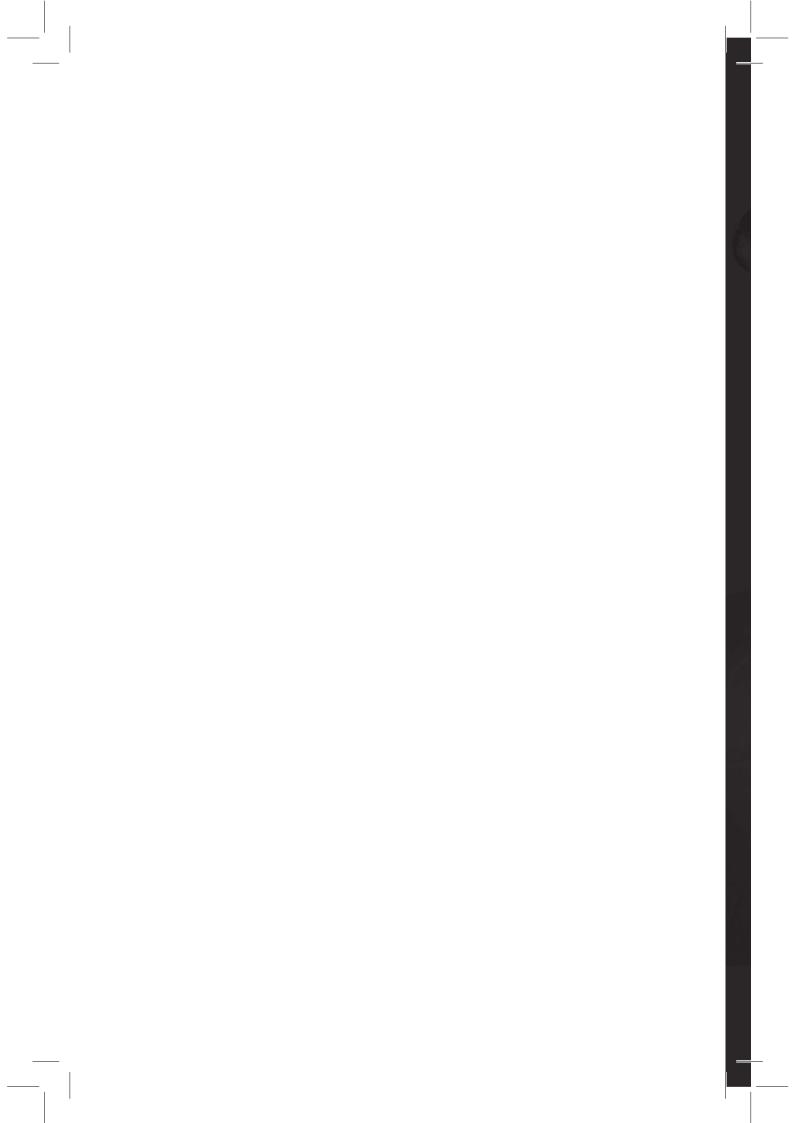
The LIGHT BLINDS US



ANDY DARCY THEO



First published in Great Britain in 2024 by Gallery YA, an imprint of Simon & Schuster UK Ltd

Text copyright © 2024 Andy Darcy Theo Character art copyright © 2024 Alex Forrest

This book is copyright under the Berne Convention No reproduction without permission. All rights reserved.

The right of Andy Darcy Theo to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted by him in accordance with sections 77 and 78 of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988.

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Simon & Schuster UK Ltd 1st Floor, 222 Gray's Inn Road London WC1X 8HB

Simon & Schuster: Celebrating 100 Years of Publishing in 2024

www.simonandschuster.co.uk www.simonandschuster.com.au www.simonandschuster.co.in

Simon & Schuster Australia, Sydney Simon & Schuster India, New Delhi

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

PB ISBN 978-1-3985-3177-2 eBook ISBN 978-1-3985-3184-0 eAudio ISBN 978-1-3985-3183-3

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual people living or dead, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

Typeset by Sorrel Packham

Printed and bound in the UK using 100% Renewable Electricity at CPI Group (UK) Ltd



For 13-year-old me. We did it.



AUTHOR'S NOTE

This book is full of paradoxes, but so is the human condition.

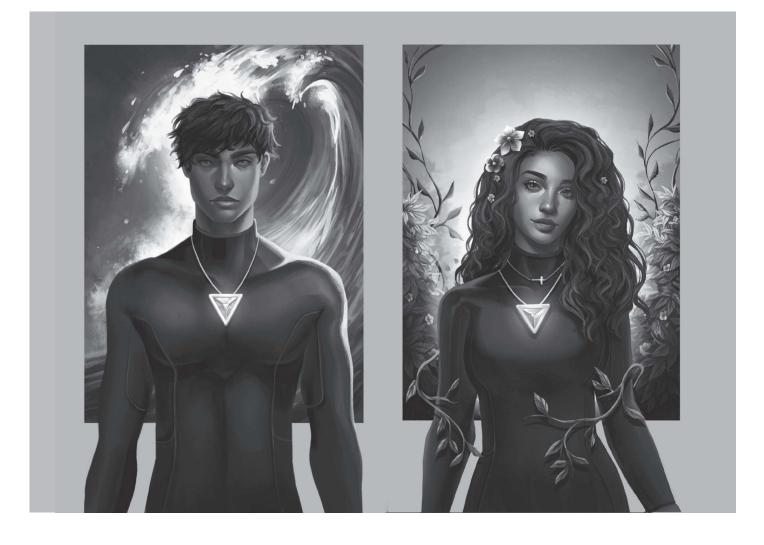
Prepare for laughter and revenge, love and loss, light and dark. In times of humour there is sadness, and in the greatest moments of despair there is hope.

Alexis's psychosis is based on my own family history, years of extensive research, and my experience as a senior clinical psychology assistant and healthcare assistant in a psychiatric hospital. Alexis's symptoms, cognitive profile and mannerisms are inspired by real-life encounters to reflect an authentic experience in a fantasy setting. His journey to understanding himself and living with his mental illness is raw and tumultuous and incomplete, as it is for so many of us.

I hope you love reading *The Light That Blinds Us* as much as I loved writing it.

Welcome to the Elemental world.

Take care on your descent into darkness.



ALEXIS
I'll drown you
in your own blood
MICHAELS

DEMI
Don't make me
tell you twice
NIKOLAS



BLAISE
I'm sorry that
I'm beautiful
ADEMOLA

CAELI
I'd rather die
than apologise
DORAN



PROLOGUE

Eleven years ago

Alexis Michaels's parents were certain their son didn't know what he was doing when he tried to drown his therapist.

They were wrong.

Alexis knew exactly what he was doing.

Not that he wanted to kill anyone – he was only six. But even by that age, Alexis had long grown accustomed to doing things he didn't want to do.

And he would do anything to silence the Shadow Man.

Dr Carl Dash didn't know this when he arrived for a psychiatric consultation with a boy tormented by nightmares. The appointment, like all of his assessments, began with him thinking of a single word to describe the patient. An outdated method perhaps — but Dr Dash liked to think of himself as a good judge of character. And after thirty-seven years of experience, he wasn't going to change now. People weren't as complicated as they liked to think.

He didn't know it at the time, but the boy standing before him was an exception. Dark curly hair fell in unruly waves over the boy's tanned forehead, covering much of his eyes and face. He stood in the open doorway and looked up at the doctor.

Dr Dash smiled. 'Hello, young man. And who might you be?'

Before the boy could respond, winter's icy whisper howled, sweeping through the quaint suburban cul-de-sac of Valerian Lane. Dr Dash shivered as he buried his chin into his scarf and pulled his long woollen coat across his chest. The boy, however, didn't flinch. He only waited for the wind to withdraw before he spoke.

'Alexis.'

Alexis brushed his hair from his eyes, revealing their colour – an inner ring of icy blue, surrounded by a thicker band of obsidian black. *Central heterochromia*, the Doctor thought – rare. He had never seen anyone with eyes like this before. They were as beautiful as they were unsettling, in the way all unnatural things are.

'Alexis!' A man rushed into the hallway behind the boy, followed by a woman carrying a baby. They smiled at Dr Dash in greeting before the man crouched down to Alexis's level and placed his hands on his son's shoulders. 'What did we say about opening the door to strangers?' he asked gently.

Alexis nodded and retreated inside the house. *Interesting child*, Dr Dash thought. What word would best suit him? *Peculiar*, *unnerving*, *melancholy* all came to mind, but none were quite right.

'Sorry about that.' The boy's father stuck out a hand. 'You must be Doctor Dash?'

'Yes. And you must be Mr and Mrs Michaels?'

'Mr and *Doctor*,' said the woman, failing to stifle a grin. 'Didn't do all those years of medical training to not have the title. But call us Stephanie and Jackson. It's nice to meet you, doctor. Please come in and have some tea.'

'Bold' was the word for Stephanie Michaels. Dr Dash liked her already.

Untouched by the pollution of Central London, and free from its crowded confinements, the houses of Valerian Lane stood proudly against the great expanse of Protegere Forest. Set back and guarded by gates, the Michaels' home was as picturesque on the inside as one would expect from the outside, with morning sunlight spilling into the tall windows and conservatory where they settled.

Jackson poured them cups of Earl Grey tea. Then he took the baby while Stephanie grasped the teacup with both hands to absorb the comforting heat. They were a young couple — an attractive couple — and very much in love. Dr Dash could tell just from the way their bodies found a way to always be touching, even if it was just at the elbows. Yet there was a worry between them, and it was more visible now.

The doctor was the one to break the burdensome silence.

'Alexis looks a lot like you, Jackson. And yet – he's adopted, isn't he?'

Stephanie's response flew out, drenched in maternal defence. 'Yes. Why do you ask?'

'I understand the circumstances were rather unusual,' he replied calmly. Stephanie's leg was bouncing nervously, but Jackson placed a reassuring hand on her knee and it stilled. 'Would you mind telling me a bit about it?'

It was Jackson who answered, looking at his wife between sentences, every so often glancing at Dr Dash's notepad. 'It was around a year ago. Alexis was five at the time, although we're not certain of his exact date of birth. It was after that megatsunami in the South Pacific Ocean. We were in Australia for our honeymoon, but luckily weren't near the shore when it hit. Stephanie and I went to volunteer; she helped the medics and I helped the survivors. That was when we met Alexis. His parents had both died — that's what the officials presumed. We bonded with him instantly, as if we were meant to be there to find him. As someone raised in the system myself, I couldn't leave him.'

Jackson shifted the weight of the baby in his arms. 'I'm sorry, but what does this have to do with Alexis's current issues?'

'It is helpful to get a sense of history to understand the present.' Dr Dash loosened his shirt collar. 'But let's move on. Could you tell me about Alexis's presentation and the reason you called me? You mentioned he suffers from nightmares?'

'Every night,' Stephanie began, setting down the empty drink. Without anything to fiddle with, she interlocked her hands and tucked them beneath her chin to hold up her head. 'Wakes up screaming and crying. Sometimes he even hurts himself in his sleep, scratching his chest and arms, making them bleed. We've tried everything to help him. We even have him in our bed now, but nothing seems to stop them.'

'Does he tell you what these night terrors are about? A particular worry?' Stephanie shook her head. 'I understand he has been diagnosed with retrograde amnesia and doesn't remember anything before the tsunami.'

'Not even his name,' said Stephanie with a sad smile. 'But the nightmare is always the same. It's always him falling off a cliff.'

Dr Dash added to his notes and then stood up. He didn't want to speak too much longer in case he had any preconceived ideas when he spoke to Alexis, but there was one more thing they hadn't discussed – the thing that had led him to take their case in the first place. 'And what about his hallucinations?'

The word alone brought over a cloud of disquiet for both Stephanie and Jackson. Even the baby sensed the change, squirming in his father's arms. Jackson tried settling him as he began crying, but soon handed him to Stephanie.

'Excuse me,' she said, standing also. 'I'll let you explain, darling.'

She left the room, soothing the baby. The distant wailing soon subsided.

Dr Dash turned back to face Jackson. His eyes had followed after his wife as she left, brimming with adoration and concern. It was that look alone that helped Dr Dash find Jackson's descriptive word: 'Guardian.'

'The hallucinations?' he prompted gently.

'Sometimes he looks like he's talking to someone who isn't there,' said Jackson. Through the glass table, the doctor could see his fists clenched so tightly they shuddered. 'He's better in the mornings and when he's around Jason; Jace, he calls him. But at night, he's . . . he says he talks to a man. A man made of shadow. He said the man tells him to do things, bad things.' Jackson met the doctor's eyes, finally sucking in a long breath. 'We're so worried about him, that he's going to hurt himself

or his brother. The last two psychiatrists that came refused to medicate him, saying he was too young, but we can't risk anything happening to him. Please, doctor, you have to help us. I-I'm powerless here. I can't bear to see him in pain any longer.'

Dr Dash could see the desperation, the pain, the exhaustion. 'I think it's time I talk to Alexis.'

Jackson led him towards the bright living room where Stephanie sat on the cream carpet, Jason resting in the crook of her arms. Alexis was crouched over his brother, letting the baby hold his finger, swaying it back and forth in the air. The corners of his eyes were crinkled from smiling so widely.

Alexis's face was a portrait of unconditional love. It was enough to make Dr Dash wonder if he and his wife had made a mistake in deciding not to have children of their own. The thought was only fleeting, however, for his attention shifted towards something odd – a bucket of water beside the mother and sons. A blue stone pendant cut into an inverted triangular shape floated on its surface, bobbing up and down.

Alexis glanced up, catching him staring. Alexis snatched the pendant out of the water, hastily pulling the chain over his head to conceal the pendant beneath his collar.

'What are you doing to your toys there?' Dr Dash asked, tucking the notepad away in his pocket. Jackson and Stephanie had reluctantly agreed to give him a few minutes alone with the boy. Now Alexis was entertaining himself by dunking three small plastic figurines into the pail of water beside him. Each time he submerged them beneath the surface, he too held his breath, pinching his nostrils closed with his free hand.

Two red blotches dotted Alexis's tanned cheeks until he finally gasped for air. He pulled the toy free from its underwater capture and placed it dripping on the carpet. Dr Dash was about to repeat his question before Alexis replied, his blue eyes still focussed on the water's surface.

'They're my friends. I'm seeing how long they can breathe underwater.'

'Why would you want to drown your friends?'

Alexis looked up at him, his eyebrow arched. 'Obviously they're not real.' He went back to playing with a slight smirk to himself.

'Obviously,' Dr Dash muttered, feeling humbled. 'So, do you have any other friends? Maybe from school?'

A long exhale slipped out as Alexis shook his head, his smile waning. 'I don't go to school.' He suddenly shut his eyes. His face contorted and his shoulders shot up as if to cover his ears from an inaudible, sharp sound. It was only brief, for he soon opened his eyes and added, 'I don't go anywhere. Mummy and Daddy don't let me out. I have no friends.'

'That's a shame,' Dr Dash said, making a quick note. 'It's good to have friends your age. Friends can be some of the best people in our lives. I'm sure that when he gets older, you'll find a friend in your brother.'

Alexis didn't seem to have heard him. He was looking past Dr Dash, somewhere over his shoulder. He looked like he was listening to something, or rather trying to ignore something. Dr Dash tried his best not to, but he couldn't help but turn around. There was nothing there, of course, but a coldness had descended on the room, and he felt prickles on the back of his

neck. There must be a draft coming from somewhere.

Dr Dash turned back. 'Alexis? Did you hear me?'

The boy didn't blink. He seemed transfixed. Scared. And as the clouds outside came together, unleashing a tide of rain that thrashed down on Valerian Lane, the natural light in the Michaels' home fell dark, and Dr Dash shared in Alexis's unease.

'Alexis,' he said quietly. 'Is there someone behind me?'

Alexis nodded.

'I can't see or hear him, but can you?'

The boy nodded again.

'Can you feel him? Can he touch you?'

Alexis's throat bobbed, his eyes threatening to spill with tears.

'Is he your friend?'

Alexis shook his head. He clutched the pendant through his T-shirt. When he spoke, his voice was barely a whisper, almost as if he was frightened of being overheard. 'It's the *Shadow Man*. It is real and it is not my friend.'

'Can I see your necklace?' Dr Dash asked, hoping to distract the boy.

Alexis shook his head. 'It's an amulet.'

'Did your parents get it for you?'

'No. It's mine. It floats sometimes.'

'I saw. I'm sure it's a very special necklace, then,' said Dr Dash, before correcting himself. 'A very special *amulet*.'

He received a smile from Alexis in return, a smile that revealed his dimples. This was a boy who didn't smile often, Dr Dash observed with sympathy. There was a vulnerability to the joy, a hesitancy to be happy. Dr Dash wanted to do

whatever he could to help make this rarity a reality.

'Here,' said Alexis, broken from his trance. He handed the doctor a toy. 'Who are you?'

'Thanks,' said Dr Dash, looking down at the battered figure. He began to walk the toy playfully across his knees. 'I'm a doctor.'

Alexis grinned widely. 'My mummy is a doctor. She fixes hearts.'

'I'm a different kind of doctor.' Dr Dash tapped his temple. 'Your mother treats people's bodies. I treat people's thoughts and feelings, to make them feel better. I have helped many children just like you, in fact.'

Alexis looked at him thoughtfully. 'You're here to help me? To help *us*?'

Before Dr Dash could reply, Alexis gasped and recoiled. He squeezed his eyes shut, clamped his hands over his ears and shook his head from side to side. All the while, he repeated the same two words over and over again, his plea nothing more than a whisper.

'Please stop, please stop, please stop.'

'Alexis?' Dr Dash spoke loudly and firmly. 'Alexis, do you know what I do when an upsetting emotion takes over? When I want to focus on the here and now?'

Dr Dash didn't know if his voice was louder than the one Alexis was hearing, but it was enough to make Alexis crack open his eyes. The doctor rolled back the sleeves of his own sweater. Slowly, he tapped each finger against his thumb, repeating the action over and over, rhythmically, purposefully. 'Can you copy me?' he asked.

Alexis watched for a while before imitating him, concentrating intently until he became familiar with it. It seemed to help, pulling his focus back and grounding him to a calmness.

Dr Dash handed him back his toy. 'Does the *Shadow Man* talk to you?'

The rain outside had fallen still, silenced by the clouds above. In the absence of all sound, the darkness of the sky held a noise of its own. Low. Persistent. Hostile.

Alexis's eyes were locked onto the water within the bucket. The surface was disturbed, rippling. Dr Dash didn't recall Alexis knocking the bucket at any point. 'It used to be a *voice* in my head. Now it's real. It scares me.'

'And what was he saying just then, Alexis?'

Alexis dropped his toy and looked straight at Dr Dash. There was a sorrow to his voice when he spoke, a guilt. Regret, not for what he had done, but for what he was about to do.

'It told me to drown you in your own blood.'

And Alexis lunged.

A strangled, gargling scream echoed throughout the house. Jackson had been waiting outside and flung the door open the second he heard the commotion. His heart thundered in his chest at the prospect of his son in danger, but what he found was the very opposite.

Alexis was holding down Dr Dash's head in the pail of water, pushing with all his weight. The old man's arms thrashed, scratching out at Alexis and drawing blood, but Alexis didn't move. His eyes were wide and unblinking, lips trembling.

Somehow charged with unnatural strength, the boy fought against the old man's resistance.

As Jackson rushed towards them, he noticed where the pail's rim had cut into Dr Dash's throat, deep enough to spill his own blood into the bucket where he was drowning.

Jackson hauled Alexis away with both arms, restraining his son as he screamed in defiance.

'I have to! I have to!' Alexis cried, fighting with a strength Jackson didn't know was possible for a six-year-old.

Stephanie ran into the room just as Dr Dash swept the bucket away, gasping for air, his thin, white hair plastered to his forehead. A mixture of blood and water dripped down his face, staining his shirt and sweater.

'I'm sorry!' Alexis bawled, rubbing his eyes with his knuckles before pressing his palms against his ears. Jason's cries in the distance rang out as Stephanie inspected Dr Dash for signs of major injury. He was cut and shaken, but he was going to be okay; just.

Alexis twisted in Jackson's grip, staring up at his father. 'It made me! If I don't, it hurts Jace.'

Stephanie and Jackson locked eyes with one another from either side of the room. It had been bad before, but never as bad as this. As the seconds rolled out – seconds of disbelief and wordless deliberation – Alexis's resistance grew futile, his strength depleting. Soon, the exhausted child crumbled.

'I don't want to,' Alexis whispered, tears streaming down his face as he buried it into Jackson's chest. 'I just want to make it stop. Please . . . make it stop.'

Dr Dash batted off Stephanie's hand as he struggled to

his feet, breathing raggedly. He ignored her as she began to apologise. Everyone was silent, watching the small boy clutching his blue amulet between his hands as if that would save him. As if that would somehow grant him sanity and safety.

Another delusion. Another fantasy.

Dr Dash realised in that moment that Alexis Michaels was beyond his help, possibly beyond anyone's.

He shook his head and backed away. He had to get out of this place.

He said only one thing before he had left, the one word to describe Alexis.

'Doomed.'