

STAY IN
THE LIGHT

ALSO BY A.M. SHINE

The Watchers

The Creeper

STAY IN THE LIGHT

A.M. SHINE



An Aries Book

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Prologue

DAVID

‘*Professor Kilmartin,*’ he whispered, gazing through the ghostly mist of his own reflection in the glass, still disbelieving it to be true.

At last, in spite of the sceptics and narrow-mindedness of academia, the university had finally acknowledged his accomplishments. Convincing the old guard hadn’t been without its crucible of frustrations, and his patience was all but bankrupt because of it. But his thesis and the theories therein had shaken the very bedrock of Ireland’s ancient past. He’d forced their wilfully deaf ears to listen, to concede that the lore’s tapestry shimmered with golden threads of truth. All it took was a capable mind to tug at its seam.

The evidence was too credible to be ignored forever. No century since their banishment had passed without some record, however trifling or inconspicuous it may have been to the layman’s eye. The very nature of their gifts made the changelings’ presence throughout history impossible to substantiate. But they *had* existed, and David was of the belief that they walked amongst society still – those unfamiliar faces in the crowd, seen only once, hiding perfectly in plain sight.

How, in a world full of strangers, could humankind ever hope to isolate such an entity?

A hard rain had rolled in over the city at sundown, quenching stars before they'd even had a chance to glimmer. Puddles flooded the street outside, each one awash with ripples of amber streetlight. Dark bodies skittered between doorways for shelter. Others were too drenched to care. Somewhere out of sight, a woman screamed – most likely in jest but most certainly wet. A momentary distraction, hardly engaging enough to hold David's interest for long.

The changelings' number was too great for them to disappear completely. He'd yet to appoint some rational explanation as to how or why they had been subdued beneath the earth. Their powers were incomprehensible. Dispel the mythology's magic, and their wondrous feats become almost feasible, and so to suggest defeat in battle was to belittle what they once were. But who was to say what they became? Perhaps, David considered, the daylight had come to command some sway over their movements. That would explain why cases alluding to some interaction or interference on their part were so novel. A few above but most below, slaves to some nocturnal rhythm, no different from the owl and the bat and those other species so rarely seen by human eyes. Such a lengthy period underground could have mutated them in some horrific way that kept them imprisoned in the darkness. It was, after all, in their very nature to change. If only he could isolate where the—

'Darling,' Madeline whispered, 'you don't look like a man who should be celebrating.'

A lifetime of research awaited him, and the questions far outweighed the answers he could hope to bring to light in

however many years he had left. But for now, he would enjoy this moment.

‘Sorry, my love. I suppose it hasn’t quite sunk in yet.’

The table’s white cloth was set beside the restaurant’s window. Its rain-speckled glass mirrored a roomful of candlelight, where the soft play of ivory keys graced the air like a warmth. Cutlery chinked. Corkscrews squeaked. And two dozen or more voices blended into a wordless din; none so loud as to spoil the evening’s ceremony.

‘Perhaps it would help if I started calling you *Professor* then.’ Madeline smiled, gliding her hands towards him, reaching for his touch. ‘Just for a little while, you know, like teaching an old dog a new name.’

David squeezed her slender fingers and chuckled. ‘After all you’ve put up with, Maddy, you can call me anything you like. And I’m not *that* old, am I?’

‘*Every* professor is old, darling. It’s not your fault.’

It pained him to confess, if only to himself, how distant he’d become these past months, treading the slenderest of tightropes above an abyss of ancient riddles; the depth and darkness of which all too often tainted his sleep with nightmares. There were moments when he could feel it – that seed planting itself inside his skull, sprouting some fresh strand of thought that would grow and grow and occupy his full attention until eventually, like so many others, it would wilt and die, and only then would he snap out of its intoxicating reverie and take note of his wife’s loneliness. The sight of her blue eyes glazed with tears would evoke in him a weakening sorrow. His own disappointments he’d learned to shoulder. But it broke him every time to witness hers.

Madeline understood David's obsession better than he ever could. She'd watched it toy with him since the day they'd met; lifting him, crushing him, and yet always leaving just enough will to go on, as though there could be no prize without due punishment. But in punishing himself, he had been in turn punishing her, and the time had come to change. He knew that now.

'Try not to think about it for one night,' she said to him, smiling through the sadness of knowing that even there and then, together, he still shared their special moment with his work.

David gripped her hands tighter but no words came.

He would pursue his passions in private. This was the only way forward that made sense. He would lecture in the lore he knew so well. And to those attentive minds that gathered in their droves to listen, this lore would remain simply that – stories to be appreciated but not to be believed. It was a job. A well-paying one at that. It could support his interests in the secrecy of his own supposed leisure, away from prying eyes and those snide whispers that snaked through the corridors of the university. The changelings would linger in his life as they always had – eternally out of reach, rarely out of mind. But they would become his curse and a burden that he alone would carry.

'You've achieved so much,' Madeline leant forward to whisper, perhaps for fear that his elusive fairies were listening in. 'You can afford yourself some time off. It would do you good to be a part of the world again after such an absence. And we've so much to look forward to.'

A figure loomed between them, perfectly poised with one hand balancing a tray of two crystal flutes. A parting caress

was shared before their fingers unlocked. The man's crisp shirt and burgundy bow tie were reminiscent of an older time, and his youth offered David some reassurance that not all traditions faded over time; history still had its uses.

The waiter looked to Madeline with the subtlest insinuation of some prior agreement.

'I do believe a celebratory toast is in order,' he said; his mannerisms polished as the crystal.

'I think a professorship is cause enough for celebration,' Madeline said, winking over at her husband, 'don't you, darling?'

David couldn't help but blush. 'We're celebrating far more than just that, my love,' he said. 'Could you take a photograph of us?' he asked, turning to the waiter as he rooted around in his pocket. 'I want to remember this evening. You see, my wife and I are—'

'Don't jinx it, darling,' Madeline interjected with a grin.

'It would be my pleasure, sir,' the waiter replied, accepting the camera. 'Special occasions such as this should always be captured. A photograph is a happiness that we can take with us wherever we go.'

David stole a glance at his wife as his hand touched the stem of his glass, posing for a memory that he was fated to cherish more than any other. Madeline's silver necklace – gifted to her on their first anniversary – sparkled over that black dress he so adored. She'd worn it because it was *his* night. But the truth was that it was *theirs*.

The camera flashed. And with a smile and a nod, the waiter retreated, as gracious a host as one could hope for and one certainly deserving of a handsome tip.

'And to think there were times when I thought you loved

your precious fairies more than you did me,' Madeline said with a smirk, captivating as it was playful.

'No fairy could ever be as beautiful as you are in this moment, my love.'

I

MINA

The tide had retreated late that evening, laying a ledge of grey sand in its wake where all else now sparkled in the dusk like a desert of broken glass. For too long this was all she'd dreamt of – a sky pruned of black branches and a sun whose departure wasn't chased into the night by a thousand screams. But nowhere was safe. Not anymore. The darkness, the light, even those grey areas in between reminded her too much of the coop's cold concrete and those still, twilit moments before the light clicked on.

Mina's growing repertoire of anxieties kept her tethered to the cottage's open door. But she'd stretched her leash over time, leaving longer trails of footprints with each passing day. The sand was nothing like the soil. Its silver grains left no stain that she couldn't dust away with her fingers. And when the sun shone, the shore resembled some magical seam holding the last fraying threads of her sanity together.

She touched the mug to her lips, breathing in more warmth than she drank as her wary eyes scanned the whole beach; from its southern caves to where the rocks beetled out into the bay like a bed of black broken teeth on the far side. Mina

had the good sense to drape a blanket over her shoulders; the massive, tasselled one that she toasted by the stove before the sun and the temperature began their nightly nosedives into the ocean.

It had become a ritual of hers to face the night, to force down those memories that were forever tearing their talons around every moment. In the woodland there'd been an echoing list of chores and duties to keep her mind occupied. But here her fears grew restless, and though the waves washed ashore with the calmest whisper, the world as she knew it never ceased to tremor.

Mina swallowed back a mouthful, wincing as it passed her throat. She'd come to loathe the taste of it. But the whiskey hit her like a hard slap, and sometimes – on those nights when she upped her dosage – it'd even knock her into a dreamless sleep, though these blessings were rare and too hazy in mind and memory to really be appreciated. Either way, she sure felt the impact the following morning; that familiar bruise on the brain, pulsating like a beating heart about to break.

Mina's phone performed a nervous jolt in her pocket. She prised it out as she padded her bare feet along the sand, taking care to keep in the dry.

'Do I need to ask what you're up to?' Ciara asked, her voice on loudspeaker.

'You should see the sky. It's beautiful this evening.'

'It's always been beautiful, Meens. We just forgot.'

Ciara was the only one who understood what Mina saw when she closed her eyes at night, when the silence was at its most fragile and the softest breeze sang like a scream. She'd asked her countless times to call an end to her impromptu exile and come live with her in the house that she and John

had built – the home she refused to abandon, like an altar to the dead man’s memory. But the watchers had been following her in the city. And Mina knew without being told that they were following her still.

‘How are you holding up?’ Ciara asked.

‘Could be worse, I suppose.’ Mina sighed wearily through a smile. ‘Still alive. Though my neck aches from looking over my fucking shoulder.’

Ciara chuckled as a steel pan clamoured over the line.

‘What are you making?’ Mina asked.

‘I’m stir-frying some vegetables. What have we got here? Peppers, some red onion, those baby sweetcorn things, and a few tomatoes.’

‘Oh, wow, very healthy.’

‘I know, right? I’m not sure what I’m going to do with them.’

‘You *eat* them, Ciara.’

‘You know what I mean.’ She giggled.

Her voice washed over Mina like a balm, cooler and more comforting than any wave the ocean could offer. The implicit purpose behind their nightly conversations was to soothe and support and to help the other process the past into something that would someday crawl into a pit and die. But there were too many groggy mornings when Mina couldn’t recall a single word shared between them. Alcohol made the nightmares more tolerable but it didn’t exactly make her the most riveting company. She was meant to be an emotional crutch for Ciara to lean on. But there were times when Mina could barely stand herself up, never mind support another.

‘How’s the yellow one?’ Ciara asked.

'Yeah, he's good,' she replied. 'I brought his cage outside earlier but some of the seagulls started having a go at him, so we went back in.'

'And I take it there's still no sign of Madeline?'

Mina detected that familiar diffidence to her voice, the reluctance to ask a question that she'd already guessed the answer to. It'd been over a month now since she'd fled as far west as she could without getting her feet wet.

'Not yet. But she knows where I am, kind of.'

Ciara chuckled. 'Do *you* even know where you are?'

'No idea.'

That last day in the city had yet to find its focus. It was as though Mina's mind had intentionally flicked a switch, some failsafe to keep her from revisiting those horrors before eventually there'd be no way to escape them.

They're everywhere. They've been watching you.

Madeline's eyes – once so stark and secretive – had smouldered with an eerie uncertainty as she'd gripped Mina by the shoulders, seeming in that second more human than ever before. For the first time, the woman looked afraid, and Mina remembered the feel of her long fingers trembling like tender, windswept stems.

She still couldn't cleanse her dreams of the sight of them, watching her in broad daylight, breaking the one rule that she'd learned to live by. As Madeline had told her once – they were leaner and they were longer. But on that street, standing amidst the unknowing crowd, they were also so terrifyingly convincing. It was as though they wanted to be seen. There was no soulful illusion to their expressions, only a burning intensity around the eyes. Worse still, Mina was sure that one of them had *smiled* at her; the slyest curl of the lip, so

effortlessly sinister, as if they had perfected it – the face, its form and utility.

Madeline had raised her shoulders, standing tall so as to shield Mina in the shelter of her shadow. It was jarringly uncanny to meet her in the eye, for they were Madeline's: two jewels she knew so well, set into a different face.

'Mina,' she snapped, drawing her closer, making sure the message delivered, 'you can't stay here.'

Words became vague, soundless letters in Mina's mind. Her mouth opened but it was more likely to expel the contents of her stomach than anything resembling sense.

'I don't know how many there are,' Madeline said, peering back over her shoulder. 'They've been following you.'

'How did they...' was all she managed to utter before her jaw tensed up.

'How did they *what*, Mina?'

'Find me?'

'It doesn't matter. You need to leave the city *now*.'

Like old times, Mina suspected that Madeline was cushioning her from the truth, portioning out her words like a meagre feed of nuts and berries.

'But where...?' she whispered.

'Far from here. Go to the coast, to the salt water and the sand.'

'Why?'

'Mina, I don't have time to explain. It's the woodland. It's on you. They can smell it.'

There it was – the horrifying reality that Madeline hadn't wanted to share. It took a single honest answer to tear down the scaffolding of Mina's new life. She couldn't feel her legs but she was moving. Feet found their own course without a

thought to guide them, clipping on a cobble that nearly sent her tumbling.

‘Where do you think you’re going?’ Madeline asked her.

‘I need to get my bird. I can’t leave him behind.’

Madeline’s nostrils snapped out her frustration. But she knew not to argue.

‘And what about you?’ Mina called back to her. ‘Aren’t you coming with me?’

Madeline’s steely gaze whipped back to where their pursuers were still gathered; no effort made to belie their presence.

‘I’ll come find you,’ she replied, ‘once I know what they want.’

There were so many questions that Mina had wanted to ask before fear cracked its whip, sending her thundering up the stairs to her apartment; staggering, tripping, groping upward, their grimy tiles staining her hands with an unseen stickiness. That feeling of being chased rose beneath her like a flash flood in the stairwell. The door slammed, felling a picture frame on the console table and awakening a shriek from the parrot perched in his cage by the window, suitably panicked by the sight of her.

‘We have to go,’ she screamed before a sudden nausea wormed its way up her throat and sent her skidding straight to the sink.

She gripped the basin, shoulders stooped, spitting a long strand of drool from her lips. Its ceramic felt cool against her skin as her eyes – shimmering like two cymbals – rose reluctantly to the mirror. The coop hadn’t just broken her, it had split her perfectly in two. The carefully curated hairs on her head – that pixie do that remained after all the dead

ends had been chopped to the floor – wasn't the *Meens* she remembered, the one she'd stared at night after long night in a prison of glass and concrete. There was colour to her cheeks and gloss on her lips. It was as if that sad, broken, friendless piece of shit that trekked into the woodland had tried to dress herself up as somebody new. But nothing had changed.

Monsters were real, only now they were everywhere.

She dragged the yellow one's old cage from the hot press, toppling a broom onto the floor and taking a sad glimpse at the neat stack of towels that she'd bought the week before. And beside them – the emergency bag containing the lightest, most basic needs that wouldn't slow her down in the event of *this* ever happening.

'You'll have to shift into the smaller cage,' she said to the bird, his little agitated eyes hinting at some understanding. 'Your new one is too big for me to carry.'

Mina pressed her cheek into the pane so as to peer down the street. Madeline was gone. So, too, were the watchers. Outside, the world looked perfectly normal, as it had that morning when last she'd checked in on it. Mina looped the tote bag around her shoulder and hoisted up the yellow one's cage. Eyes darted around the room, taking it all in one last time, grabbing any memories worth keeping. It didn't take long.

She was the fox that ran until the hard soil softened to sand and she could run no further. And as the fox shivers in the safety of its den, listening out for the gallop of hooves and the baying of men, Mina dreaded those ancient screams and the scratch of glass; the talons, the teeth – all those sharp things that shone in the moonlight of her mind.

'What's in your mug tonight?' Ciara asked; it was obvious

from her voice that she'd lodged the phone between her cheek and shoulder. 'I can hear you slurping on something.'

'Jesus.' Mina laughed. 'It's just a drop of whiskey to keep me warm. Trust me, if you were standing here in the cold, you'd be *slurping* on a hot one too. Well, it was hot when I poured it.'

She could sense Ciara's disapproval. But they'd hashed over her drinking habits enough times to deem the conversation redundant. Fate had dealt Mina two options – passing out drunk or crying into her pillow – and she'd never liked the taste of tears.

'You aren't smoking again, are you?'

'Nope,' Mina replied proudly. 'But don't think it hasn't crossed my mind.'

A low sizzle could be heard in the kitchen as the silence resettled between them.

Night was creeping in stealthily with the waves, stealing the last colour from the sand, leaving it a lightless grey. It was nearly that time again, when the rumble of the watchers' bodies would rise like a thunder beneath the earth. She imagined them gathering around their pits. An empire of black eyes watching and waiting for the last ash of daylight to scatter.

'What did you get up to today?' Ciara asked, guiding Mina back to the light.

'Nothing too exciting,' she replied. 'I found another article online that could be changeling-related. I've hardly any space left on the wall. I swear, if anyone saw it they'd think I was an absolute headcase.'

There was the sudden tapping of a wooden spoon against

something iron, and then a gush of water. ‘Go on,’ Ciara said, ‘I’m listening.’

‘This one’s interesting actually. A few years ago – back in 2016, I think – some lad thought he’d seen his mother’s ghost. He’d been living over in the States and came back to sell the old family home. Some little place in the arse of nowhere, unlive in since she passed away and when—’

‘Let me guess,’ Ciara interjected, as she liked to do whenever Mina was telling a story. ‘The mother came back.’

‘Something that looked identical to her anyway. The poor lad caught her watching him from the window as he was walking up to the door.’

‘What did he do?’

Mina giggled. ‘What do you think he did? He fucking bolted, like any sane person would have. When he finally plucked up the courage to go back, she was gone. But someone had obviously been living there.’

‘Ghosts don’t usually leave a mess after them, do they?’

‘No, they certainly do not.’

‘So what do you reckon happened?’ Ciara asked through a mouthful.

‘I’d say a watcher scoped the place out and perused an old family photo album until it found a face it liked the look of.’

‘But what was it waiting for? Why would it live there for so long?’

‘What are any of them waiting for? If this lad hadn’t come back to Ireland, it’d probably still be there now, masquerading as his mother, dressing up in her clothes and pottering around the house.’

The chewing ceased. A fork was heard to clash onto a

plate. Nothing stifled the appetite quite like a sour serving of reality.

‘Isn’t that a horrible thought?’ Ciara whispered.

‘You’re welcome. Oh, and I sent you those links again. You know, the ones you’ve been avoiding.’

‘The message boards?’

‘Ciara,’ she said sternly, ‘other people know about the watchers. I can’t tell yet how much exactly. I mean, I highly doubt they were kept as fucking pets like we were.’

‘Okay, I’ll check them out tomorrow.’ A lie, if ever Mina had heard one. ‘And tell me, how are the lovely Peadar and June?’ Ciara was obviously keen to change the subject.

Mina looked over her shoulder, to the guest house looming on the rise behind the cottage, where the once-green fields now harvested only shadows. Curtained windows glowed like foggy lanterns under the earliest specks of starlight.

‘They’re good,’ she replied. ‘I keep thinking they’re watching me. But I guess that feeling is never going away, is it? If you saw the way their house sits on that hill by the road, it’s like I’m living beside Norman Bates or something.’

‘Would you shush,’ Ciara said, her smile audible. ‘You’d be sleeping down in the caves if it wasn’t for them.’

The idea lured Mina’s eyes south, where their jagged tips rose like ancient cathedrals left to crumble. There was no lullaby to the black, lightless waters that roiled down that side of the beach. They crashed and they screamed, and they foamed like rabid beasts slashing at the stone, carving out those hidden crannies where the seabirds slept. Their impression was one of gauntness and of death, of sickly hollows and tired, misshapen parts.

Who was to say there weren't some long-forgotten horrors lurking down there too.

'I think June is trying to adopt you,' Ciara said, chuckling away, her happiness restored. 'Or maybe you're like a comfort daughter, and she'll throw you out once the real one returns from wherever she is.'

'Australia, I think. I wonder has she even told her that some randomer with a parrot has taken over the cottage they did up for her.'

With that said, the last sliver of light sank into the leaden line of the ocean. Mina drained her mug and held it upside down as proof of a job well done. The night was like an old lover that had broken her heart. She'd never trust it again, but maybe – with enough time – she could train herself to tolerate its company.

'You okay?' Ciara asked.

She'd obviously heard more *slurping*.

'Never better,' Mina replied unconvincingly.

'Why don't you go back inside? You know what Madeline would say if she caught you dithering out in the cold after dark.'

Mina laughed. 'Christ, she wouldn't be impressed, would she?'

'Goodnight, Meens.'

'Goodnight, my dear,' she replied, failing to capture the same chirpiness that came to Ciara so naturally, despite everything. 'I'll talk to you tomorrow.'

The phone screen faded to black. A million imaginary sounds hounded Mina in the silence of that moment. Even here – wherever *here* was – the watchers' screams were never

far from her thoughts. And every day they grew that little bit closer.

The coop's rules were still in effect. The cottage's door should already have been shut.