

DARK
and
SHALLOW
LIES

GINNY MYERS SAIN





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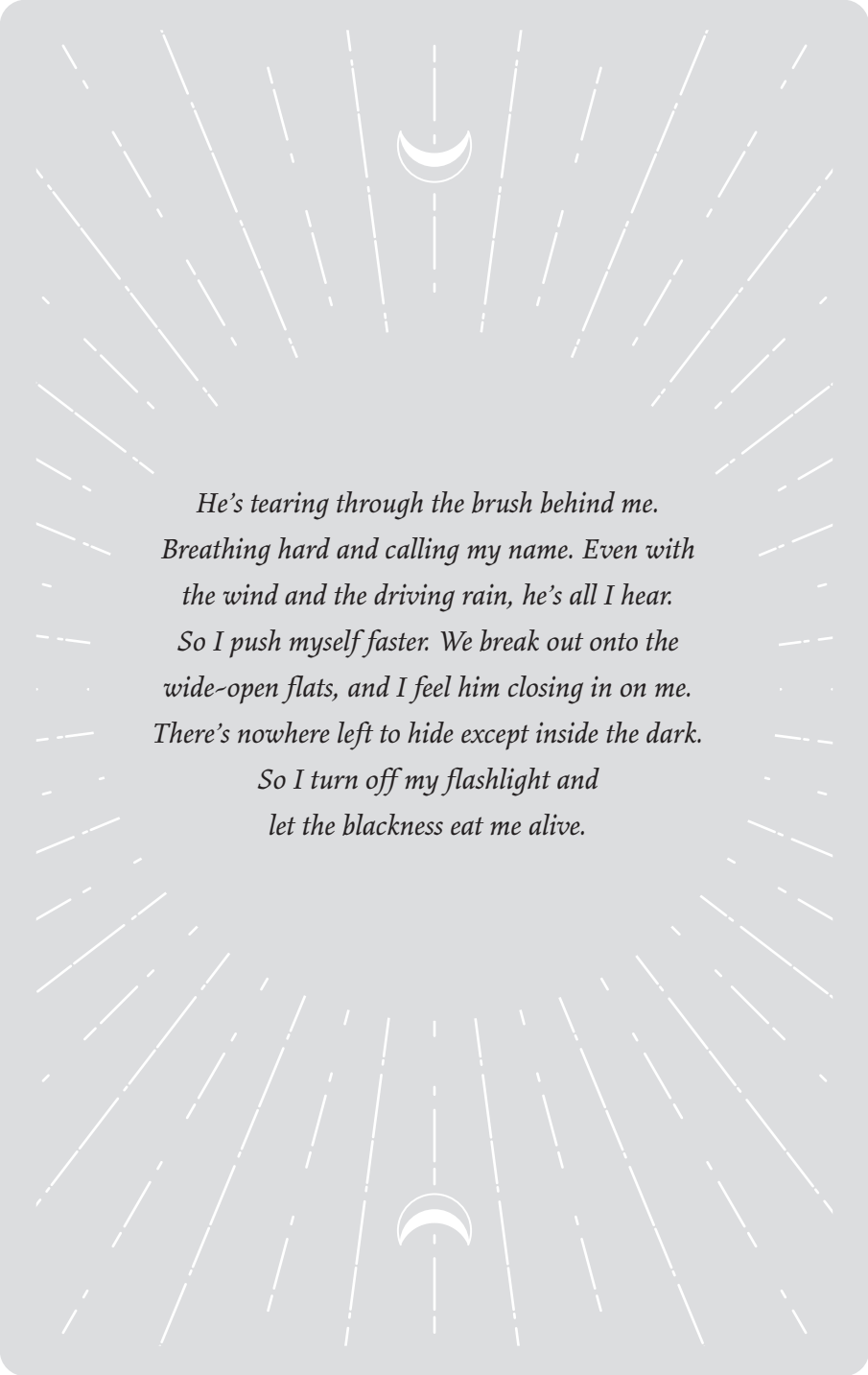
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Dedication TK



☾ 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 Cachette

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 Cchette. 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.”

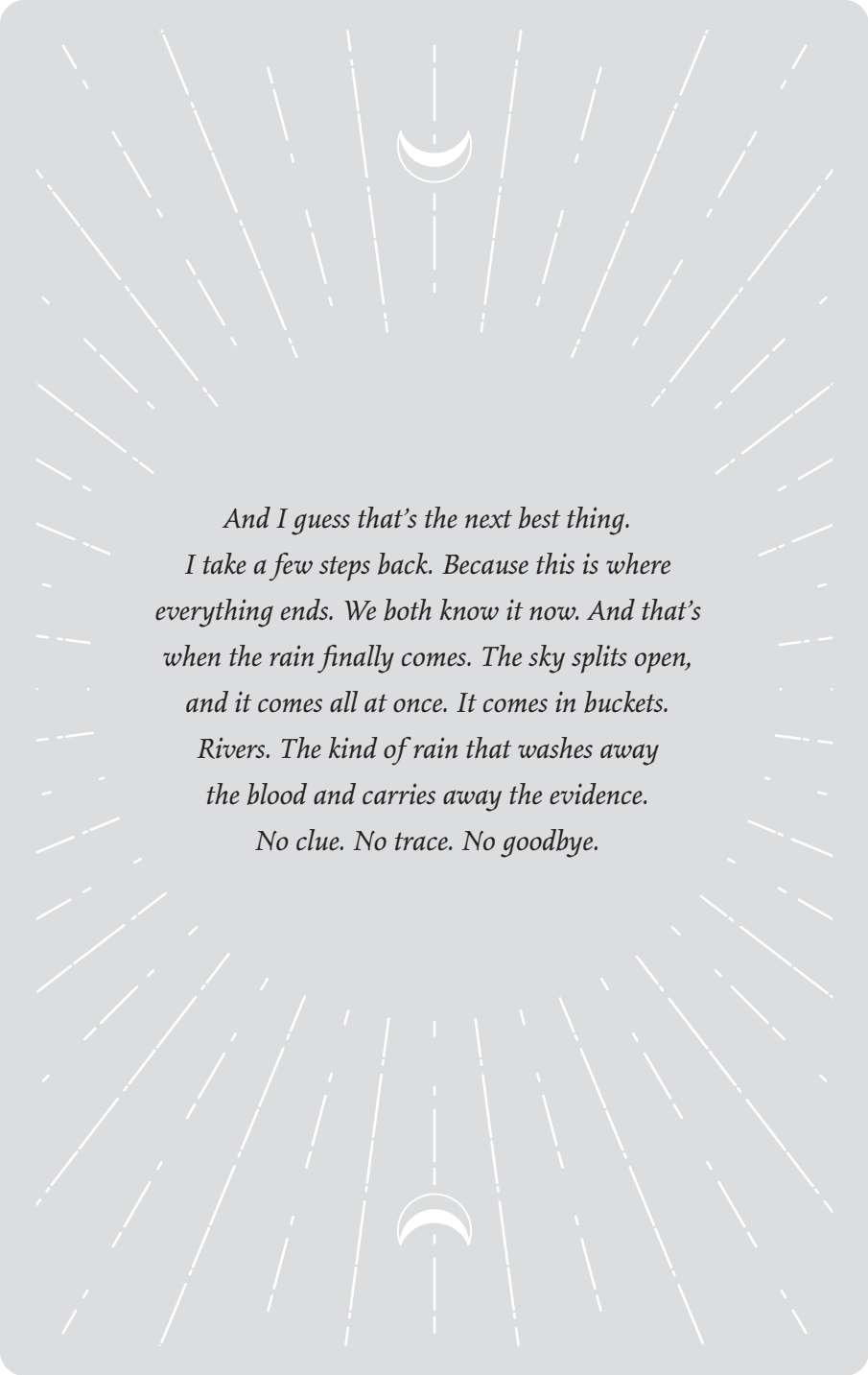
The little bell over the door jingles, and I look up, thinking

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.





*And I guess that's the next best thing.
I take a few steps back. Because this is where
everything ends. We both know it now. And that's
when the rain finally comes. The sky splits open,
and it comes all at once. It comes in buckets.
Rivers. The kind of rain that washes away
the blood and carries away the evidence.
No clue. No trace. No goodbye.*



Before I even have a chance to say hello, Hart's made it around the counter and has me wrapped up in a hug so tight it hurts. His arms are strong. Familiar. And I finally let myself melt into the safety of home. The soft sound of the bead curtain tells me Honey has slipped into the back room to give us some privacy.

"Evie told me you were here." Hart's voice sounds different than it did last summer. Deeper. Or maybe just sadder. I talked to him on the phone in February, when he called to tell me about Elora. But that conversation had been so weird. Short and confusing. We weren't used to talking to each other on the phone. And we were both upset. He hadn't offered a lot of details, and I'd been too stunned to ask questions. As soon as I hung up, it almost seemed like maybe it wasn't real. Like I'd imagined the whole phone call.

But now it's definitely real. This hug makes it real.

Hart is the oldest of us all. The first of ten. Born in late March, almost three months before Elora and I came into the

world on the same day in June. He's technically Elora's step-brother, but the "step" part never mattered to us. And I've always thought of him as my big brother, too. Sometimes he played with us. Sometimes he tormented us. Occasionally he kicked someone's ass on our behalf. But he was always there. Hart's mama married Elora's daddy when we were six years old, but in our minds, that only cemented what we already knew—that the three of us belonged to each other.

Three peas in a pod.

Three coins in the fountain.

Our very own three-ring circus.

Hart and Elora and Grey. Grey and Elora and Hart.

Hart was just a month shy of seventeen when Elora disappeared back in February, but when he called me that next day, he sounded so much younger. He sounded like he had when we were little.

He sounded scared.

"How you holding up?" I ask him. Evie was right. He looks like he hasn't eaten or slept in weeks.

"It's rough, Greycie." He pulls back to look at me. "How 'bout you?"

I shrug. "It's better, being here, I think."

I'd wanted to come right at the beginning—I started packing as soon as I got that phone call from Hart—but my dad wouldn't let me. We had a screaming, door-slamming fight about it that lasted most of a week. I couldn't afford the time off school, he'd said. Not at the tail end of my junior year, with track season getting ready to start.

Scholarships, you know.

Hart moves to sit on the tall stool behind the cash register, and I see him glance at the flyers. He runs his fingers through the wild dark curls on the top of his head, but they're untamable. I bet he hasn't so much as touched a comb since sometime in February. His eyes are red, and his fingernails look like he's bitten them down to the quick. Hart spends most of his life outside, but somehow he looks pale underneath his deep fisherman's tan.

He jerks his head toward the stack of flyers. "I took that picture," he says. "Remember that day?"

I nod. "I was trying to remember what she was laughing about."

"Who knows." He tries to smile. "Elora was always laughing."

I wait for him to correct himself. Elora *is* always laughing. But he doesn't. He leaves her in the past.

"There's still no news?" I ask him. "Nobody knows anything?" It seems wild to me that someone could vanish like that. No clue. No trace.

No goodbye.

How is that possible? Here, of all places?

Hart shakes his head. "There's no sign of her anywhere, Greycie. They've never found—"

He hesitates, and I feel sick. I know what he means. I know what they've been looking for out there in the bayou. They haven't been looking for Elora. They've been looking for something awful and ugly. A floater. A bloated, decomposing

body that's risen to the surface of the foul black water. A body identifiable only by a bright blue tank top with faded yellow stars.

Or part of a body, more likely. Gators don't leave much behind.

The room starts spinning, and I grab the edge of the counter to try to make it stop. My knees threaten to buckle.

Hart is instantly on his feet. He takes my arm, and I let him pull me against him again. "Hey, easy, Greycie." His voice is low and gravelly, and the familiar sound of it soothes me a little. "You're gonna be okay. Just breathe." I nod against his chest, feeling guilty for making him comfort me. Especially when I know he's so broken, too.

Hart is a psychic empath. Honey says it's the greatest psychic gift but also the worst. She says it will tear him up if he's not careful. It's not just that he knows what other people are feeling. He actually feels it, too. Every bit as strong as they do. It gets inside him somehow. And I know what it costs him, constantly taking on everyone else's pain. I untangle myself from his arms and move away to give him some space.

"What were you guys doing out there? That night." I have so many questions. He didn't really tell me much on the phone. After we hung up, I called Honey and she told me what she knew. But the details she had were pretty sketchy.

Hart looks at me and sighs. "You wanna get outta here?" He glances around the shop. "Before the first boat comes? I'm not in the mood to deal with tourists."

Everyone in La Cachette has a love-hate relationship with

the tourists. They hate them. But they love their cash. It's the only thing that keeps most of them alive. That and maybe a bit of fishing. On a Saturday with good weather, a couple hundred people might make the trip from Kinter to La Cachette and back on board the old shuttle boat. Along the way, the captain drones into a crackling microphone, pointing out things of interest on the riverbank.

Spoiler alert: there aren't any.

I stick my head into the back room and tell Honey that Hart and I are heading out for a bit. She nods. "It's good for you two to be together. Healing."

I don't know about healing, but I know I need to be with someone who loves Elora as much as I do. It doesn't make her any less gone, but it makes me less lonely.

Outside, Hart and I both turn left. We walk in silence, and for a few minutes, things feel almost normal. I like the familiar *slap-scuff-slap* of my flip-flops on the boardwalk. It's a summer sound—a La Cachette sound—and I know the rhythm of it as well as I know the rhythm of my own name.

La Cachette is made up of two dozen or so little houses—all of them on stilts—connected by a half-mile stretch of elevated wooden walkway. Every bit of this town was built to let the floods and the tides and the mud flow right underneath us. Down here, there is no water and there is no land. There's only an uneasy in-between. When it's dry, we have yards. Sort of. When it's not, you wouldn't know where the river ends and the town begins.

Right now, the tide is coming in and the water is slowly

rising beneath our feet. I blink against the glare bouncing off the river. And off the gleaming white paint. The whole town gets a new coat each spring. Every square inch of it. All the buildings. The boardwalk, too. Even the dock. All the same bright white. Living their whole lives a few feet above the relentless muck, everyone down here craves that kind of clean, I guess.

The Mystic Rose sits smack in the middle of the boardwalk, right across from the boat dock, and Hart and Elora's place is on the downriver end of town. The very last house. A quarter mile and a whole five-minute walk away. In between, every single structure has a swinging sign hanging from the front porch or painted lettering on the windows advertising a buffet of psychic services—everything from séances to palm readings to past-life regressions. There's even one lady who claims she can contact the spirits of your dead pets, and that—for a nominal fee, of course—they'll relay messages to her. In perfect English.

The sign that hangs out front of the little house where Elora and Hart live is made from plywood cut in the shape of a heart. It's painted bright red with fancy gold letters that spell out psychic love READINGS—MISS CASSIOPEIA, ROMANCE COUNSELOR.

If you bring Hart's mama something that belongs to a boyfriend or a wife or a fiancé, she can hold it in her hands and tell you if their love is true. I've seen her do it a million times, and she's never wrong. People even send her things by mail from all over the country. A girlfriend's pencil or a husband's

cuff link. Their front room is papered with wedding invitations from happy customers. I don't doubt her talent, but her name is Becky. Not Cassiopeia. In La Cchette, the line between what's real and what isn't gets blurry sometimes.

The boardwalk ends just past their house, and that's where Hart and I are heading. There's an old pontoon boat rusting away in the mud down there, washed up by some hurricane I can't remember the name of. Elora's daddy, Leo, chained it up so it wouldn't float away in the next flood, and that's where it stayed. I guess he thought maybe he'd fix it up someday, but he never did. Then, the summer we were all seven, we claimed it as our hangout. And it's been ours ever since.

It was our pirate ship that first summer. Evie's mama sewed us a skull and crossbones flag to fly. Another summer, it was our spaceship. When we got older, that's where we'd go to sneak cigarettes or pass around a can of beer. Most of us had our first kiss there, too. Some of us more than that. I know for a fact that Elora lost her virginity there with Case the summer we were all fifteen.

Hart jumps down into the bow of the old boat. It's not that far, maybe four or five feet below the boardwalk, but my legs aren't nearly as long as his, so I climb down the rickety wooden ladder to join him.

"Hey, Shortcake," he teases. "You think you're little 'cause you live in Little Rock? Or is that just a coincidence?" I roll my eyes. It's an old joke—and a bade one—but the familiarity of it feels good, and when I reach the bottom of the ladder and step off into the boat, Hart's almost grinning at me. I've always loved the way his eyes crinkle up at the corners when

he smiles, and it makes me happy to see the old him, even if it lasts only a second.

We sit together on one of the cracked and peeling bench seats. The boat's canopy is long gone, and I'm grateful for the shade of a single bald cypress tree that rises from the murky water of a pond a few feet away. I slip off my flip-flops and pull my knees up to hug them to my chest.

"You seen Willie Nelson this year?" I ask.

Hart nods. "Yup. See him almost every day, seems like. Still big as a barge and ugly as sin."

Willie showed up three or four years ago. A monster gator. Probably thirteen feet at least. Somebody probably would've shot him for meat by now, except the tourists like taking pictures of him. Sometimes he'll disappear off into the bayou when it's flooded out, but soon as the water starts to recede, he comes crawling right back here to this pond. Year after year. Because this deep hole never goes dry. Once, Leo caught us throwing hot dogs to him, and he threatened to beat the shit out of all of us—Willie included. Since then we've coexisted in a kind of cautious truce. He sticks to his side of the muddy pit, and we stick to ours.

Hart leans down and picks up an old nail that's rusting in the bottom of the boat. He pitches it out into the center of the gator pond, and I hear it hit the water with a plink. We watch the ripples spread across the surface, and for a few minutes, it's so quiet between the two of us that the angry buzzing of the water bugs is almost deafening.

Finally, he takes a deep breath. "We were out hunting fifolet. Like we used to do when we were kids, remember?"

I nod. We all grew up hearing stories about the mischievous ghost lights that appear in the bayou. Strange, eerie balls of floating blue gas. Cajun folklore says they'll lead you to Jean Lafitte's pirate treasure, if you're brave enough to follow. But sometimes the *fifolet* play tricks, leading people farther and farther from safety until they're lost forever deep in the swamp.

I shiver as the old fear creeps through me, and Hart nudges me with his shoulder. "It's only a story, Greycie."

"I know that," I tell him. But those stories have always scared me.

"It was the second Saturday of the month, so everybody'd gone upriver to Kinter for bingo. All the adults, anyway. And there wasn't shit to do. It was Elora's idea. She wanted to go huntin' *fifolet*." He shrugs. "So we did."

I wait while Hart pulls a beat-up pack of cigarettes out of his T-shirt pocket. He shakes one out and lights it before he goes on. "It was really dark that night. Thick clouds blockin' out the moon. And we walked for a bit, but we didn't see any lights. Didn't see anything at all. Didn't hear anything, even. It was weird. The quiet."

I shiver again, imagining that strange silence. Down here, the daytime can be still enough to hear a pin drop. But the bayou is never quiet at night. It's a cacophony of bugs and frogs and owls and bellowing gators. Sometimes they carry on so loud you can't sleep inside the house with all your windows closed and the AC humming on high.

"We had some beer, so we drank that. Evie got freaked out.

She wanted to go home. But Case wanted to play flashlight tag.” Hart pauses to take a long drag off his cigarette, then he exhales and stretches one arm over the edge of the boat to flick away the ash. “And nobody really wanted to play. We were over it, you know? But Case was pissed. Half-drunk. You know how he gets. He wasn’t ready to go home yet.”

Case has the most gorgeous hair I’ve ever seen. Deep, dark red. And the temper to go with it. He’s okay most of the time, but he can be mean as a cottonmouth when he’s been drinking. He and Elora have been a thing since we were twelve years old. She’ll step out with other guys occasionally, but she’s never had any real boyfriend besides Case. Not true love, she told me once. Not by a long shot. Just something to do.

Someone to do.

Hart finishes his cigarette and stubs it out before he goes on. “So we played flashlight tag for a while. Out there at Li’l Pass. Then it was Mackey’s turn to be it, and he found us all real quick. Everybody except Elora.”

“What’d you do?” I ask him.

“Called the all clear. But she didn’t come out. We figured she wouldn’t have gone far, so we started lookin’ for ‘er.” He runs a hand through his sweat-damp curls. “But this huge storm blew in outta nowhere. Craziest thing I’ve ever seen. We stayed at it, though. All of us. Searched out there for hours in a goddamn downpour.”

I feel sick, remembering that flash of Elora that came to me earlier. That moment the sky split open and the rain came. Just the way Hart describes.

“I left the rest of ’em huntin’ for her out there at Li’l Pass. Where she disappeared. Came home and got the four-wheeler. Looked everywhere I could think of. Rode all the way back to Keller’s Island, even. Ended up soaking wet. Mud up to my neck. Covered in bug bites.”

“No way.” I shake my head and swallow my rising panic. “She wouldn’t have gone way back there. She’s scared of that place.”

We all are. There’s no way she would have gone there. Not in the dark. Not alone.

Not at all.

Not to Killer’s Island.

“I know,” he says, “but, shit, Greycie. She had to go somewhere.”

I hug my knees harder to my chest, remembering how Hart used to make fun of Elora and me. How he used to tease us that Dempsey Fontenot was coming for us. But he doesn’t make fun of me now. He just shakes out another cigarette and lights it up, pulling the smoke into his lungs and breathing it out slow and steady before he goes on.

“Then, after midnight, when everybody got back from bingo, the men all went out lookin’. Airboats and huntin’ dogs. ATVs. Searchlights. All of us callin’ her name till we were hoarse. Clear through till mornin’.” He chokes a little. “And there was absolutely nothin’. Not a goddamn sign of her.”

He pulls the bottom of his T-shirt up to mop his sweaty forehead, but it doesn’t do any real good. The shirt is already soaked through. I’m melting in shorts and flip-flops. And

here he is in jeans and boots. I've never seen Hart in shorts, unless we were out swimming.

"So that's the story," he tells me. "Leo called Sheriff early the next mornin'. Pretty soon they had boats all up and down the river. Search teams scouring the bayou. Two hundred volunteers in hip boots wading through inch by inch back there where she disappeared. Just like on TV." He puts the cigarette to his lips again. Inhale and hold. Breathe out smoke. "Still nothin'."

Hart's focused on something off in the distance, and I let myself take a minute to look at him. Really look at him. He's all dark tangled curls and sun-browned skin and hard angles. Faded jeans and an old gray T-shirt stretched tight across broad shoulders.

Hart is what Honey calls "a tall drink of water," which is her way of saying he's hot. I think. And she's not wrong. Even now, rough as the last few months have obviously been on him.

For a couple years, when we were younger, I thought we might be something else to each other. Things got confusing between us. He even kissed me once, the summer we were thirteen. Elora never knew that. She would have been so pissed. It's the only secret either of us ever kept from her. It never went anywhere, but sometimes I still find myself fighting the urge to reach out and run my fingers through those beautiful curls.

And I'm fighting it hard as hell right now. I'm fighting it so hard my fingers itch.

But I settle for asking a question.

“Do you feel her?”

Hart runs one hand over the stubble along his jawline and nods, then he takes another long, slow drag off that damn cigarette. Only this time, his hand is shaking something awful. It’s bad enough that I worry he’ll drop the cigarette in his lap and set himself on fire.

“Yeah.” There’s a long, slow, smoke-filled exhale. “I feel ‘er all the time, Greycie. That’s the thing. I feel her every fuckin’ minute of every miserable day.”

“What do you feel?”

“Fear,” he says. “I don’t feel anything but fear.”

“I feel her, too,” I tell him.

He really does drop the cigarette then. And it lands in his lap, like I predicted. But it doesn’t set him on fire.

“Shit,” he mutters, and he knocks the cigarette into the bottom of the boat and grinds it out with the heel of his boot. “Jesus, Greycie. For real?”

He’s staring at me.

I hadn’t planned to tell him about the strange flashes I’ve been having. I hadn’t planned to tell anyone. I’ve never had the gift. And I’ve never wanted it.

I don’t want it now.

But I can’t hide this from him. Not from Hart.

“Yeah,” I say. “For real.”

“What do you feel?” he asks me.

“It’s like you said,” I tell him. “Nothing but fear.” Run and hide.



Hide and run.

I'll count from ten, then join the fun.

Say a prayer and bow your head.

If my light finds you, you'll be dead.

Ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five, four, three, two, one.

Ready or not, here I come.

I'm Dempsey Fontenot.

You better run.





Hart and I both jump when the shuttle boat blasts its horn. It's the last Saturday in May. A three-day weekend. Perfect weather. Hot. But not as suffocating as it will be in another few weeks. The people of La Cachette should do good business today.

Aside from running the Mystic Rose and doing her own readings, Honey also acts as a broker for all the other psychics and spiritualists in town. For a commission, of course. Day-tripping tourists get off the boat and pour into her shop first thing, looking to buy a cold bottle of water and maybe a postcard, and Honey gets them lined up with appointments all up and down the boardwalk. Advice about lovers. Energy cleansings. Conversations with dead pets. Whatever they're in the mood for. It can get hectic, and I know she's glad to have my help during the busy summer season.

Across the pond, Willie Nelson has dragged himself out of the muck, and he's sunning in the long grass like he doesn't give a rat's ass about the tourists. Or their money. And I swear,

Hart's watching that alligator with this expression on his face that looks an awful lot like envy.

He scuffs at a rusty spot in the hull with the toe of one boot, then he turns to look at me. "Tell me what's going on, Greycie. With you." There's a wariness in his voice that matches the deep worry in his hazel eyes. And now I'm wishing I hadn't even mentioned it.

"I don't know." I shrug. "Maybe nothing."

"Dreams?" he asks, but I shake my head.

"Definitely not dreams. I'm wide awake."

"So . . . like . . . what? Visions of some kind?"

"Not exactly. They're just . . . flashes. You know?" This sounds so bizarre. Or at least it would in Little Rock. In La Cachette, this is what passes for normal conversation. "It's like I'm seeing bits and pieces of that night through her eyes. Thinking what's she's thinking and feeling what she's feeling. None of it makes sense, though. It's all jumbled and out of order."

Hart is digging dirt out from under the edges of his fingernails. He's hunched over. Elbows resting on his knees. "But these flashes, you think they're Elora?"

"I know they are."

"What do you see? Exactly." His voice is easy. But I don't buy it. "Or feel? Or whatever." His jaw is tight. Muscles taut.

Hart is afraid. He's afraid of me. Of what I know. Of what I'm going to tell him. And I don't want that kind of power. I've never wanted it.

Not over Hart.

Not over anyone.

"I'm not really sure," I admit. "Dark. And water. The storm. That sudden rain." I have to make myself say the next part. "She's running from someone, I think. Somebody's after her." I hear Hart's sharp intake of breath, and I hate myself for being the cause of it. "Mostly, I just feel that fear. Like you said. This awful fear that almost stops me breathing."

Hart reaches for my hand. His fingers curl around mine. They're rough and calloused. And they feel like home. "Yeah," he says. "Me too."

"But I still think maybe she's alive," I say.

"Greycie—"

"No. Listen," I insist. "In all those snatches or flashes or whatever, when they come to me, she's always alive. She's scared. Lost, maybe. Or hurt, even. I don't know. But she's always alive. I never see her . . ." I can't say it. But Hart does.

"You never see 'er die."

There are voices and footsteps up on the boardwalk, and Hart and I pull back from each other. He lets go of my hand, and I wipe my sweaty palm on my shorts. Could be tourists looking for Willie Nelson.

Could be. But it isn't.

It's them. They've found us. The rest of the Summer Children come down the ladder one right after the other, like circus acrobats under the big top.

Serafina.

Lysander.

Mackey.

Evangeline.

They're laughing about something and talking together. And just for a second, I feel like an outsider. Then Mackey takes both my hands and pulls me to my feet. Sera is hugging me and saying how much she missed me, and Sander is batting those long eyelashes of his. And there's Evie, still bare-foot, looking like she isn't quite sure what she's supposed to do—as usual.

That outsider feeling evaporates, and I know I'm right where I belong. The only place I've ever belonged.

I just wish so hard that Elora was with them. I feel her absence in the burning pit of my stomach. She's a deep ache in my bones.

But then there's this voice in the back of my mind saying, even if she were here, she wouldn't talk to me. She'd just sit there on the railing, glaring in my direction. Or maybe she'd laugh in my face again. Tell me to go to hell.

It hadn't been just that last night. Things had been messed up between us all last summer. And that was mostly my fault. I know that now.

Mackey throws one arm around my shoulders and gives me a big, warm grin. "It's good you're home, Grey," he says. "We're all together."

The others nod and agree, and we all settle into our regular spots. Evie passes out stale gum to everyone. Just another long and lazy summer day, right? It almost could be.

Except when I look over at Hart, he's staring off at Willie Nelson again, like he'd crawl out of the boat and join him in the pond if he could. He looks lost.

Hollow.

And I feel the echo of his emptiness way down inside my own soul.

Because I know Mackey means well, but it's not true. We aren't all together. We haven't all been together since we were four years old. Not since what happened to Ember and Orli. Without them, we're incomplete.

And now we're missing Elora.

Evie asks me some random questions about school. We chat for a few minutes about my classes. Mackey asks about track, and I tell him I ran cross-country for the first time this past season. He grumbles something about how they don't have enough runners for a cross-country team.

Mackey, Case, and Elora all go to high school upriver in Kinter. There's a school boat. Evie and Hart and the twins, Sera and Sander, are homeschooled.

There's no cell phone service way down here. No internet, either. So this is how summer always begins for me, with the catch-ups and the recaps. Occasionally, Mackey might send me an email from school up in Kinter. Or Elora might call every so often from the payphone up there. But mostly, my Little Rock life and my La Cchette life stay separate. Two totally different universes.

When I'm down here, it's like my friends and my world back in Arkansas don't exist. It doesn't work the other way around, though. Even when I'm up there running track and going to the mall and studying, La Cchette always takes up space in my head. It's like I never really leave the bayou. Not entirely. My feet stay wet. The smell of the swamp lingers in

my nose. And when I finally get back down here at the start of every summer, everything is just the way I left it. Like no time has passed at all.

Or at least that's the way it's always been before.

"This is total bullshit." The chitchat stops, and everyone turns to look at Sera. She gazes right back at us. Defiant. "Are we gonna talk about 'er or not?" She gives Sander a look that clearly says, *Can you believe this?*

Serafina and Lysander are basically carbon copies of each other. Folks around here call them the Gemini. Twins born in late May. Both of them mind-blowingly talented artists and smarter than the rest of us put together. I forget how many languages Sera speaks. Five, maybe? Sander doesn't speak at all—never has—but he has plenty of other ways to communicate.

The twins come from an old Creole family. Home for them is out on Bowman Pond, about ten minutes away by airboat. But their mama, Delphine—they call her Manman—makes good luck gris-gris and love potions that she sells from a little card table she sets up on the dock most weekends. People swear by them. She tells tourists the charm magic was passed down from her great-great-great-granmè, who was a famous New Orleans voodoo queen. A friend of Marie Laveau's.

Maybe that part's true. And maybe it isn't.

Sera spits her gum into the water. Her hair is the color of rich, wet river sand streaked with copper, and she wears it in a long braid down the middle of her back. Almost to her waist. The madder she is, the more that braid swings back

and forth when she talks. And it is really swinging now.

“We gonna sit here all day dancin’ around her name?” she demands. “Not talkin’ about what happened won’t make things different.”

“Don’t be mad, Sera,” Mackey soothes. He’s a little guy. Not much bigger than me. Dark skin and soft brown eyes. An easy smile. He can’t stand for anybody to be upset. “We can talk about her.” He turns to look at me. “We talk about her all the time, Grey.”

“What’s the point?” Hart’s voice has an edge that I’m not used to hearing from him. “We’ve been over that night a million times.”

Sera doesn’t back down, though. She never does. “Not with Grey, we haven’t.”

Evie bites at her lip and glances over at Hart. “Grey doesn’t have the gift,” she pipes up. Then she looks embarrassed. “I’m sorry, Grey. You know what I mean. It’s just . . .” She shrugs. “You don’t. Right?”

I feel Hart’s eyes on me. I feel all their eyes on me.

“Grey deserves to hear us speak Elora’s name out loud,” Sera argues. “It’s a sign of respect. She was her twin flame, after all.”

Her *was* isn’t lost on me.

There were three sets of twins in the beginning. Serafina and Lysander. And Ember and Orli.

But also Elora and me.

Elora and I were born to different families, but on the very same day at the very same hour. Almost the exact same time,

down to the minute. There's an old story that tells how human beings originally had two faces, four arms, and four legs. But God was afraid of being overpowered, so he split them all in half. That's why we all have one twin soul out there in the world.

People say the moment you meet your twin flame is the moment the earth beneath your feet begins to shift. There's only one midwife down here to deliver all the bayou babies, so our mamas labored together in Honey's big upstairs bedroom. They laid Elora and me side by side in the same bassinet. And I guess that's when the earth shifted for both of us, when we were only minutes old.

"Go ahead, Mackey," Sera prods. "Tell Grey what you told the rest of us. She's tough. She can take it."

Hart gets up and moves away from me. He stands at the front of the boat, his back to all of us, one boot up on the rusted railing. Then he pulls out that pack of cigarettes and lights another one up.

Mackey watches him for a few seconds, then he swallows hard and turns in my direction. And suddenly, I know exactly what he's going to say.

"I had a death warning. That night. About Elora."

Hearing him say it out loud is like a kick in the teeth.

Mackey's family history here goes way back. Further back than anyone's, probably. *Cachette* is a French word. It means "hiding place." Back in the days before the Civil War, this area was a hideout for enslaved people who had escaped their captors.

Mackey's family were some of the first ones who made their way here. They faced down venomous snakes and swarms of mosquitoes, plus ripping thorns and sucking mud—but they were free, so they stayed and made this inhospitable place their home. And to hear Mackey tell it, every single one of his ancestors could feel when death was about to come knocking, which it must have done pretty often in those days.

Mackey frowns and runs one hand over the top of his head. His hair is shaved down almost to his scalp. It's what he calls his "summer haircut," which means it's about one-sixteenth of an inch shorter than he wears it the rest of the year.

"We were playing flashlight tag," he goes on. "And Evie was it. She was counting down that rhyme. About Dempsey Fontenot. You know the one."

I do know the one. I get a little dizzy when I remember how it came to me earlier. How I felt Elora's fear of the old taunt.

"And it was pitch black, so I couldn't see. But then Elora ducked behind this tree with me. And I felt it. Strong as anything."

"Did you tell her?" I ask him.

"I did. I had to." He hesitates. "But she laughed it off."

I picture her, head thrown back, laughing into the dark. Elora could be like that. If she was in the mood to have fun, she might not take anything seriously.

Hart takes one last drag off his cigarette and flicks it out into the murky pond. I see how tense the muscles in his neck are.

Evie is watching him. I pat the empty seat next to me, and she comes to sit in Hart's vacant spot. Evie's always been younger than her years, and long legs or not, she's still the baby. Our baby. Everyone's little sister. I slip my arm around her, and she rests her head on my shoulder. She smells like honeysuckle, and it calms me, breathing in her summertime sweetness.

"It's the water that bothers me," Mackey mumbles. "Drowning. That's what I felt that night. Death in the water." I look over at Hart, but he's still got his back to me. To all of us. "Elora was so pretty, you know?" Mackey's voice breaks. Another chalk mark next to *was*. "I can't stand to think of her dying like that. In the water."

Sander pushes his hair out of his face—soft waves the color of river sand and copper, just like his sister's—then puts an arm around Mackey's shoulders.

"She didn't die in the water." Hart sounds drained. Exhausted. "Search teams combed the bayou from one end to the other. River, too. They'd have found something."

"Yeah," Mackey says. "Sure, Hart. You're probably right. Sometimes I get things confused."

But not very often.

"Ember and Orli were in the water." My voice sounds funny in my ears. Far away. Everyone turns to look at me. Everyone but Hart. We don't hear those names spoken out loud very often. People down here don't like to talk about what happened back then. Thirteen summers ago. Two identical little girls snatched off the boardwalk early one morning,

just this time of year. Right under everybody's noses. "They found them floating facedown, back of Dempsey Fontenot's place," I go on. "Back at Keller's Island."

Killer's Island.

"Dempsey Fontenot's long gone," Mackey reassures me. "That doesn't have anything to do with whatever happened to Elora."

And it's true; they never found him. He'd already cleared out. But it's not really true that he was gone. Not in the ways that really mattered. When we were kids, Dempsey Fontenot was the reason we avoided the dark of the tree line. He was the reason Elora and I ran the distance between her house and Honey's at night, instead of walking. He was every campfire legend we ever told and every slumber party ghost story we ever whispered. It didn't matter that nobody ever saw hide nor hair of him again. For the eight Summer Children who were left alive, Dempsey Fontenot was a permanent resident of La Cachette. He walked the boardwalks. Same as we did.

"What if you're wrong, Mackey?" Sera asks, and for a second I can't breathe. "What if it does have something to do with Elora?"

I remember what Hart said, about how he went back there that night. To Keller's Island. Looking for Elora. He must have been afraid he'd find her there, floating facedown in that stagnant drowning pool, out behind what's left of Dempsey Fontenot's burned-down cabin.

He must have thought *maybe*.

We all look at each other, and Sera puts words to what

every single one of us is wondering. “What if he came back?”

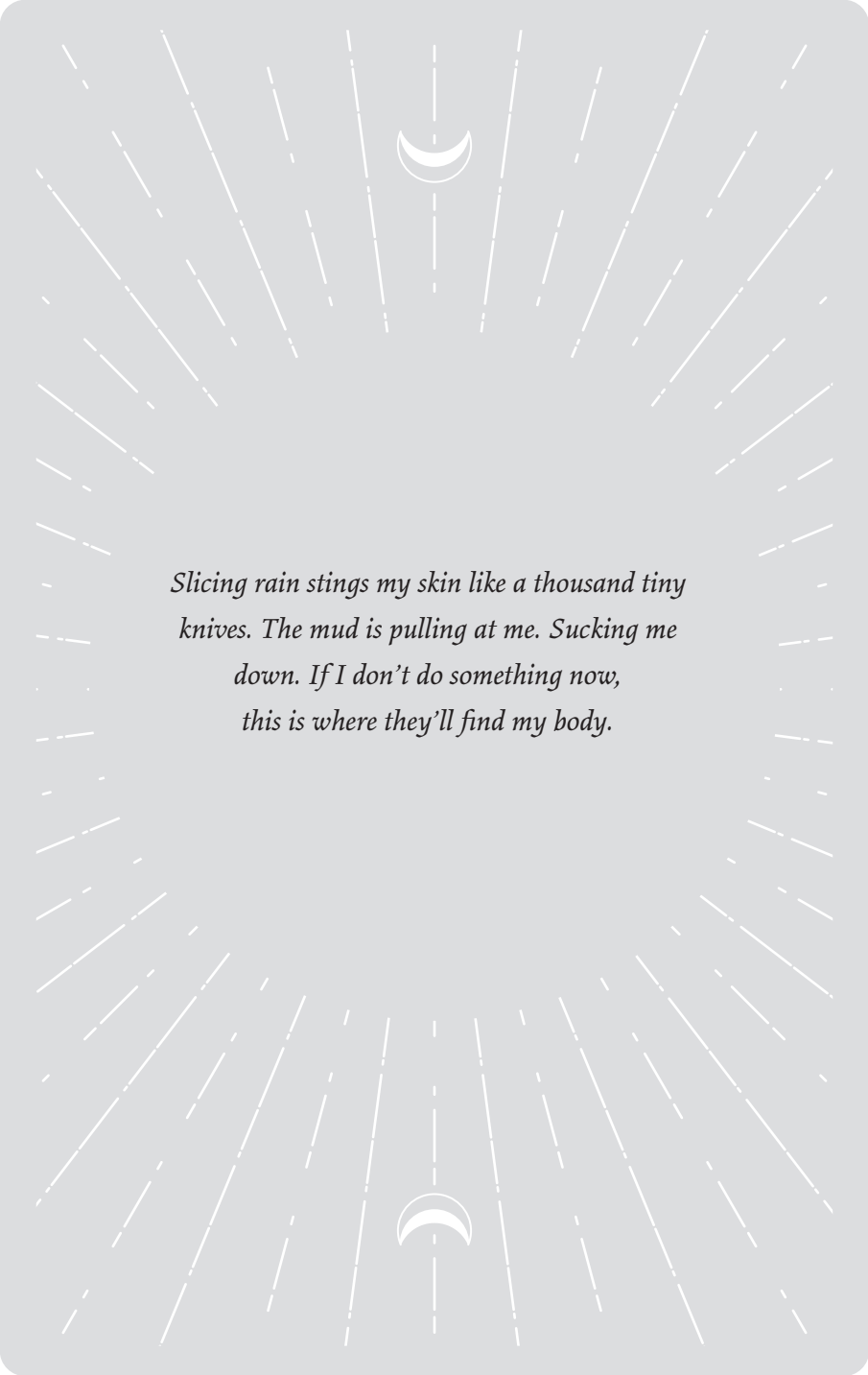
Hart finally turns around to face us, and I’m waiting for him to say that it’s not possible. That we’re being silly. Like he would have when we were kids.

But he doesn’t.

Behind him, across the pond, Willie Nelson slides into the water without making a sound. Silent. Ancient. Deadly. The kind of predator you would never see coming.

“What if he didn’t come back?” I say. My voice is thin as fishing line, and I feel Evie shiver against me in the steamy midday heat. “What if he never left?”





*Slicing rain stings my skin like a thousand tiny
knives. The mud is pulling at me. Sucking me
down. If I don't do something now,
this is where they'll find my body.*



I take advantage of the silence—everyone caught off guard—to conjure up that little flash of Elora.

That slicing rain.

And the sucking mud.

I try to focus on what she's running from. What—who—she's afraid of. Could it really be Dempsey Fontenot, our long-lost childhood boogeyman?

It's no use, though. I can't see Elora's face, let alone the face of whoever is chasing her down through the storm.

If I've suddenly become a psychic, I've become a really shitty one.

Sera turns to Sander and whispers something to him in Creole. I wonder what she said, but I don't speak much Creole. Just a word or two I've picked up from the twins over the years. Curse words, mostly. Evie speaks some French, but it's not quite the same. Case, too. But what he speaks is Cajun French, so it's a little different.

And that's when I realize that Case isn't here.

“Where’s Case?” I ask, and everybody gets really interested in the cypress needles scattered around the bottom of the boat. Evie sits up and pulls away from me. She’s watching Hart again, twisting that white-blond hair around her finger and chewing on her lip.

“He’s around,” Mackey tells me. “We just haven’t seen much of him lately.”

“Why not?” I ask, and they all exchange looks.

“Case won’t come around if I’m here.” Hart’s arms are crossed in front of his chest, and rosy blue veins stand out against his skin. “The two of us got into it a while back.”

That’s nothing new, really. Hart and Case run up against each other from time to time, like dogs fighting over territory. Their little pissing contests never last long, though. And then they’re friends again.

Sera is the one who spells it out for me. “Hart thinks Case did something to Elora.”

“No.” I shake my head. “No way.” Case is a hothead. We all know that. But he wouldn’t hurt Elora. He’s head-over-heels for her. Has been since we were kids. I find Hart’s eyes, but I can’t read what he’s thinking. He’s turned off the lights and pulled the shades down. “Case loves Elora,” I say.

Mackey reaches over and lays his hand on mine. “We all loved Elora, Grey.”

Nobody corrects him.

We all *love* Elora.

Tourist sounds drift down from the boardwalk, and it’s like some kind of spell has been broken. Sera gets to her feet. “We

need to go," she says, and Sander stands up, too. "Time to make some money."

"Me too," Mackey says, and he seems grateful for the excuse. On busy weekends, Mackey and his brothers take paying customers out on airboat rides. "Swamp Photo Safaris," they call them. Turns out the ability to see death coming isn't a psychic talent that people really appreciate. Or pay for.

The three of them say their goodbyes, and Mackey gives me a hug. Then they hurry up the ladder and head off down the boardwalk, leaving Evie looking back and forth between Hart and me. She stands up, but she doesn't follow the others.

"I could stick around," she offers. And there's something hopeful in her voice. "I mean, if you guys want company."

"That's okay," I tell her. "I need to get back and spend some time with Honey."

Hart nods. "I gotta get to work."

Sometimes he hangs around the river dock up in Kinter making a little money here and there helping guys off-load cargo. It's backbreaking work, but nobody bothers him. And they pay him in cash. I figure he makes just enough money to keep himself in cigarettes.

But Hart doesn't head toward the ladder.

And neither do I.

Evie hesitates another few seconds, shifting her weight back and forth to stand on one long leg and then the other, like some kind of flamingo.

Finally she gives up and says, "Okay. I'll see you later, Grey." We share a hug before she turns toward Hart. "Bye, Hart," she

tells him, and I feel a tiny twinge of jealousy when he smiles at her.

Evie has always worshipped the ground Hart walks on. Ever since she was born. But there's something new about the way his name sounds in her mouth this year. Something that's different from last summer. And all the summers before that. Something about the way her eyes linger on his face—and the rest of him—a split second longer than they should.

I guess she really is growing up.

When she's gone, Hart lets out a long, ragged breath, then he leans against the boardwalk piling.

"She has a crush on you," I tell him. "Evie."

"Yeah," he says. "I know." Of course he does. I wonder what that must be like, to actually feel someone's heart beat faster when they look at you. "I helped her out with something. That's all it is. Evie's a sweetheart. But she's just a kid."

I let go of that jealous feeling, because I guess he hasn't noticed the new boobs.

"You really think Case could have done something to Elo-
ra?" I ask him.

"It isn't just me who thinks it. Sheriff must have questioned Case a dozen times. Investigators from the state police, too. They never officially named him as a suspect, but it was pretty clear they were looking hard in his direction. Probably still are."

"But do you really think it could be him?" I can't wrap my brain around the idea, because Case is one of us.

"I don't know." Hart shrugs. "He was out there that night."

If she pissed him off bad enough. Or if he had some reason to be jealous . . .”

Case has a jealous streak a mile wide. That’s not exactly a secret. But he’s never hurt Elora before. Or anybody else, really. Punched holes in a few walls, maybe. Slashed some guy’s tires once at a party up in Kinter. That’s about it.

“I don’t think he’d do anything like that,” I say. “Not Case.”
Not to Elora.

“Yeah. Well, I’ve seen a lot of people do shit you wouldn’t have thought they’d ever do.” Hart goes to pull out another cigarette, but there aren’t any. He growls in frustration, then he crumples the empty pack in his fist and drops it in the bottom of the boat. “I never thought my mama would blow my daddy’s head off in our kitchen.” I grit my teeth against the pain in his voice. The shock of that sentence.

We were only five years old that summer when Hart came knocking on my bedroom window in the middle of the night, eyes wide and face pale as a ghost. I remember sliding open the window to let him crawl in. The two of us curled up in my bed together under one of Honey’s thick quilts.

His daddy was dead, he told me.

Blood and brains all over the wall.

Hart’s father was an abusive bastard. Everybody knew it. And it was self-defense. No question. Elora’s mama had died when we were babies. Cancer. So when Becky married Leo a year later, Hart and Elora became brother and sister, and everybody agreed that a little bit of good came out of an awful situation.

Hart’s never gotten over that night, though. I don’t see

how anyone could. He still carries it with him. It's not just that he witnessed it with his eyes. He felt it, too. It soaked into his soul, the way the blood soaked into the wallpaper.

The stain is still there.

"What about Dempsey Fontenot?" I ask. "Do you think—"

He shuts me down. "That's a bunch of nonsense. I only went back to Keller's Island that night 'cause I was half outta my mind." He lays a hand on my shoulder. "You don't need to be afraid of Dempsey Fontenot, Greycie. Don't get yourself all spooked."

But it's too late. Suddenly I need to be with Honey.

"I should go," I tell him. "Seriously."

Hart takes my hand and helps me up the ladder, then he climbs up behind me.

We walk back toward the Mystic Rose together, dodging tourists on the way. I notice Miss Cassiopeia's sign is flipped to CLOSED, and I wonder if she's been open at all these last three months. I guess maybe nobody wants a reading from a psychic who can't even find her own missing stepdaughter.

When we stop to say goodbye in front of the bookstore, Hart digs something out of his jeans pocket, then he takes my hand and folds whatever it is into my palm.

I open my fingers to reveal a necklace. Part of a set I gave Elora last year in honor of our golden birthdays. Sixteen on the sixteenth. A delicate silver chain with a single blue pearl.

Pearl because it was our shared birthstone.

Blue because the regular white ones had seemed too plain for Elora.

It's one of the few good memories I have of us last

summer. The way she gasped when she opened the little box. “Oh, Grey,” was all she said.

“I wanted to find the ring that goes with it,” Hart tells me. “I looked all over. But I didn’t see it anywhere.” One corner of his mouth twitches up a little. “You know what a disaster her room is.” Then his face turns serious again. “She probably had it on that night, though. She wore it all the time.”

She wore it all the time. Even after what happened between us at the end of last summer.

I need that to mean something.

I shake my head. “I don’t want this.”

“Come on,” he pleads. “Take it. Please, Greycie?” Hart puts a finger under my chin and tilts my face up toward his, so I can’t avoid his eyes. “For me?”

Jesus. How am I supposed to say no to that?

“It’s hers.” I feel tears creeping up on me, but I’ll be damned if I’m going to start sobbing. Not with all these stupid tourists milling around.

“She’d want you to have it. What you guys had—have—that connection . . .” Now it’s Hart’s turn to get choked up. “You two were—” He stops. Flustered. Looks down at his boots.

“Lit from the same match,” I finish, and Hart looks back up at me. “It’s something Honey used to say. About Elora and me. That we were two flames lit from the same match.” I’d reminded Elora of that when I gave her the ring and the necklace last summer. Our very own magic words.

Hart and I study each other for a few seconds. I let him fasten the chain around my neck, and he gives me the very

beginnings of a grin before he turns to go. “Later, Shortcake,” is all he says. But his fingers brushing against my skin and the low, throaty sound of his voice are enough to remind me that I’ve been on the brink of falling in love with Hart for basically my entire life. And occasionally, I trip.

I watch him walk away. There’s the kiss of a breeze. The musical laughter of wind chimes. When I look toward the little house Evie shares with her mama and her uncle, Victor, I see the homemade chimes hanging right outside her bedroom window. Colorful bits of hand-strung glass and metal. A flash of white-blond hair lets me know that Evie has been watching me from behind her pale blue curtains.

Watching us.

And it makes me sad for her.

If our little Evie has a crush on Hart, she’s really barking up the wrong tree. In that way, Hart is the most solitary person I’ve ever known. He’s never dated anyone, and no matter how hard I try, I can’t imagine him ever falling for a girl.

Not shy, nervous Evie.

And definitely not me.