to wear this," she said, gesturing to the uniform, which was navy with gold trim. "We're into anything that's dark and gloomy. That's why I dye my hair black, too, but you have to promise not to tell anyone, because we're not allowed to. There are *rules*, you see. Lots and lots of rules."

Lilian wondered if she might be a goth, too. Her hair was already black, and although she couldn't recall ever having a fondness for graveyards, she had heard of The

Cure, and she did find herself drawn to gloomy thoughts. She had no time to ponder it further though, because Marian had nudged her in the ribs.

"Talking of which, watch out, here comes a vampire."



Chapter 2

Lilian followed Marian's gaze. A small, slender man, dressed in an ill-fitting black suit, shuffled towards them. His head seemed too large for his body and his gait was very odd, Lilian noticed. He walked as if he was trying not to be seen, clinging so close to the wall of the corridor that he would catch his shoulder every few steps and do a funny little twist. His hair was long and rose back from his forehead into a huge dark cloud, as if it had been caught by a gust of wind and then frozen in that position.

"Good afternoon, sir," Marian said, as the man approached.

He darted a nervous glance at them both, his eyes large, watery and pale blue.

"Marian." He paused as he looked again at Lilian, his

small mouth twitching. "I'm terribly sorry, I can't recall your name."

Lilian attempted to put on her friendliest smile, hoping she didn't look like a ventriloquist's dummy.

"Lilian Jones."

"Lilian is new, sir," Marian added. "She just arrived today."

"Ah, that would be why then. Pleasure to meet you, Lilian, I'm Simon Bullen."

"Mr Bullen teaches history," Marian added.

"Hello," Lilian said.

Mr Bullen stared at them both for another uncomfortable few seconds.

"Well, welcome again, Lilian. I'll see you both at supper."

"Thank you," Lilian said, before Mr Bullen continued his strange shuffling dance down the corridor.

"Told you he looked like a vampire," Marian said.

"I thought he looked nervous."

"Because he's out in the daylight, that's why. You'd be nervous too if you thought you might burst into flames and die horribly at any moment."

It was at that moment Lilian decided she and Marian were going to be good friends and the spiky ball of knots and nerves in her stomach began to unravel a little.

"Come on," said Marian, leading Lilian to a grand staircase. "The dorms are right at the top."

The staircases were made of old, stained wood, at the ends of which were matching wooden figures that looked as if they might be lions. There was nothing like this in Lilian's old school. Here, she was beginning to feel rather grand, too. Normally she would only see stuff like this on a guided tour through a stately home, but she lived here now. This was *her* school. The floors were tiled in a black and white pattern and there were large portraits hanging on the walls. The higher they climbed, the narrower the hallways became. They were crooked and winding, the floors cracked and uneven, rising in strange little hills and bumps. It was cold, too. Lilian's fingers began to feel stiff, and she crunched them into the palm of her hand. Eventually, Marian paused outside a door, held out her hand and gave a little bow like a butler.

"After you, ma'am," she said in a pretend posh accent.

Lilian pushed open the door. Her dormitory smelled of furniture polish, but it wasn't unpleasant. It had whitewashed walls, the only decoration a painting of a sad-looking Jesus with a halo. The windows were huge and overlooked the sweeping lawns and the wood and lake beyond. Each one had a giant pair of burgundy velvet

curtains which must have stretched ten feet high and weighed a ton. There were four beds in total. Each girl had a small wardrobe and a desk beside their bed. Most alarming, for Lilian, was the lack of privacy. She didn't even have to share a bedroom with her sister, Susan. Now she would be sharing a bedroom with three strangers. This was a situation that she had no experience of, and the prospect made her nervous. Did she snore? Talk in her sleep? She had no idea.

"You can put your stuff in there," Marian said, pointing to the wardrobe next to an unclaimed bed. "The bathrooms are next door but don't go in there without your dressing gown on, they're freezing."

"Is there anywhere warm in this place?"

"No, not really. You sort of get used to being permanently cold."

Lilian placed her suitcase on her new bed and opened it. Her belongings had been packed into neat little squares, all the clothes pressed and folded as if they'd just come new from the shop. Lilian had insisted on doing it herself, despite her mum's offer of help. She liked to be in charge of her own things. In the corner of her suitcase was a small shell, which Lilian had found on the beach in a place called Malmouth. Her parents had taken them there once

and this particular shell had been the first in what later became a quite extensive collection.

Just as she was about to place it on the bedside table, she heard the door creak open and a voice called out.

"Hey, Spooky, who's the new shipmate?"

She turned to see a tall girl looking at her with a bemused expression. It made Lilian feel nervous again.

"Her name is Lilian Jones." Marian sighed. "Lilian, this is Serena Khan, the High Queen of Shadowhall. Or at least that's how she sees herself. Her dad drives a Rolls-Royce. Really, she should be at some posh school in Switzerland but her dad didn't fancy shelling out the cash so she ended up here with us."

Serena was as tall as Lilian, with long black hair that flowed over her shoulders like a shining cloak. Her dark eyes glittered with mischief. Serena was beautiful but with a cruel look. Like a jagged mountain peak.

"I can't help it if my papa's loaded," Serena snapped. "And he drives a Bentley, just for the record. Anyway, I see you've been dyeing your hair again, Spooky. I assume Ms Strange gave you special permission?"

This made Marian's already pale face go a little paler.

Lilian had no idea whether this girl was friend or foe. She bowed her head, willing Serena to pass on by. She

wanted time to ease her way in before any uncomfortable encounters presented themselves. But to her dismay, she heard footsteps and a shadow fell across the bed. Serena sniffed very loudly.

"That's a nice seashell," she said. "Can I have it?"

Lilian took a deep breath. It appeared that this was to be her first test. And she needed to get safely through it.

"No, sorry, it's like my lucky charm."

Serena stretched out a hand and wiggled her fingers on the edge of Lilian's case.

"Well, now it can be my lucky charm, can't it?"

Lilian felt her face flush. Turning, she locked eyes with Serena.

"Have you ever heard of the vagus nerve?"

Serena frowned.

"The what?"

"The vagus nerve," Lilian continued. "You see, if somebody presses their knuckle on a certain point in your neck, it hits the vagus nerve and can cause temporary blindness, or even unconsciousness. My father showed me how to do it once."

This was a lie. Lilian had only read about it in a book. But when she saw Serena's eyes widen and her mouth fall open, she felt relieved that she'd prepared in advance.

Her dad had cautioned her that sometimes schools came with bullies and so she'd determined to have something up her sleeve. A strategy. Something that might at least make someone think she was tougher than she looked.

"Alright, new girl, keep your wig on," Serena said. "I was only asking."

Then Serena flounced away, pausing to flick Marian's hair as she passed, almost like a consolation prize.

"Well, Maz," Serena said, flopping down on her bed and picking up a Sony Walkman. "It seems our new friend has a problem with sharing things."

"I didn't mean that…" Lilian began, but Serena placed her headphones on, switched the play button, and the sound of a tinny drumbeat filled the room.

"Ignore her," Marian said. "She's just trying to get the measure of you, she does it all the time."

Unsure if she'd overreacted, Lilian silently returned to her unpacking. She knew that it was important to make friends. Now she might have made an enemy on her very first day. Marian was impressed though.

"I've never seen anyone put Serena in her place so quickly," she whispered, her eyes shining with glee as she came to sit on the end of Lilian's bed. "And Serena's not scared of anything except heights."

"She's scared of heights?"

"Absolutely petrified. Says she can't go anywhere high up without feeling terrified and sick. Anyway, was that true about the *vaguest verve* thing?"

"Vagus nerve," Lilian corrected. "Yes it's true, but I have no idea how to do it."

"Ha!" Marian exclaimed. "Even better! I think that's two things she's terrified of now – heights and you."

Lilian didn't want Serena to be terrified of her.

But she didn't mind her being a little wary.

Supper was a noisy affair, eaten in a large dining hall. Lilian followed Marian as they queued up with trays and then sat down at long wooden tables. After the relative calm of the dormitory, Lilian found it all a little overwhelming. It had the feel of a medieval feast, only with awful food. She tugged at the neck of her new school jumper. It was coarse and ill-fitting, but she supposed she'd get used to it. Gazing around, she saw that up on the wood-panelled wall, there was a large tapestry. It showed two wolves curled around a flag of some kind, like a coat of arms. Turning her attention back to her meal, she prodded at the soggy quiche on her plate. A thin

stream of something which looked like yellow water oozed out.

"Don't worry, we all live on biscuits and tea here," a voice at her shoulder said.

Lilian was surprised to see Serena Khan sit down beside her.

"I'm not sure it's cooked," Lilian said, eager to have the chance to build a bridge with this girl.

"Probably not," Serena said. "I always think, why risk your life when you can play it safe and just throw it in the bin?"

Lilian laughed.

"So, it's freezing cold and we all live on biscuits?" she asked.

"Yes. That's exactly it. Welcome to Shadowhall. We love it here."

Beside her, Marian laughed, too, and for a while Lilian just listened as Serena and Marian made rude comments about the school and each other. They had a curious relationship. They seemed to be both annoyed and delighted with each other and once again Lilian regretted her and Serena's tetchy first encounter. She waited until there was a pause in the conversation, before asking the question that had been on her mind.

"Who's the empty bed in our dorm room for?" she asked.

"We don't know yet," Serena said. "Another newbie, like you. Hopefully she won't immediately threaten to kill me over a seashell."

"I…no…I mean," Lilian stammered.

"Don't take the bait," Marian said. "Serena's sense of humour takes a little getting used to."

"Marian's just trying to say that I'm very unique and special," Serena said with a grin.

Lilian laughed. She already liked Marian. Serena was quickly growing on her, too. Despite the girl's rather intimidating confidence, she was funny. And almost friendly.

The other girl arrived later that night. By then they were in bed, allowed an hour of reading before lights out. The door opened and one of the prefects led the girl in. She gave Lilian, Serena and Marian a quick fearful glance as if weighing up whether they were about to eat her. Lilian was relieved to see her. It felt good to have someone else for whom this was all new and confusing.

"Girls, this is Angela Radford," the prefect said. "She

was late getting here and is very tired so please help her get comfortable."

With that, the prefect disappeared, seemingly glad to have handed over the responsibility for this younger girl's welfare. Angela was small, with mousey, thin brown hair down to her shoulders and a pinched, pale face, with a small nose and mouth. She wore large blue spectacles and peered at them like a frightened mouse.

"Hello, where are you from, Angela?" Lilian asked, trying to make the girl feel welcome. It was, after all, only a few hours ago that she'd been in the exact same position.

"Ipswich," Angela whispered.

Lilian waited to see if she would add any further detail but that was that.

"I'm Lilian," she said. "I'm new, too."

"Hi, I'm Marian," Marian said, giving her customary warm smile. "But you can call me Maz."

Serena glanced up from her book and waved her hand in a bored fashion.

"Hi, I'm Serena. You can call me…Serena."

Lilian and Marian showed Angela where she could unpack, along with directions to the bathrooms. They offered biscuits, explained about the chilly temperatures, and did their best to help Angela relax and not feel as

terrified as she looked. Despite their best efforts, it didn't seem to work. Lilian could even see that Angela was trembling. She wanted to tell her it would be alright and that she was nervous, too. That Serena's bark was worse than her bite. That, yes, the school was old and a little creepy, but they would be just fine, all tucked up together. But none of that seemed appropriate with a girl she'd only just met, in a place she barely knew. And so with a tinge of regret, she left Angela to it.

It wasn't long before their door opened and Ms Strange peered in, her eyes sweeping the room like prison searchlights.

"Angela, Lilian, are you both settling in okay?" she asked. "I hope Serena and Marian are making you feel welcome?"

"Fine, thank you, miss," Lilian said.

Angela gave a tiny nod and mumbled something Lilian didn't quite catch.

"Very good. Well, it's worth remembering that while it all may seem very overwhelming right now, you'll soon get the hang of it. Goodnight then, girls. Lights out."

"Goodnight, miss," they all replied.

Lilian laid her book to one side, clicked off her bedside lamp, and settled down in bed. It felt like she was lying on

a plank and she had to tightly wrap the sheets and blankets around herself before she felt even vaguely warm. Shadowhall Academy was definitely more impressive on the outside than on the inside, but she didn't mind so much. It seemed to match its personality, like some crooked, grumpy old man. Every few minutes she heard a soft sniffle come from Angela's bed. Outside, the wind rustled through the trees. A cold slap of running footsteps echoed outside in the corridor. Maybe someone coming back from one of the bathrooms. But otherwise it was silent. All things considered, her first day hadn't been bad at all. She liked her room-mates and while it felt very strange to know that her parents and sister were far away, sleeping in this shared room had begun to feel like the start of the adventure she'd always promised herself.

Lilian closed her eyes. Her mind whirled, but it wasn't long before she fell asleep. After what only seemed like a few minutes, but was probably a few hours, Lilian was awoken by the sound of murmurs and whimpers. They were coming from Angela's bed. Perhaps she was having trouble sleeping. It did feel odd to be in these unfamiliar, hard beds, with their stiff sheets that smelled of washing powder and felt like they'd been spun from iron.

Cautiously, she leaned up on one elbow and peered

across the room. It was very dark, the heavy curtains blocking out what little light there was. As her eyes adjusted, she could make out a huddled shape underneath the blankets. Angela seemed to be lying very still. Lilian waited another few seconds, before easing herself out of the sheets.

"Angela," she whispered. "Are you okay?"

In response there came a soft sniffle.

"Yes."

Lilian waited a minute, unsure what to do. There was no movement from either Marian or Serena, though she could hear their soft breathing.

"Are you sure?" Lilian said. "Did you have a nightmare or something?"

"No, I just can't sleep," Angela said.

"What is it?"

"Sshh," Angela said, holding a finger to her lips.

Lilian strained to listen. For a moment there was silence.

Then she heard it.

A faint *tap-tap-tap*.

Coming from the wall.