

DARK *and* SHALLOW LIES

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DARK
and
SHALLOW
LIES

GINNY MYERS SAIN





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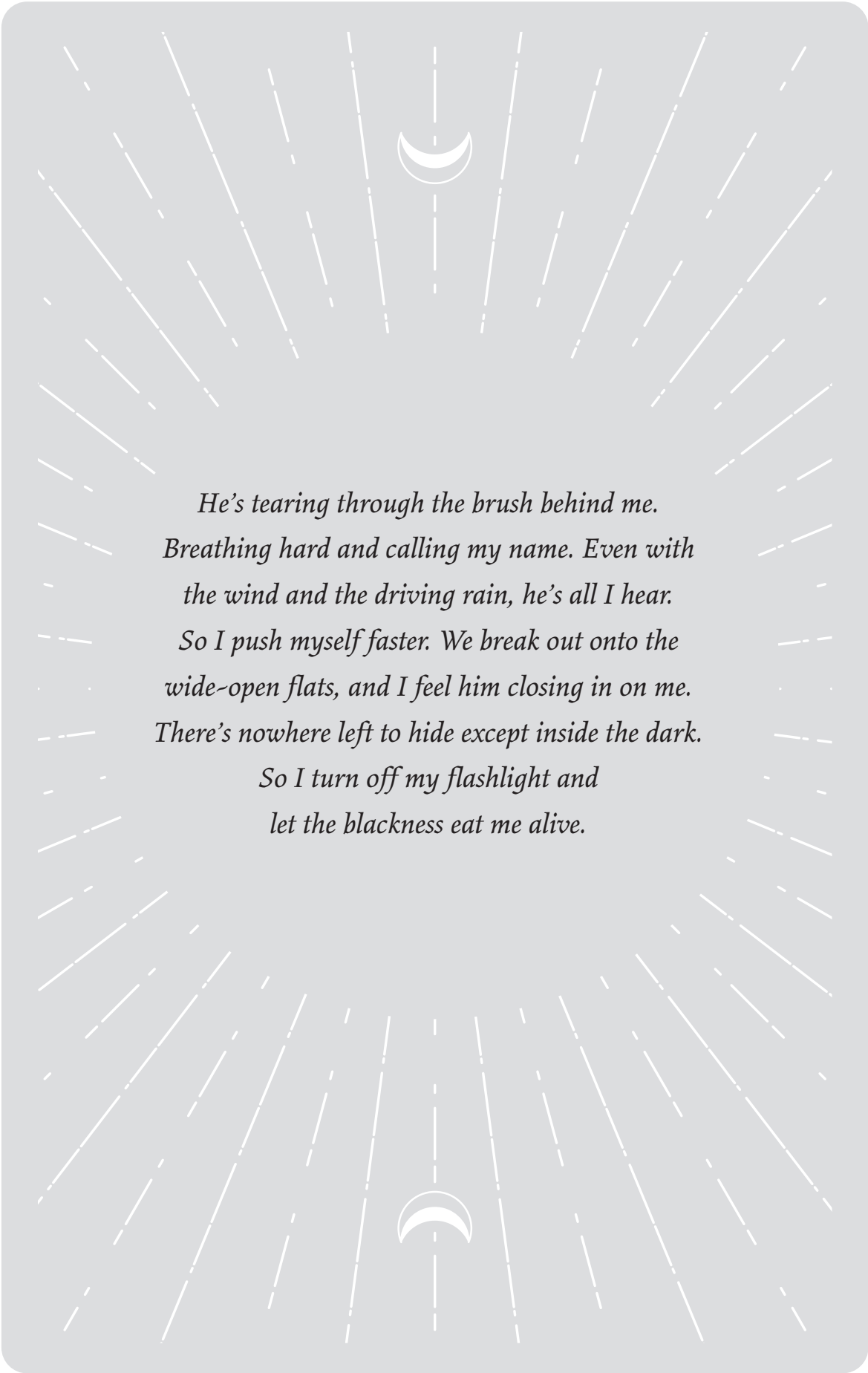
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☾ What's past is prologue. ☾
—*The Tempest*



*He's tearing through the brush behind me.
Breathing hard and calling my name. Even with
the wind and the driving rain, he's all I hear.
So I push myself faster. We break out onto the
wide-open flats, and I feel him closing in on me.
There's nowhere left to hide except inside the dark.
So I turn off my flashlight and
let the blackness eat me alive.*



The last time I saw my best friend, she called me a pathetic liar and then she punched me in the mouth. The shock of it almost kept me from feeling anything until it was over. And I had no idea what Elora was thinking in that last moment. Because she didn't say. And I'm not a mind reader.

Honey is. My mother was. I guess. All the women in my family, right up to me.

But not me.

I'm thinking of that night last summer as I stand on the front porch of the Mystic Rose and stare at Elora's missing poster, trying to catch my breath. I'm wondering why they chose that picture. The one with her eyes half-closed. She hated that picture.

Jesus.

She *hates* that picture.

I've been steeling myself for this moment since I got that phone call back in February. Trying to imagine what it would be like to come home and step off the boat into a La Cchette

without Elora. And I knew it would be bad. But I hadn't been prepared for the poster.

The words missing girl printed in red caps.

The sheriff's phone number.

My chest tightens. I drop my backpack to sink down and sit on the front steps so I can pull myself together. Clear my head of that weird flash that hit me out of nowhere.

Elora running from someone.

Being chased through the rain.

Swallowed up by the dark.

A few seconds to shake off that terror. Her terror. That's all I need. Then surely I'll be able to breathe again.

The screen door slams, and I hear footsteps on the porch behind me. It's Evie. "Hey, Grey." She perches beside me on the steps, like a bird, and offers me half a stick of gum dug out of the pocket of her cutoff shorts. "Miss Roselyn said you was comin' this mornin'. You just get in?"

La Cayette, Louisiana, is the self-proclaimed "Psychic Capital of the World," so I always find it odd that every summer visit starts with people firing off questions they should already know the answers to.

How was school dis year?

Still makin' good grades?

Gotcha a boyfriend yet?

"Yeah." I unwrap Evie's offering and nod toward the backpack at my feet. "Got off the mail boat a few minutes ago." The gum's a little stale, and I wonder how long she's been carrying it around.

“We didn’t know if you’d come this year . . .” Evie’s voice trails off, and she glances at the curling edges of the missing poster. At the picture in the center. Half-closed eyes and a long dark ponytail. That bright blue tank top with the faded yellow stars. And a knock-you-on-your-ass smile.

Elora.

“She’s my best friend,” I say. “My—” But I can’t choke out the words.

“Your twin flame,” Evie finishes for me, and I nod. She settles onto the step and slips her hand into mine. “So you had to come.”

Evie’s gentle sweetness is as familiar as the worn smoothness of the porch step. And the smell of the river. I’m glad she was the first one to find me.

Sweat stings the corners of my eyes, and I pull up the collar of my T-shirt to dab it away. Barely eight thirty in the morning and already a million degrees with 500 percent humidity. I lived down here full-time till I was almost nine years old, so you’d think I’d be used to it, but it always takes me a while to reacclimate after spending the school year up in Arkansas with my dad. I mean, it’s hot there, too . . . but not like this.

Nowhere is hot like this. Or wet like this. Spending the summer in La Cchette is like living inside someone’s mouth for three months out of the year.

I pull my eyes away from Elora’s picture in time to watch the back half of a big black snake disappear into a clump of tall sedge grass beyond the boardwalk. It’s too far away to say for sure if it’s a moccasin. But I figure it probably is. That thick

body gives it away. And I know they're always out there, sliding back and forth beneath our feet like the slow roll of the tides. Every once in a while, one of them finds its way up onto the boardwalk and into someone's house, where it meets its doom at the business end of a long-handled hoe. Or a shovel.

I don't like to think about the snake, or where it might be heading, but it's better than staring at that poster while the words missing girl burn deep into my brain.

"You okay, Grey?" Evie asks. She's twisting a strand of almost-white-blond hair around one finger.

"Yeah," I say. "It's just weird, you know? Everything's different—"

"And nothing's different," she finishes.

And that's it exactly.

Evie reaches down to scratch at a bug bite on one bare foot, and I can't help noticing how long her legs have gotten since last summer. Plus, she's gotten boobs. She's finally growing up.

Evie turned sixteen last September, the youngest of us all . . . but not by much.

People down here call us the Summer Children. We started our lives as a complete set.

Ten. The most perfect number. The number of divine harmony. The number at the heart of the universe. Ten commandments. Ten plagues of Egypt.

Ten babies born to eight different families.

A real population boom for little bitty La Cachette. One hundred tiny fingers and one hundred tiny toes. All of us

arriving that same year, between the vernal equinox in March and the autumnal equinox in September.

Me and Elora. And Hart.

Evangeline.

Serafina and Lysander.

Case.

Mackey.

Ember and Orli.

I wonder if the others have changed, too. Like Evie. I wonder if Elora had.

Shit.

Has.

Suddenly, there's this ache inside me that feels big enough to fall into. And, unlike me, maybe Evie is a mind reader, because she puts one arm around my shoulders and gives me an awkward squeeze.

Only, I know she isn't a mind reader. Evie is clairaudient. She hears things. Messages. Words. Snatches of whispered conversation. Music sometimes. Like a radio in her head. That's her gift.

And my mother wasn't a true mind reader, either. Not really. She saw color auras. That was her thing. Which explains how I got my name. Imagine looking at your perfect baby girl and seeing her swimming in a sea of gray.

The color of fog and indecision.

The color of nothing special.

The color of everything that's in between.

"We're glad you're here, Grey." Evie's words are so soft. She

always talks quiet, like she's afraid of drowning out the voices in her head. If it were me, I think I'd talk loud, so I wouldn't have to hear their whispering. "We've been waiting for you," she adds. And I know she means all of them.

Well, all of them except Ember and Orli, of course, because they've been dead forever.

And all of them except Elora.

Because Elora's been gone a little over three months now. One night back in February, she walked into the swamp and vanished. Almost like she'd never been here at all.

"You seen Hart yet?" Evie asks.

"I haven't seen anyone," I tell her. "Except you."

"He's not doing so good, Grey." There's something strange in her voice, and she looks away from me. Out toward the river. "I mean, it's been real hard on everybody, but Hart . . . he . . ." Evie shakes her head and chews on a ragged cuticle. "You'll see for yourself, I guess."

It feels wrong, the two of us gossiping about Hart before I've even had a chance to lay eyes on him. I know he wouldn't like it.

"Is Honey up?" I ask.

"Yeah," Evie says. "She's in the back room unpacking a bunch of new yoga DVDs. I just came over to bring some muffins for the boat people."

To everyone else, my grandmother is Miss Roselyn. But I call her Honey. She runs the spiritualist bookstore, which happens to be the only real business in town. The Mystic Rose sells books, sure, but also amulets, crystals, incense, candles,

healing herbs, and now yoga DVDs, apparently. On busy weekends Evie's mama, Bernadette, makes a little money by sending over fresh baked goods and sandwiches for Honey to peddle to the hungry tourists.

"I better let her know I'm here," I say. "She thinks I'm coming in on the ten o'clock boat."

There are no roads that lead to La Cachette. To get here, first you drive to the end of the world, then you get on a boat and keep on going. Two hours south of New Orleans, Highway 23 dead-ends in Kinter, a tiny almost-town where you can buy groceries, gas, and round-trip "scenic" boat rides to the Psychic Capital of the World. From there, the journey down-river to La Cachette takes another half hour.

The town, if it's even big enough to be called that, sits on a low-lying island, absolutely as far south as you can get in Louisiana, just above the spot where the Mighty Mississippi splits into three fingers and then splinters into a hundred more before it finally floods out into the bayou, eventually reaching the Gulf of Mexico. Ol' Man River on one side and nothing but waterlogged swamp on the other.

As Hart likes to say, one way in. And no way out.

I glance at an old wooden sign nailed to a post out on the boat dock.

Welcome to La Cachette, Louisiana

Elevation 3 Ft.

Population 106 Living Souls

The only time the number changes is when someone gets born.

Or dies.

Somewhere inside my head, a voice jeers that they'll have to repaint it. Because of Elora. But I close my ears. Don't let myself listen.

Just then, Honey calls to me from inside the bookstore. "Grey, you gonna come in here and see me?"

Evie gives me a little smile as she stands up to leave. "She knows." A whisper of a breeze moves through, and I hear the tinkle of wind chimes from someplace nearby. It's a nice sound. Almost like laughter.

Evie's smile fades. "Miss Roselyn always knows."

She turns and starts down the boardwalk in the direction of her house, right next door. But I stop her with a question that I hadn't planned to ask.

"Do you think she's dead?"

Evie stares at me for a few seconds. She's twisting that long strand of white-blond hair around and around one finger again. She blinks at me with pale blue eyes, then answers me with a question of her own. "Do you?"

"I don't know," I say. "I hope not."

I don't tell Evie the rest of it, though. I don't say that Elora can't be dead, because, if she is, I don't know how I'll keep breathing.

Evie reaches up to swat away a horsefly that's buzzing around her head, and when she opens her mouth to speak again, I want to tell her I'm not asking for her opinion. I want

to know if she *knows*. For sure. If she's got that radio in her head tuned to Elora's frequency. But all she says is, "Welcome home, Grey."

Honey yells at me again from inside the bookstore, so I stand up and grab my backpack. Then I spit Evie's gum into the tall grass before I head inside.

A bell jingles when I open the door, and Honey shouts, "Back here, Sugar Bee!"

I'm careful with my backpack as I weave my way through the crowded shop. Incense burns on the counter, and every bit of space is crammed full of books and bottles and jars and colorful rocks. Herbs dry in little bundles on the windowsills.

I pause a minute to breathe in the comfort of a hundred familiar smells, then I push aside the bead curtain that marks the doorway to the back room. Honey stops unpacking boxes to come give me a big hug. She has on a purple flower-print dress and sensible white tennis shoes. Dangly earrings. A yellow headscarf covers her white curls. I can't decide if she looks any different than she did when I left last August. It's like whatever age Honey is, that's the age she's always been to me. It's only when I look at photographs that I see she's getting older.

"There's my girl!" She plants a big kiss on the top of my head. "Oh! Look at your hair!" she says, even though I've had basically the same short pixie cut for years. "You look so sophisticated!" That makes me smile. "I thought you weren't coming till later," she scolds. "I would've made breakfast."

Twice a day Monday through Friday and three times a day on weekends, an ancient ferry shuttles passengers back and

forth between Kinter and La Cachette. The first trip of the day is always at ten o'clock. Sometimes, though, if you're lucky, you can talk Alphonse, the mail-boat captain, into letting you ride along on his early morning run. Today I was lucky.

"I'm not that hungry," I tell her. "I had a granola bar." Honey raises one eyebrow, silently judging my dad for putting me on the boat without breakfast.

"Evangeline brought over some fresh muffins," she tells me. "Bran. And some blackberry, I think." She leads me back into the shop and points out the basket by the register.

I dig around until I find a big blackberry one. I'm in the middle of peeling away the wax paper when I notice the stack of flyers sitting on the counter.

HAVE YOU SEEN THIS GIRL?

Underneath the big block letters, there's another picture of Elora. This time she's sitting on the edge of the picnic table out behind her house. She's wearing cutoffs and an orange bikini top. Her long dark hair is loose, sunglasses perched on the top of her head like a crown. Her mouth is open, and she's been caught midlaugh.

I recognize the photo immediately. It was taken at the beginning of last summer. Before everything went wrong between the two of us. Only a sliver of bare shoulder at the edge of the picture hints that someone is sitting next to her. Someone who's been cropped out of the image.

Me.

The best friend she cut out of her life, just the way someone cut me out of that photograph.

I'm stuck for a minute, trying to remember what she was

laughing about. Staring at Elora. And the space where I should have been. When I finally look up, Honey is watching me.

“You feel her,” she says. “You’ve always said you didn’t have the gift, but I’ve never believed it.”

“No.” I wrap the muffin back up and set it aside. “It’s not like that. I just keep expecting her to show up, you know?”

I want to ask Honey the same question I wanted to ask Evie. I want to ask if she knows—for sure—whether Elora is still alive. But I don’t. I’m afraid to hear the answer.

Honey is an old-school spiritualist at heart. A true medium. She believes that the spirits of the dead exist and that they have the ability to communicate directly with the living. If they want to.

For Honey, they communicate mostly through visions. She reads tea leaves and stuff like that, but that’s just for the tourists on day trips down from New Orleans. The real stuff she keeps to herself these days. She says nobody wants to listen to the wisdom of the dead anymore. They just want to know when their boyfriends are going to propose. Or if they’ll win the lottery. And the dead, Honey says, don’t give a shit about stuff like that. They have bigger fish to fry.

I tear my eyes away from Elora’s frozen laugh, and Honey is still watching me. “Every year you remind me more of your mother,” she tells me, and I know the resemblance she sees goes deeper than our chestnut hair, our big green eyes, and the freckles scattered across our noses. “Always keeping the most important pieces of yourself tucked away somewhere.”

The little bell over the door jingles, and I look up, thinking

maybe it really will be Elora standing there and this whole thing will be over. We'll rip down the missing posters and toss the flyers in the trash. Then I'll tell her I'm sorry, and she'll forgive me. And everything will be the way it's always been.

The way it's supposed to be.

But it isn't Elora. It's Hart.

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