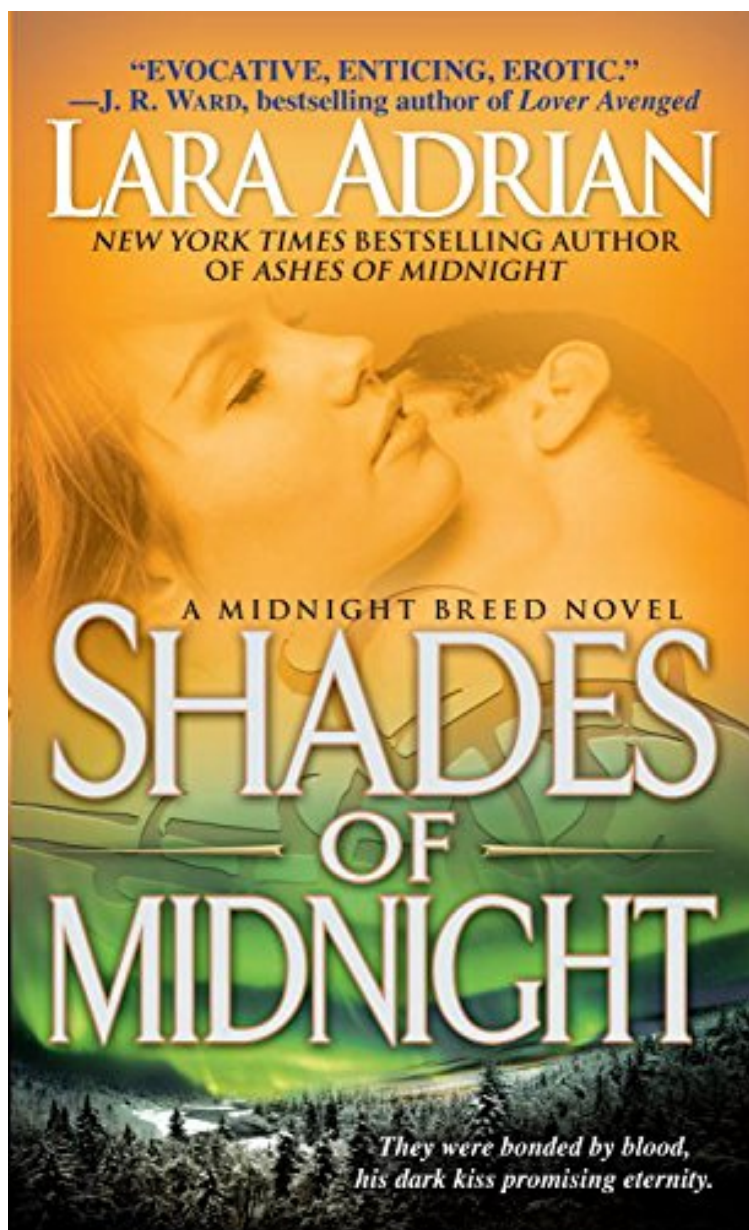


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Shades of Midnight: A Midnight Breed Novel



Par Lara Adrian

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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurIn a frozen wilderness steeped in darkness, the lines between good and evil, lover and enemy, are never black or white but drawn in Shades of Midnight. Something inhuman is stalking the frigid Alaskan wilds, leaving unspeakable carnage in its wake. For bush pilot Alexandra Maguire, the killings stir memories of a horrific event she witnessed as a child and evoke in her the inexplicable sense of otherness she has long felt within herself but never fully understood . . . until a darkly seductive stranger with secrets of his own enters her world. Sent from Boston on a mission to investigate the savage attacks and stop the

slaughter, vampire warrior Kade has his own reasons for returning to the frigid, forbidding place of his birth.

Haunted by a secret shame, Kade soon realizes the stunning truth of the threat he faces—a threat that will jeopardize the fragile bond he has formed with the courageous, determined young woman who arouses his deepest passions and most primal hungers. But in bringing Alex into his world of blood and darkness, Kade must confront both his own personal demons and the even greater evil that could destroy all he holds dear.

Chapter One
Twenty-eight-hundred feet below the red single-engine de Havilland Beavers wings, the broad swath of the frozen Koyukuk River glistened under the morning moonlight like a ribbon of crushed diamonds. Alexandra Maguire followed the long stretch of ice-jammed, crystalline water north out of the small town of Harmony, the back of her plane loaded with supplies for the days delivery run to a handful of settlements nestled deep in the interior. Beside her in the passenger seat of the cockpit was Luna, the best copilot shed ever had, aside from her dad, who had taught Alex everything she knew about flying.

The gray-and-white wolf dog had been standing in for Hank Maguire for a couple of years now, when the Alzheimers had really started taking hold of him. Hard to believe hed been gone for six months now, although Alex often felt she had been slowly losing him for a lot longer than that. At least the disease that ate away his mind and memories had also ended his pain, a small mercy to be sure. Now it was just Luna and her living in the old house in Harmony and making the supply runs to Hanks small roster of clients in the bush. Luna sat erect next to Alex, her pointed ears perked forward, sharp blue eyes keeping a steady watch on the mountainous terrain of the Brooks Range, its dark, crouching bulk filling the northwest horizon. As they crossed the Arctic Circle, the dog fidgeted in the seat and let out a small, eager-sounding whine. Dont tell me you can smell Pop Tomss moose jerky from here, Alex said, reaching out to ruffle the big furry head as they continued north along the Koyukuks Middle Fork, past the small villages of Bettles and Evansville.

Breakfast is still twenty minutes away, girlfriend. Make that thirty minutes, if that black storm cloud over the Anaktuvuk Pass decides to blow our way. Alex eyed the dark thunderhead that loomed a few miles up from their flight path. More snow was in the forecast; certainly nothing unusual for November in Alaska, but not exactly prime conditions for her delivery route today. She exhaled a curse as the wind coming off the mountains picked up speed and scuttled across the river valley to give the already bumpy ride a bit more gusto.

The worst of it passed just as Alexs cell phone began to chirp in the pocket of her parka. She dug the phone out and answered the call without needing to know who was on the other end of the line. Hey, Jenna. In the background of her best friends house, Alex could hear a Forest Service radio chattering about sketchy weather conditions and plummeting windchill factors. Storms gonna be coming your way in a couple of hours, Alex. You on the ground yet? Not quite. She rode through another round of bumps as she neared the town of Wiseman and turned the plane onto the route that would take her to the first stop on her days delivery schedule. Im maybe ten minutes from the Toms place now. Three more stops after that, shouldnt take more than an hour apiece even with the headwind Im fighting right now. I think the storm is going to pass right by this time. It was hope more than qualified estimation, sympathy for her friends concern more than caution for her own safety. Alex was a good flier, and too well trained by Hank Maguire to do anything completely reckless, but the simple fact was the supplies she carried in her cargo hold were already a week overdue because of bad weather. Shed be damned if she was going to let a few snowflakes or gusty breezes keep her from delivering goods to the folks in the far-flung reaches of the interior who were counting on her for food and fuel. Everythings fine on this end, Jenna. You know Im careful. Yeah, she said. But accidents happen, dont they? Alex might have told Jenna not to worry, but saying it wouldnt have done any good. Her friend knew as well as anyone perhaps better than most that the bush pilots unofficial creed was roughly the same as that of a police officer: You have to go out; you dont have to come back. Jenna Tucker-Darrow, a former Statie from a long line of States and the widow of one to boot got quiet for a long moment. Alex

knew her friends mind was likely traveling down a dark path, so she worked to fill the silence with chitchat. Hey, when I spoke to Pop Toms yesterday, he told me hed just smoked a big batch of moose meat. You want me to see if I can sweet-talk him into sending me back with some extra jerky for you? Jenna laughed, but she sounded as though her thoughts were a million miles away. Sure. If you think Luna will let you get away with it, then yeah, Id like that. You got it. The only thing better than Pops moose jerky is his biscuits and gravy. Lucky me, I get some of both. Breakfast at Pop Tomss place in exchange for semimonthly supply drops had been a tradition started by Alexs father. It was one she enjoyed maintaining, even if the price of aviation gas well outweighed the price of Pops simple meals. But Alex liked the old guy and his family. They were good, basic folks living authentically off the same rugged land that had sustained generations of their stalwart kin. The idea of sitting down for a hot, homemade breakfast and catching up on

the weeks events with Pop Toms made every bump and dip in the flight out to the remote settlement worthwhile. As she crested the final ridge and began her descent toward the makeshift landing strip behind Pops store, Alex imagined the salty-sweet smell of smoked meat and buttermilk biscuits that would already be warming on the woodstove when she arrived. Listen, Id better go, she told Jenna. Im going to need both hands to land this thing, and IThe words caught in her throat. On the ground below, something odd caught Alexs eye. In the dark of the winter morning, she couldnt quite make out the bulky, snow-covered form lying in the center of the settlement, but whatever it was made the hair at the back of her neck prickle to attention. Alex? She couldnt answer at first, all of her focus rooted on the strange object below. Dread crawled up her spine, as cold as the wind battering the windscreen. Alex, are you still there? Im, uh . . . yeah, Im here. Whats going on? Im not sure. Im looking at Pops place just ahead, but somethings not right down there. What do you mean? I cant say exactly. Alex peered out the window of the cockpit as she brought the plane closer, preparing to land. Theres something in the snow. Its not moving. Oh, my God . . . I think its a person. Are you sure? I dont know, Alex murmured into the cell phone, but the way her pulse was hammering, she had no doubt that she was looking at a human being lying underneath a fresh cover of snow. A dead human being, if whoever it was had been lying there unnoticed for anything longer than a few hours in this punishing cold. But how could that be? It was almost nine in the morning. Even though daybreak wouldnt come until close to noon this far north, Pop would have been awake for hours by now. The other folks in the settlementhis sister and her familywould have had to be blind to miss the fact that one of them was not only unaccounted for but sprawled in a frozen heap right outside their doors. Talk to me, Alex, Jenna was saying now, using her cop voice, the one that demanded to be obeyed. Tell me whats going on. As she descended to begin her landing, Alex noticed another worrisome form on the ground belowthis one lying between Pop Tomss house and the tree line of the surrounding woods. The snow around the body was blood-soaked, dark stains seeping up through the blanket of fresh white in horrific intensity. Oh, Jesus, she hissed under her breath. This is bad, Jenna. Something awful has happened here. Theres more than one person out there. Theyve been . . . hurt somehow. Hurt as in wounded? Dead, Alex murmured, her mouth gone suddenly dry with the certainty of what she was seeing. Oh, God, Jenna . . . theres blood. A lot of blood. Shit, Jenna whispered. Okay, listen to me, Alex, I want you to stay on the phone with me now. Turn around and come back into town. Im going to call Zach on the radio while I have you on the phone with me, all right? Whatever happened, I think we should let Zach handle it. Dont you go nearI cant leave them alone, Alex blurted. People have been hurt down there. They might need help. I cant just turn away and leave them now. Oh, God. I have to go down and see if I can do something. Alex, dammit, dont youI have to go, she said. Im about to land. Ignoring Jennas continued orders to leave the situation to Zach Tucker, Jennas brother and the sole police officer in a hundred-mile radius, Alex cut off the call and eased the plane down onto its skis on the short landing strip. She brought the Beaver to an abrupt stop in the fresh powder, not the most graceful landing but good enough, considering that every nerve ending in her body was screaming in rising panic. She killed the engine and no sooner had she opened the cockpit door did Luna leap over her lap to bolt from the plane and run toward the center of the cluster of homes. Luna! Alexs voice echoed in the eerie quiet of the place. The wolf dog was out of sight now. Alex climbed out of the plane and called for Luna once more, but only silence answered. No one came out of the nearby houses to greet her. No sign of Pop Toms at the log-cabin store just a hundred feet away. No sign of Teddy, who, despite his teenage front of indifference, adored Luna as much as the dog loved him. There was no sign of Pops sister, Ruthanne, either, nor her husband and grown sons, who were usually up well before the late daybreak of November and taking care of things around the settlement. The entire place was still and soundless, utterly lifeless. Shit, Alex whispered, her heart jackhammering in her breast. What the hell had happened here? What kind of dangerous situation might she be walking into when she got out of her plane? As she reached back into the cargo hold to grab her loaded rifle, Alexs mind latched onto the grimmest possibility. Middle of winter in the interior, it wasnt unheard of for someone to go stir-crazy and attack his neighbor or do serious harm to himself, maybe both in short order. She didnt want to think itcouldnt picture anyone in this close-knit group of people snapping like that, not even sullen Teddy, whom Pop was worried had recently fallen in with a bad crowd. Rifle at the ready, Alex climbed out of the plane and headed in the direction Luna had run. Last nights fresh snow cover was powdery soft under her boots, muffling the sound of her footsteps as she cautiously approached Pops store. The back door was unlatched, wedged open half a foot by snow that had blown over the threshold and begun to accumulate. No one had been out here to check on the place for a minimum of several hours. Alex swallowed the lump of dread that was steadily growing in her throat. She didnt dare call

out to anyone now. She hardly dared to breathe as she continued past the store to the cluster of cabins beyond. Lunas bark made her jump. The wolf dog was sitting several yards out. At her feet was one of the lifeless forms Alex had spotted from the air. Luna barked once more, then nosed the body as if she were trying to make it move. Oh, Jesus . . . how can this be? Alex whispered, taking another look around the silent settlement as she managed a firmer grip on her weapon. Her feet felt like lead weights as she walked toward Luna and that motionless, snow-covered bulk on the ground. Good girl. Im here now. Let me have a look. God help her, she didnt need to get very close to see that it was Teddy lying there. The teens favorite black-and-red flannel shirt was sticking out of the shredded, bloodied mess of his heavy down parka. His dark brown hair was iced over where it rested against his cheek and brow, his olive-colored skin frozen and waxy, tinged blue where it wasnt coated brick red with coagulated blood from the torn, gaping wound where his larynx used to be. Alex rocked back on her heels, sucking in a great gasp of air as the reality of what she was seeing slammed into her. Teddy was dead. Just a kid, for crissake, and someone had killed him and left him there like an animal. And he wasnt the only one to suffer that fate at this remote family settlement. Shock and fear clawing at her, Alex stepped back from Teddys body and swung her head around to look at the surrounding area and houses. A door was smashed off its hinges across the way. Another motionless bulk lay outside one of the cabins. Still another, just below the open door of a pickup truck that was parked alongside an old wooden storage shed. Oh, God . . . no. And then there was the body shed seen on her descent into the settlement, the one that looked so like Pop Toms, dead and bloodied at the edge of the woods behind his house. Taking a firmer hold on her rifle even though she doubted that the killer or killers, based on the depth of carnage here had bothered to hang around, Alex found herself drifting toward that scarlet-drenched patch of snow near the tree line, Luna following at her heels. Alexs heart and stomach twisted together with each dreadful step. She didnt want to see Pop like this, didnt want to see anyone she cared about brutalized and broken and bloody . . . not ever again. Yet she could no more stop her feet from moving than she could keep from kneeling beside the grisly, facedown corpse of the man whod always greeted her with a smile and a big, warm bear hug. Alex set her gun down in the red snow next to her. A wordless cry strangling in her throat, she reached out and carefully rolled the big mans shoulder. The ruined, sightless face that gaped up at her made Alexs blood chill in her veins. His expression was one of pure terror, frozen across his once-jovial features. Alex could not even begin to imagine the horror of what he must have seen in the instant before he died. Then again . . . The old memory leapt out at her from the dark, locked corner of her past. Alex felt its sharp bite, heard the screams that had shattered the night and her life forever. No. Alex didnt want to relive that pain. She didnt want to think about that night, least of all now. Not when she was surrounded by so much death. Not when she was so totally alone. She couldnt bear to dredge up the past shed left eighteen years and thousands of miles behind her. But it crept back into her thoughts as though it were yesterday. As though it were happening again, the unshakable sense that the same horror she and her father had survived so long ago in Florida had somehow come to visit this innocent family in the isolated wilds of Alaska. Alex choked back a sickened sob, brushing at the tears that burned her cheeks as they froze against her skin. Lunas low grunt beside her broke into Alexs thoughts. The dog was digging at the snow near the body, her muzzle buried in the powder. She moved forward, sniffing out a scent that led toward the trees. Alex got up to see what Luna had found. She didnt see it at first, then, when she did, the sight did not compute in her mind. It was a footprint, bloodstained and partially obscured by the new-fallen snow. A human footprint that she had to guess would have fit a size fifteen or larger boot. And the foot that left it was naked more than improbable in this deadly cold, impossible. What the hell? Terrified, Alex grabbed Luna by the scruff of her neck and held her fast at her side before the dog could follow the tracks any farther. She looked out to where they quickly grew lighter, then simply vanished into the elements. It didnt make sense. None of this made any sense in the reality of the world as she wanted to view it. From the direction of her plane, she heard her cell phone ringing, accompanied by the airless crackle of the Beavers radio as an agitated male voice squawked for her to report in. Alex, goddamn it! Do you copy? Alex! Glad for the distraction, she picked up her rifle and ran back to the plane, Luna keeping pace at her side like the canine bodyguard she truly was. Alex! Zach Tucker shouted her name over the airwaves again. If you can hear me, Alex, pick up now! She bent in over the seat and grabbed the radio. Im here, she said, breathless and shaking. Im here, Zach, and theyre all dead. Pop Toms. Teddy. Everyone. Zach swore a harshly whispered oath. What about you? Are you okay? Yeah, she murmured. Oh, my God. Zach, how could this happen? Im gonna take care of it, he told her. Right now, I need you to tell me what you can about what you see, okay? Did you notice any weapons, any explanation for what might have gone on out there? Alex shot a miserable look back over at the carnage of the settlement.

The lives cut short so violently. The blood that she could taste on the icy wind. Alex? Do you have any idea how these folks might have been killed? She squeezed her eyes shut against the barrage of memories that assailed her the screams of her mother and her little brother, the anguished cries of her father as he grabbed nine-year-old Alex up into his arms and fled with her into the night before the monsters had a chance to kill them all. Alex shook her head, trying desperately to dislodge that awful recollection . . . and to deny to herself that the killings here last night were stamped with the same kind of unthinkable horror. Talk to me, Zach coaxed her. Help me understand what happened if you can, Alex. The words would not come to her tongue. They remained trapped in her throat, swallowed up by the knot of ice-cold dread that had opened in the center of her chest. I dont know, she answered, her voice sounding detached and wooden in the silence of the empty, frozen bush. I cant tell you what could have done this. I cant . . . Thats okay, Alex. I know you must be upset. Just come on back home now. Ive already got a call in to Roger Bemis out at the airstrip. Hes going to fly me out there within the hour and were gonna take care of the Tomses, all right? Okay, she murmured. Everythings going to be okay now, I promise. Okay, she repeated, feeling another tear spill down her cold cheek. Her father had said the same words to her all those years ago a promise that everything would be all right. She hadnt believed him. After what she had seen here today, the sense she had that something evil was closing in on her once more, Alex wondered if anything would ever truly be all right again. Skeeter Arnold took a long drag off a fat joint as he kicked back in a battered baby blue velvet recliner, the finest piece of furniture he had in the shithole apartment he kept in the back of his mothers house in Harmony. Holding the smoke deep in his lungs, he closed his eyes and listened to the yammering of the shortwave radio on the kitchen counter. The way Skeeter saw it, the kind of enterprise he was in, it just made good business sense to keep a handle not only on the States but also the local yokels too stupid to keep their asses out of trouble. And yeah, maybe he liked to listen to the dispatches partly because he got a perverted amount of enjoyment out of other peoples misery, as well. Nice to be reminded sometimes that he wasnt the biggest loser in the whole state of Alaska, no matter what his bitch of a mother told him on a regular basis. Skeeter exhaled slowly, thin smoke curling around the curse he mumbled when he heard the creak and groan of the old floorboards as the perpetual pain in his ass came stomping down the hallway to his room. Stanley, did you hear me calling you up there? Do you intend to sleep all damn day in there? She ham-fisted a few hard raps on the door, then gave the locked knob a good, but ineffective, jiggle. Didnt I tell you to run out first thing this morning and pick up some rice and canned beans? What the hell are you waiting for, the spring thaw? Get off your lazy ass and do something useful for a change! Skeeter didnt trouble himself to answer. Nor did he budge from his sprawl in the chair, or even so much as flinch as his mother continued to huff and puff and bang on the door. He took another lazy hit off the joint and savored the buzz, knowing the annoyance outside his room would eventually tire of him ignoring her and slink back to her harpys perch in front of the TV where she belonged. To help drown her out in the meantime, Skeeter reached for the radio a few feet away and cranked the volume. Harmonys one-and-only law enforcer, Trooper Zachary Tucker, sounded like he had his panties in a wad over something pretty big today. Stanley Arnold, dont you think you can just tune me out, you miserable no-good excuse for a son! His mother pounded on the door again, then stormed off, her big mouth still running all the way up the hall. Youre just like your father. Never been worth a lick and never will be! Skeeter got up from the recliner and moved in closer to the radio as Tucker, reporting in with the State boys in Fairbanks, rattled off the coordinates of an apparent multiple death sceneprobable homicide, hed said some forty miles out in the bush. Tucker was awaiting air transport from one of Harmonys two resident pilots. He advised that the other one, Alex Maguire, had been the one who discovered the bodies while on a supply run and was presently on her way back into town. Skeeter felt a twist of excitement as he listened. He knew the area in question very well. Hell, hed been out that way just last night with Chad Bishop and a few other people. Theyd been getting high and drinking by the river . . . right before theyd started tormenting Teddy Toms. In fact, the way it was sounding to him, the settlement the cops were talking about had to be the kids familys place. No friggin way, Skeeter whispered, wondering if he could possibly be right about that. Just to be sure, he jotted the coordinates down on his palm, then riffled through a pile of unpaid bills and other trash until he found the beer-stained area map hed been using as a coaster for the past couple of years. He triangulated the spot on the map, disbelief and a sick sort of wonderment sliding through his senses. Holy shit, he said, taking a long drag off his joint before snuffing it out on the burn-scarred Formica to save the rest of the buzz for later. He was too excited to finish it now. Too lit up with morbid curiosity to keep from running a tight pace back and forth across the cramped room. Had Pop Toms or the old mans brother-in-law gone off the deep end? Or had it been Teddy who

finally snapped his leash? Maybe the kid had gone home and lost it after Skeeter and the others had driven him off in tears last night at the river? Hed know all that soon enough, Skeeter figured. Hed always wanted to see a dead person up close. Maybe hed just head out for a little detour on his way to the store for those beans and rice his mother wanted. Yeah, and maybe hed skip the errand-boy bullshit and just go do what he wanted for a change. Skeeter grabbed his cell phone the sweet new one with video capability and the cool skull-and-crossbones skin. Then he fished the key to his Yamaha sled out of the mess on his counter. He didnt bother telling his mother where he was heading, just pulled on his winter gear and strode out into the bracing chill of the day. *Revue de presse* Evocative, enticing, erotic. J. R. Ward, author of *Lover Avenged*