



## Darkness Unknown

By Selina A. Fenech

*Complete summary including spoilers.*

When twenty-two-year-old Everly Boderleth's mother passes away, she has to return to her hometown of Shroudhaven—a place known for its dreary weather—to clean out her childhood home then sell it.

Everly, who had never been able to win her mother's love, was kicked out at the age of eighteen. It seems that no matter how hard she tries, she always messes up somehow, is always abandoned by the people she cares about. Now, she must return to a place that triggers her anxiety and brings up painful memories.

Everly heads to Shroudhaven accompanied by her best friend, Harper, a famous social media influencer. The plan is to clean out her family's old antique shop while trying to spend as little time as possible in the gloomy town rumored to be run by vampires. Though Everly knows vampires aren't real, she can't deny that Darkfrey Estate up on the hill is pretty spooky, and that when the boy she loved, Rylan, moved into that estate, he certainly changed somehow. Harper is eager to reunite Everly with her long-lost love. Everly, who still dreams about Rylan regularly, knows that Harper's enthusiasm is probably misplaced.

While driving past the Wyrwood on the way into Shroudhaven, Everly is certain that she spots an old woman in the shadows of the trees. Right after that, a cougar—an unlikely animal to see in these parts—dashes out into the road in front of them, causing Harper and Everly to crash. Everly is certain she felt the campervan hit the animal, but when they get out to investigate, there's no sign of it.

Luckily, neither Everly or Harper are badly injured, and they continue on to find the Boderleth house abandoned and full of cobwebs and mold. Outside of her old home, Everly runs into none other than her best friend from childhood and first love: Rylan Howell. He has a soldierly buzzcut just like he does in her dreams, and Everly wonders how her subconscious could have known what he looked like even after not seeing him all these years.

Everly's happiness at seeing Rylan is quickly ruined when he tells her she shouldn't have come back—and that she should leave immediately. The incident sparks one of Everly's panic attacks, which she is well-acquainted with. She thinks of her anxiety as a dragon trying to protect her—a dragon that is a bit confused about what is actually a threat.

Having stalked off into the darkness, Rylan regrets his rudeness to Everly. That evening, he'd been drawn to Everly's house by a longing to be in her presence. He found her to be even more beautiful than he remembered. But he knows that she shouldn't be here. He needs her to be safe.

Rylan runs into his fellow Darkfreys, Vonny, Jasper, and Annabeth, whom he was supposed to have met up with over an hour ago. Unknown to them, he has been out investigating something suspicious. Someone at Darkfrey Estate is up to something, but he isn't quite sure what, but knows bodies have gone missing. Rylan considers heading to his childhood home, Howell House, to warn them of what he

saw at the estate, but he hasn't been home in nine years—not since his father died and he realized he was too weak to protect the ones he loves.

Meanwhile, Everly enters one of her lucid dreams, where she often finds Rylan being chased by something and clashing with shadow creatures. Everly is accustomed to monsters and violence haunting her dreams at night.

This time, the cougar she saw in the road earlier appears, and Everly has to prevent her dragon—which manifests in her dreams—from eating the creature.

That night, Everly hears a horrible howling noise that doesn't stop. She goes to the window and looks outside to see the impossible: a vampire-like Rylan fighting a shadowy beast. But this time, Everly isn't dreaming. The beast engulfs Rylan, tearing his chest down the middle.

Everly rushes outside and attempts to stop Rylan's bleeding, but he urges her to run. Unable to save him in time, Everly is forced to watch as Rylan stops breathing. Her dreams of ever reuniting with him are completely crushed.

The monster returns and attacks Everly. In her panic, Everly loses control. Bright light fills her vision and she lifts off the ground as threads of light lash out from her, killing the monster. Confused and wondering if she has been struck by lightning, Everly passes out—but not before she sees a strange person approaching, dragging a large sack.

She wakes up to the sound of Rylan calling her name. They hug, and he checks her over for injuries. But when Everly sees her dragon nearby, she realizes she's dreaming. When she tries to explain to Rylan what she witnessed, he's confused, and they wonder if they're both dead. Rylan is pleased to learn that Everly dreams about him on a regular basis. He urges her to leave Shroudhaven as soon as she wakes up, for her own good.

When Everly truly wakes up, it is to find Harper shaking her as she lies on the ground in the rain. Everly asks Harper if Rylan is okay, but Harper has no idea what she's talking about. When they look for Rylan's body, he's not there, and there is no evidence of a violent struggle having taken place at all, much to Everly's bewilderment.

Everly nervously reflects on the bright light she witnessed during the attack. She has seen light like that only once before. It had to have been a dream then, and it has to have been a dream now.

The next day, Everly and Harper get to work on the house. Everly convinces herself that what she witnessed the previous night was just a dream. Meanwhile, being in her old house forces her to grapple with difficult memories of her mother's substance abuse and neglect. The only people Everly really considered family were the Howells.

Just in case, Everly decides to give Rylan a call, but he doesn't answer. When she goes to take the trash out, she inspects the spot of the struggle again. This time, she finds blood on the asphalt—which makes her realize it could have been real after all.

She and Harper attempt to report the incident to the police, but they don't take her seriously. In town, Everly and Harper run into Rylan's younger brother, Callan. Everly asks Callan if he has seen Rylan, and is surprised when she learns that Callan and Rylan don't really speak anymore. Callan no longer lives at Darkfrey Estate with his brother, having moved back home to Howell House. Callan seems sure that what Everly saw was nothing, but he promises to look into it. Everly can't help but feel that there's no happy ending for her in Shroudhaven.

Everly and Rylan reconvene in Everly's dreams. Rylan tries to convince Everly that despite the odd dream logic, he's real. Trying to prove it, he shows her a tattoo of the Darkfrey coat of arms on his chest, which she has never seen in real life. Her subconsciousness couldn't have known about it. Everly is still uncertain, though, so Rylan resolves to prove it to her—but he's worried he might be dead in the real world.

The next day, Everly enters the antique store portion of her house which has been locked ever since her father's death. She finds it unchanged from nineteen years ago: shards of a broken crystal still lie strewn across the floor. As a young child, she'd snuck in here one day to play with it. When she broke it, her father had become so angry that he died of a heart attack. Everly's hair has been white ever since the traumatic experience.

Harper tries to convince Everly that her father's death wasn't her fault—she was only three years old, after all. Everly admits to Harper that when Rylan's dad died from an animal attack, she was secretly happy, in a way, because it meant they had something big in common. She believes that when Rylan realized Everly didn't care about his father's death, he stopped talking to her, and that was why he pushed her away.

Everly and Harper pay a visit to Howell House where they meet an assortment of long-term guests: Denny, Tammy, and Rushelle. It seems that Lian Howell, Callan and Rylan's mother, is not aware that one of her sons is missing, so Everly decides to avoid the topic so as not to worry her unnecessarily. Everly catches up with Lian, who used to be like a mother to her, but the exchange brings up painful memories.

Meanwhile, Callan is privately worried about the story Everly told him, so he and another Howell House live-in, Cherry, head to Darkfrey Estate to make inquiries. He is surprised when Vonny and Jasper inform him that no one is looking for Rylan, despite the fact that he's been missing for two days. Callan knows that judging by Everly's description, Rylan had most likely encountered a vasmire that night.

While Callan and Cherry stand outside the gates talking to the Darkfreys, Everly and Harper pull up. Everly asks about Rylan, but Callan knows he can't overshare with Everly and Harper about what's really going on here. Mordan Darkfrey, the leader of Darkfrey Estate, arrives, and reminds Callan that, as a Darkfrey deserter, he is no longer permitted to be privy to Darkfrey business—unless his intention is to rejoin them.

When Mordan and Vonny leave, Jasper relays one piece of information to the group: Rylan is not the only thing missing—and cleaning crews aren't finding much to clean up. Callan laments not being able to tell Everly more information. She's a bliv, which means she's supposed to remain oblivious.

That night, Everly meets Rylan in her dreams accompanied by her dragon and the cougar. She informs Rylan that he is definitely missing in the real world, and she demands to know what is going on; she recognized the galaxy-colored eyes on Cherry that she knows Rylan and Callan to have at night, and she senses that something isn't as it seems, but Rylan doesn't oblige her.

Instead, Everly asks Rylan to prove he's real by telling her something she doesn't know—but something she can confirm in real life. He tells her to look into Rook's Theater, which is where he was headed before he disappeared that night.

Everly, Harper, and Callan investigate Rook's Theater, which has been closed down ever since an accident a decade ago that killed over a dozen people. Now Everly wonders if the stories about why it shut down are true, or if there were other, more sinister factors at play.

At the theater, the trio finds black bones strung together to form some kind of symbol. The bones seem to move, and Everly realizes she saw something like this the night Rylan disappeared. They also discover the decaying remains of a monster, and Callan is forced to admit that yes, monsters do exist. Then Callan senses something approaching and tells them they need to leave at once. Right in front of Everly and Harper, Callan transforms into a hairy, wolf-like beast.

A six-legged, faceless monster attacks. Callan fights to defend them in his strange new form. Everly can feel her dragon raging inside of her. When she decides to unleash it, she lights up with the same bright light that took over the night of Rylan disappearance—which means it was all real.

Everly defeats the monster with her tendrils of light. Callan transforms back into himself, then explains that the thing that attacked them was a weroth, a type of eidolghast. Monsters are indeed real, and Callan is a shadyr, a shapeshifter that transforms based on what type of monster is nearby. Everly learns that Rylan, Lian, and a whole bunch of other people in Shroudhaven are shadyrs as well.

But when Callan asks Everly to explain what *she* is, she can't answer, because she has no idea. Callan admits that he's out of his depth, and that it's time for them to get some help.

As they head to Howell House, Everly realizes that the so-called dragon inside of her might be more real than she thought. And whatever it is, the weroth was afraid of it.

At Howell House, Everly, Harper, Callan, Lian, Rushelle, Cherry, Tammy, and Denny sit down for a meeting. Callan explains everything that has happened: Rylan's disappearance, the ritual bone arrangement at the theater, the weroth attack, and Everly's strange powers. The group wonders if Everly is beshadowed—a phenomenon that occurs when an eidolghast settles into one territory for too long and the area or anyone in it becomes changed or possessed. Callan theorizes that the black bones are meant to attract eidolghasts. But why?

Rushelle and Cherry explain to Everly and Harper that there is another dimension called the Everdark, where a race of shapeshifting beings lived until it was taken over by eidolghasts. The shapeshifters then fled to the human world right into what became Shroudhaven, one thousand years ago. Their descendants are the shadyrs, and it is a shadyr's duty to stop eidolghasts from taking over this world as well. Shroudpoools—portals to the Everdark—are scattered throughout the world.

In the middle of the conversation, Tammy, a girl with black-stained hands, suddenly disappears into thin air. Everly is shocked, but the others tell her this is normal for Tammy. It turns out that Tammy stuck her hands into a shroudpool a few years back, and now has a habit of disappearing at random moments. Luckily, she always appears in the same place, so they know where to get her.

Everly struggles to come to terms with the fact that nothing has never been as it seemed. In her dreams, Everly tells Rylan she's now aware of the big secret he'd been keeping from her about shadyrs and monsters.

Rylan confesses to Everly that he once chased away one of her mother's visitors, and that he has always felt protective of her. Everly learns that the night Rylan disappeared, he had been investigating the black bones after coming across some weird artifacts hidden at the estate—but someone knocked him out and cleared up the evidence. They realize someone may have set up the eidolghast lure as a trap for him—and they worry that someone may have stolen his body to use *his* bones.

The next day is Everly's last day in Shroudhaven, but Rylan is still missing. She and Harper tag along with Lian, Callan, and Rushelle to Darkfrey Estate, looking for answers. Inside the estate, groups of young shadyrs train like they're military units. One shadyr called Annabeth speaks to them briefly, worried about Rylan too.

The group pays Mordan Darkfrey a visit. Mordan asks Lian if she has come to return the artifact she stole, but she says she has no idea what he's talking about. They update Mordan on recent happenings. When Lian expresses her concerns about Rylan, Mordan brushes her off, and says that while he does have braces out looking for him as they speak, Rylan was the one who made the decision to go off on his own. Mordan also reminds Lian that he only humors her and her group of misfits because she's a Pimey, descended from one of the town's oldest families. When they leave, Mordan advises Lian to be careful involving blivs in shadyr business—it didn't work out so well last time with that husband of hers.

Everly, Harper, Callan and Cherry meet at The Crow's Nest, a local bar run by a woman named Crowea who, as Everly learns, is kind of the town witch. Crowea has an eidolghast tooth stuck in her eye, and has been able to perform psychometry ever since it got there. But she senses something about Everly, and refuses to come near her, which makes Everly feel broken.

Everly and Harper accidentally stumble upon Cherry making out with one of the Darkfrey shadyrs, Jasper. He begs them not to tell anyone. If the estate finds out about Jasper, they might kick him out, just like they kicked Cherry out.

On their way home, the group spots a hunched old woman dragging something in the road. Everly is certain it is the same figure she saw approach her as she fell unconscious after Rylan's battle with the vasmire. But when Everly tries to speak to the woman, she bolts into the forest, leaving behind the bag of the roadkill and eidolghast parts she's been collecting.

Wondering if there is any chance the woman may have collected a larger body, Everly, Harper, Cherry, and Callan chase after the woman, wanting answers. As they run through the woods, Everly spots the cougar from the first night, but it runs away. Deeper in the forest, they find a cabin surrounded by pet food bowls full of rotting remains. The old woman, who introduces herself as Nell, wants assurance that they won't hurt her or any of her animals. She explains that she and her husband run an animal sanctuary out there.

Something seems off, though, and Callan, with his enhanced shadyr night-vision, informs the group that these animals are all dead. When a small cat hops into Everly's lap, she realizes that it's stitched together from different animal parts. The house is surrounded by undead cats, bears, wolves, and other creatures. Everly realizes that Nell is stitching together roadkill with eidolghast parts to bring them back to life.

They question her about the night of Rylan's disappearance. Nell admits that she did find someone hurt that night, and she dragged him back here. His body seemed to heal itself, but he won't wake up. Just as Nell is about to bring them to the body, two teams of Darkfreys show up; they've arrived to put an end to the beshadowing here. Callan tries to explain the situation, but they won't listen.

The Darkfreys start killing Nell's animals. Nell attacks one of the brace leaders, but she's no match for him. The animals respond in turn, ready to defend their caretaker. Chaos ensues. Angry with Everly for leading the Darkfreys here, Nell says that she'll never show them where she's hiding Rylan's body.

Further enraged, Nell attacks Everly, and when a swarm of undead rats is unleashed, Everly panics and flees into a back room of the cabin. The cougar arrives and protects Everly from the rats. It turns out that they did hit the cougar on that first night. It's undead, like the other animals.

The Darkfreys want to kill the cougar, but Everly defends it. One Darkfrey assumes that Everly must be beshadowed as well—and tries to kill her. Nell's undead husband appears and hits the shadyr over the head, then beckons for Everly to follow him.

The man leads Everly into a room where Everly stumbles upon a Darkfrey shadyr trying to tear apart the body that lies there. Angered by the needless violence of the Darkfreys, Everly unleashes her dragon. But she finds that she cannot control the dragon's hunger. The shadyr, who she doesn't recognize in their transformed form, escapes, but her tendrils of light consume the undead man, killing him.

Devastated that she has just taken a life, Everly finds Rylan's body. Cherry, Callan, and Harper regroup with her here. Four Darkfreys follow them and announce that Nell is dead. Tension escalates between the Darkfreys and the Howell House crew. Annabeth, a Darkfrey, tells them they need to take Rylan's body back to Darkfrey Estate. Everly refuses, knowing that *someone* amongst the Darkfrey ranks just tried to kill Rylan—again.

Finally, the Darkfreys relent, and leave. Outside, the Darkfreys have slaughtered Nell's animals, and Everly is racked with guilt.

Rylan, it seems, is stuck in a coma in half-vasmire form, and was probably able to keep regenerating himself due to all the vasmire parts that Nell had stored in the room. They bring Rylan back to Everly's house, along with a tub of monster bits with the hope that as long as vasmire parts are nearby, Rylan's body will continue to renew itself to stay alive.

The younger shadyrs, Tammy and Cherry, haven't learned to control their transformations in the vicinity of vasmires, so the group agrees to keep Rylan at Boderleth Place for now. Lian arrives to greet her long-lost son. Whatever Rylan was investigating, it clearly made him an enemy.

Outside, Everly spots the undead cougar, and secretly leaves food for it outside. Despite their original plans to return home, Everly and Harper decide to stay in Shroudhaven until this is all resolved.

Everly explains the situation to Rylan in her dreams. Rylan worries for Everly's safety if she stays in town, but they decide that whatever happens next, they are in it together—and that Everly will do everything in her power to wake him up from his coma.



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