

The Darkness Saves

# The Darkness Saves

The Bridge Series  
Book I

K.L. Rutledge

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## The Darkness Saves

Some bridges are built of stone.

Others are forged in sacrifice.

# K.L. Rutledge

*This is for the dreamers who understand that the most meaningful adventures are rarely planned, and that a little darkness often walks beside the magic.*



# Chapter One

*Leyla*

Some mornings feel borrowed. Like the world hasn't quite decided whether to wake up or not. That's how this one felt. The air still carried a hint of last night's rain, cool and damp, wrapping the street in fog. I pulled my coat tighter as I crossed Sixth Avenue, the faint chime of *Eleanor*'s bells greeting me before I even reached the door. The shop smelled exactly as it always did. Burnt espresso, lemon cleaner, and time.

The kind of smell that clings to paper long after the story's done being told.

Rows of mismatched shelves stretched to the ceiling, some tilting slightly like they'd grown weary of holding so many lives between their spines. It was perfect. Every crooked and carefully planned inch of it. This place was my heartbeat. Half library, half coffee shop, and wholly ours.

“About time,” came Mick’s voice from behind the counter. “I was two minutes away from declaring you dead and selling your collection of depressing poetry.”

“You’d have to find it first,” I sat my bag down on one of the back tables. “I’ve got them hidden with the good pens and my will to live.”

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“Both endangered species,” she said, smirking. Her blonde curls were already rebelling against the messy bun perched on her head. Coffee grounds dusted her apron like glitter. “Are you opening today or staring wistfully at the books again?”

“I can multitask.” And I could, but she wasn’t wrong. I did stare. Often.

Our regulars were a mix of quiet readers, aspiring writers, and a few people who just came to smell the pages. I never blamed them.

“Did you finish that manuscript?” Mick asked as she poured a coffee for our incoming regular, John.

“The one with the tragic hero and emotional trauma?” I groaned. “Barely. The protagonist had a meltdown, the love interest disappeared for six chapters, and somehow there was a surprise elf... Honestly... was kind of here for the chaos, though.”

I complained, but deep down, I loved these side gigs.

Being able to assist writers with their vision, but also still running a business with my best friend, was the dream. “*Was*” possibly being the key word here.

“So... a typical Tuesday,” Mick laughed.

“Basically.”

I picked up the broom, sweeping absently near the front window, but my mind wasn’t on work. It hadn’t been for a while. Lately, everything felt like repetition... Words, coffee, sleep, repeat.

I used to crave quiet. Now it felt like the silence was waiting for something to answer it back.

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Such a stark difference from Mick and I's upbringing. Mick's mom gave it her best, but she was a single mother and her daughter chose to have a best friend whose stepfather was a drunk. Whose adoptive mom died when she was a baby.

So, she's mom. Plain and simple.

She practically raised us both since I came into their lives in the third grade. Times were tough but we had each other, always. I officially moved in with them our junior year, when Jerry, my stepfather... I shook my head. No longer even worth a memory.

My life looks a lot different than it did. The quiet helps; the simplicity and routine help.

But lately the quiet felt heavier.

When I caught my reflection in the front glass, I hardly recognized myself. The morning light softened the edges of my face, but the faint shadows beneath my eyes didn't lie. My dark brown hair was twisted into a loose braid over one shoulder, the ends curling where humidity refused to obey. My eyes... blue, not bright, more like the color of faded denim and just... tired. The kind of tired that coffee cannot fix.

Mick used to joke that I was raised by caffeine and the Dewey Decimal System, and she wasn't entirely wrong. Books made sense when people didn't. That's probably why I opened *Eleanor's* with her two years ago. We made the plan after Mick's mom passed away just a year prior. She loved books, and she left us both with a substantial insurance policy. We opened *Eleanor's* in her honor, our Eleanor. Always looking out for us, even when she was no longer here. God, how I missed her.

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Mick handled the people and the coffee while I handled the stories and the coffee. It worked. The bell above the door jingled, and I glanced up automatically, plastering on my practiced shop smile. It was just the mailman, a friendly older guy who always delivered more gossip than actual mail. He waved, dropped a small stack of envelopes on the counter, and disappeared back into the fog.

Mick began riffling through the pile. “Bill, bill, postcard from my dad, bill, and—” she frowned, holding up one, “this.” It was heavier than the others. Cream-colored, sealed with dark red wax. No return address. Just my name.

*Leyla.*

I took it, running my thumb over the seal. The wax was beautiful with a faint pattern pressed into it and thorns twining around a circle. I didn’t recognize it, but something about it felt... deliberate. Old.

“You ordering mysterious fan mail again?” Mick asked. “Maybe it’s from your secret admirer.” She laughed to herself. “If so, he’s worse at flirting than you are.”

A laugh escaped, perhaps more out of nerves than anything. I couldn’t open the envelope right away with the customers starting to make their steady entrances. Instead, I set it beside the register and went back to straightening the display table. But I kept glancing at it, that little flash of ivory against the wood. It looked out of place. Like it didn’t belong to this century, let alone this shop.

Once the morning rush decided to die down, I was finally able to tear the seal.

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The note inside was simple. One line written in the same elegant script.

*You've been found.*

That was all.

I blinked, waiting for something else. A signature, a name, a reason.

Nothing.

Mick peered over my shoulder. “Creepy. Want me to call the FBI, or should we assume it’s the world’s worst love letter?”

“It’s probably a mix-up,” I said, though the words came too fast, too defensive. The paper felt warm in my hands, too warm. I tucked it away, forcing a smile.

She gave me a look that said *‘liar’* but didn’t push it. The rest of the day blurred by in soft light and the sound of turning pages. But even after the last customer left, my gaze kept drifting to the envelope. To the words. To the strange pull in my chest every time I looked at them.

That night, as I closed up the shop alone, I headed towards the exit. I caught my reflection on the way in the front window. Muted light behind me, darkness pressing close outside. For the briefest moment, I saw movement.

A shadow beside me that wasn’t mine.

Watching.

The air stilled. My heart tripped over itself. I turned, fast.

And then... Nothing. Just shelves. Just quiet.

*Was I seeing things?*

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As I stepped into the fog, a whisper of warmth trailed across my skin, like the ghost of a touch. I told myself it was imagination. A trick of light.

But deep down, I couldn't shake the feeling that something in the dark had recognized me first.

# Chapter Two

*Leyla*

Sleep didn't come easily. Every time I closed my eyes, I saw the red wax seal, the elegant handwriting, and the words that shouldn't have meant anything.

*You've been found.*

By morning, the letter sat on my nightstand like it was waiting for me to wake up. The fog outside hadn't lifted. It clung low to the ground, soft and soundless, swallowing the edges of the street.

I stood at my window for too long, watching the world blur at the edges, almost convincing myself I'd imagined the whole thing. But unease has a way of staying. Quiet, steady, and waiting for you to acknowledge it.

By the time I reached *Eleanor's*, the familiar smell of roasted coffee and old paper filled the air. My sanctuary. My routine. The heartbeat of my ordinary life.

Mick was already inside, humming off-key while reorganizing the poetry shelves.

“You look like you've seen a ghost,” she said without looking up.

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“More like I edited one,” I replied, forcing a smile that didn’t quite land.

She snorted. “That bad?”

“Worse.” I busied myself behind the counter, wiping down surfaces that didn’t need cleaning. Anything to keep from looking at the letter now tucked safely, or perhaps stupidly, into my coat pocket.

It was barely past ten when the bell above the door chimed. The sound was innocent... Until it wasn’t.

Something in the air shifted.

He didn’t just walk in... He arrived. Like the world, my shop, had been waiting for him.

Not in the way our regulars did... with their damp coats and sleepy smiles. But with the ease of someone who rarely asked permission. The kind of man who could walk into any room and have the walls lean closer just to listen. His presence filled the doorway and also, somehow, the entire room.

He was tall, taller than any man I had met before, with a long dark coat that brushed the tops of his boots. His hair was black... not glossy, but a deep matte black, with a slight wave to it. His eyes... I couldn’t decide on the color. Somewhere between gray and blue, the kind that shift depending on the light. And when they landed on me, the air in my lungs stalled.

“Good morning,” he said, voice low, warm. Every syllable deliberate.

“... Morning,” I managed. My mouth moved but my brain had apparently abandoned ship. I continued to stand there. Continued to stare. Mick’s pointed cough from the counter

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pulled me back. “Uh... Sorry. I’m sorry. Would you like a coffee or book?”

He smiled faintly as I fumbled through our interaction. “That depends. Which one do you recommend?”

“Books last longer,” I blurted before I could stop myself.

That earned me a quiet laugh, soft but genuine. “Then I’ll trust your judgment.”

He drifted toward the shelves, fingers brushing the spines like he was reacquainting himself with old friends. His movements were deliberate, not hesitant or even remotely rushed. Like he’d been here before and was testing what had changed. The air seemed to follow him, the shadows softening. The lights ever so slightly dimming as he passed through the shelves.

Mick glanced at me from behind the counter and mouthed, *who’s that?*

I shrugged, pretending to focus my attention on the espresso machine. After minutes of cleaning the machine and nothing else to do with my hands, I walked over towards the back library section to start going through a few new books we got in yesterday. Keep my mind busy, try not to look at the man that made me forget how to speak. Yes, that should work.

A few minutes later, the man returned with a worn copy of *The Collected Works of Poe*. He set it gently on the counter in front of me, leaning across the small countertop. “Appropriate, don’t you think?”

“For the weather or the mood?” I managed.

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“Both,” he said, then looked at me with an intensity that felt far too direct for a stranger. “You’re Leyla.” A statement, not a question.

My hand froze midreach. “How—?”

He tilted his head, feigning confusion. “It’s on the sign out front. *Eleanor’s* — Owned by Leyla and Mick.” I let out a shaky laugh.

“Right. Of course.” But something about the way he said my name made me feel like he wasn’t lying, just deflecting. He handed me a twenty.

His fingers brushed mine briefly, and a pulse of cold went through me, sharp enough to feel like memory. Internally, I shake my head, *what is going on with me? Talk.*

“What brings you to our shop?” I counted his change.

“I’m just visiting,” he replies. “Sort of passing through for work. My company rented a house about ten minutes away and I wanted to explore the area. I’ll be here for a few weeks.”

“What kind of work?” There was a pause.

“... I’m in the business of books.” His lips curved. His gaze lingered a second too long, like he was searching for something behind my eyes.

“Like publishing?” I questioned, trying for steady. “You came to the right place. Plenty of stories here; some worth reading more than others, I’ll admit.”

“I don’t doubt that for a second,” he whispered, pocketing his change. “It was a pleasure meeting you, Leyla.” The way he said my name, soft and deliberate, made it sound like a promise. Made my stomach tighten.

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Before I could respond, the bell over the door chimed again, and he was gone.

Mick appeared beside me almost instantly. “Okay, what was that? Tell me everything.”

“I don’t know,” I said, staring at the empty doorway. “Just a customer.” Though as the words came out, I could feel how untrue they were.

“Hmm,” she drew out the word. “A customer who looks like a tragic novel hero and makes eyes at you while he’s pretending to look for a book. Perhaps learning his name isn’t necessary.” I smiled despite myself. Perhaps she was right.

Outside, the fog had started to lift, but when I glanced toward the street, I thought I saw him.

Standing there. Across the road.

Watching me.

Then a car passed, and he was gone.

# Chapter Three

*Leyla*

I spent last night with Brad. Well, technically on a date with Brad. It wasn't bad. Just... lukewarm.

He was the kind of guy who talked with his hands and laughed at all the wrong moments, nice enough that I felt guilty for not feeling more.

We went to that new Italian place downtown, the one with the mismatched chairs and candles in wine bottles. He told me about his job at the bank, his fantasy football league, his love for spicy arrabbiata. Every word passing through me like background music.

I smiled where I should have, nodded when expected, but my mind kept wandering elsewhere.

To storm gray eyes, that leaned a little blue just in the right light.

To the memory of that voice that felt like smoke and velvet.

To the way he looked at me like he already knew what I feared most in this world.

Brad had offered to take me to a basketball game in two days.

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*‘Front row seats,’* he’d said, all proud grin and easy charm. And I’d said yes. Because why not?

Maybe I needed to try. Maybe distraction was what I needed, to drown out the pull of someone I just met but couldn’t stop thinking about. I told myself it was just a night. Just a game. Just a chance to be normal for a while.

But even as I replayed his smile, his stories, and his too-loud laugh, all I could feel was that faint echo of electricity under my skin, the kind that didn’t belong to Brad at all.



I unlocked the door to *Eleanor’s*, and the familiar bell chimed, soft and melodic, like a lullaby for the city’s early risers. Inside, the smell wrapped around me: coffee, aged paper, and the faint sweetness of ink. Dust floated lazily in the amber shafts of light that spilled through the tall windows. Mick was already behind the counter, balancing a latte in one hand while skimming invoices with the other.

“Late again,” she said without looking up. “If the books start reading themselves, I’ll know who to blame.”

I muttered a response I didn’t mean, dropping my bag on a nearby table.

My eyes drifted to the shelves, and that strange pull returned. The subtle sensation that the shop itself was watching, leaning in a little closer.

And then I saw him.

The stranger from yesterday.

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He was in the corner, inconspicuous but impossible to ignore. Leaning against the tall shelf near the poetry section, he held a leather-bound book, but he wasn't reading. His eyes... storm-colored, edged with the faintest silver glint, were trained on me. Calm. Focused. And electric.

My pulse stumbled. My stomach turned traitor. Every sensible part of me screamed to look away, but my body refused to listen. His gaze pinned me there, the space between us thickening with something sharp and electric.

Mick noticed. Of course she did. "Leyla?" she whispered, nudging my elbow. "You okay?"

"I'm fine," I said. A terrible lie. My voice betrayed me, too breathless to sound casual.

"He's been here since right after I opened," she said under her breath, eyes narrowing. "He hasn't moved."

I forced a shrug. "He said he's in town for work."

"Right," her skepticism dripped plainly. "Work. Sure."

There was just something familiar in the way he existed. He didn't smile. Didn't move closer.

Just stood there.

He was magnetic, almost in a predatory way; like he had all the time in the world and the patience to wait while the world continued to spin around him.

Every so often, a customer wandered in, but I couldn't keep from making small glances in his direction. As discreetly as possible of course. Each step the customers took felt like a ripple in the air around him, and he barely noticed.

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“Stop staring,” Mick whispered, sharper now. “Men like that either write bad poetry or worse crimes. And I am not getting saintly vibes.” A snort escaped.

He shifted slightly, sliding the book back onto the shelf with slow, deliberate care. Then, as if sensing my gaze had tightened around him like a vise, he moved toward the front of the shop.

Not too close. Not too far.

The air seemed to bend around him, and each footfall echoed faintly, almost imperceptibly, against the tile. My stomach fluttered. I didn’t realize I was holding my breath.

“Did you enjoy your book?” I asked, forcing a smile that felt false, clumsy against the heat that had sprung to my cheeks.

He stopped. Just a few feet away, close enough to see the way my eyes followed him. He tilted his head, and that gaze bore into me like an unspoken question, a challenge.

“Enjoyed? No,” his voice filled with that low velvet and smoke sound I couldn’t stop thinking about. “My attention was being pulled elsewhere.”

A shiver ran down my spine.

“You’re... different.”

I froze. Was that a warning? Or a compliment? My pulse tripped over itself. I wanted to speak, to ask what he meant, but the air between us felt charged, almost alive. And when he turned toward the door, something in me refused to let him go.

“Wait,” I breathed, my hand brushing his arm before I could think.

The contact hit like lightning. A jolt tore through me, hot and cold all at once, blooming beneath my skin. The world

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flickered around the edges, my breath catching as the hum in the air grew louder, closer.

“You know my name,” I managed, trying to steady my voice, “I’d like to know yours.”

Instead of pulling away from my touch, he covered it. His touch deliberate, grounding, and far too intimate for a stranger. His fingers traced the inside of my wrist, and my pulse leapt.

“Thalon.” He said the name like a secret spoken into my bones.

Before I could speak, he lifted my hand. The motion was reverent and practiced. He brought it to his lips, brushing a kiss across my skin. It was nothing more than breath and heat, but it set every nerve into flames.

And for a second, just a second, his control slipped.

His eyes widened... like he’d felt the spark too. Like he hadn’t meant to.

And then he was gone.

The bell above the door chimed once, soft and final, and the rain outside swallowed him whole.

Mick leaned against the counter, arms crossed, a smirk tugging at her lips. “You didn’t even try not to stare,” she said. “You’re either smitten... or you’ve completely lost it.”

“I’m... fine.” Even I didn’t believe myself. I didn’t know what was happening.

Even as I moved through the day, grinding beans, stacking books, and straightening shelves, my gaze kept returning to the empty corner where he’d been.

# Interlude

*Leyla — The Sound of Breaking Glass*

I pressed myself deeper into the corner of the closet, the rough wood pressing against my cheek. Every breath I took smelled of stale whiskey and dust. My heart was hammering so loudly I was sure it would betray me. Jerry's boots scraped across the hallway, dragging, heavy and unpredictable.

“Where is it, girl?” His voice cracked, slurred and jagged. “Where’s my.... Leyla! Where are you?” He screamed.

I stayed perfectly still, counting my breaths: one... two... three...

Hoping, praying, that he wouldn’t notice me. A glass shattered in the hallway, the noise made my stomach leap into my throat. I clutched my knees to my chest. I hated the way he scared me. I hated that I had learned to flinch at the sound of his voice. I hated the part of me that had already figured out the rhythm of his anger: the build, the scream, the crash. Tonight, the crash came early. Shards of glass rained down from the broken ceiling light, tinkling across the floor, bouncing like jagged stars. A piece nicked my palm. I hissed softly and clenched my fingers over the wound.

I couldn’t cry. I couldn’t move.

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Noise was danger.

I thought of my adoptive mother, gone before I was old enough to remember her smile clearly, gone before I could trust anyone again. I was only five when she died, and now I was ten, and the only thing I understood was survival.

Quiet meant safety.

Silence meant safety.

Sirens wailed in the distance. Red and blue lights flashed against the walls, and I pressed my forehead to the floor, letting the colors wash over me. They came for him eventually, always eventually.

The fear inside me eased slightly, and when his shouts faded, I finally crawled from the closet. The hallway was littered with glass, glittering cruelly under the flashing lights. My stepfather was gone, dragged into the night, leaving me in a strange, uneasy calm. The officers knew to call Mick's mom. She arrived soon after. I wish she was my mom instead.

I knelt and brushed a shard aside, whispering to myself:

*Quiet means safe.*

# Chapter Four

*Leyla*

**M**orning sunlight slanted through the tall windows of *Eleanor's*, drifting across stacks of books and settling in golden squares on the worn wooden floors. Dust motes floated lazily, catching the light like tiny sparks, and the aroma of coffee blended with the faint musk of old paper. I moved carefully along the aisles, rearranging novels that had fallen, my fingers brushing against leather-bound spines and glossy covers. Every surface, every shelf, felt alive somehow. Like the books themselves were breathing, just beneath the surface of the ordinary.

Mick appeared behind the counter, balancing a tray of steaming cups like she was taming a wild animal.

“I swear these floors have it out for me,” she muttered, swiping at a stubborn coffee stain. “One day, I’m going down, and you’re going to have to exorcise me from under the espresso machine.”

I laughed softly. “You’d just haunt me.”

“Damn right I would.”

Her energy filled the room, a small storm of warmth and noise. But even her presence couldn’t smother the pulse of

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something else. Something beneath it all. The hum I kept pretending I couldn't feel.

I bent to adjust a stack of classics and felt a strange tug in my chest, like the air itself had thickened for a heartbeat.

One of the books slipped from my fingers, and time seemed to stop.

It didn't crash to the floor.

Not right away.

It hovered for a fraction of a second, wobbling delicately, before settling softly back onto the table. My heart beat rapidly in my chest, my pulse suddenly loud in my ears. I glanced up instinctively, and there he was.

Thalon.

Standing in the shadows near the back shelves, his presence quiet but impossible to ignore. His coat was dark and simple, but it carried a weight, as if the shadows themselves bent around him.

My pulse quickened, heat rising under my skin, that strange pull in my chest tightening until I could barely breathe.

He didn't move. Didn't speak.

Just watched.

Like a hunter pretending to be still.

Mick passed through my line of sight, humming off-key, completely oblivious. When she disappeared again behind the counter, he was still there. Closer this time. How had he moved so silently?

I turned away to the counters, desperate to ground myself. My hands shook as I poured a cup of coffee, the steam curling

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into the air. The scent of roasted beans and rain filled my lungs. Ordinary things. Safe things. But nothing about this felt ordinary. He moved towards me like a storm disguised as a man. Quiet, deliberate, with that dark, impossible grace. My heart pounded so hard it hurt. I wanted to look away, but every instinct screamed not to.

When I finally forced my eyes to meet his again, I swear the air between us rippled. He tilted his head slightly, as if studying something fragile. I dropped my gaze to the mug in my hand. The liquid trembled, disturbed by the tremor in my own fingers.

That low velvety voice cut through the silence. “You feel it too, don’t you?”

I froze. The words brushed down my spine like a touch.

I turned, but he was gone.

Just the corner of the shop again. The shelves.

The light.

The echo of something that wasn’t quite sound.

“Leyla?” Mick’s voice broke through the haze. “You okay? You aren’t looking so good.”

I blinked, forcing a laugh that came out too thin. “You worry too much, Mick.”

“You sure? You’ve been staring at your coffee for a full minute.”

“Fine. I’m fine. Just thinking about that manuscript from last night,” I managed, and she laughed, shaking her head. But as she turned back to the counter, I looked again.

Nothing.

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Only that lingering pull, like a hand had wrapped around my heartbeat and refused to let go.

Even as I swept the floor, arranged books, and moved through the motions of the rest of my day, I couldn't shake the sense that the world had subtly shifted. That something immense had brushed against me, and that I had barely survived noticing it.

# Chapter Five

*Leyla*

**B**y the time I pulled onto my street, the sun was already slipping behind the line of trees, painting the sky in streaks of bruised purple and gold. The glow from the streetlamps flickered on, one by one, casting long shadows across the yard.

I killed the engine and sat there for a moment, staring at the porch light I had forgotten to turn off that morning. The rest of my day at work was mind-numbingly normal, the kind of day that should've grounded me after imagining books floating in the air. But nothing felt normal anymore. Not since him.

Even thinking his name made my chest tighten, a strange mix of heat and unease curling low in my stomach. I hated it. I told myself I was done thinking about him. That the best thing I could do was move on and pretend the electric pull between us had been nothing more than adrenaline and bad timing. Which was exactly why I'd said yes when Brad asked me to the basketball game tonight.

Brad was... nice. Normal. He still said things like '*let's vibe*' but he meant well. We'd gone to dinner two nights ago at that small Italian place downtown, the one that smelled like garlic and burnt breadsticks. I smiled, nodded, and tried to convince

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myself that the boring and predictable was good. Safe. It was what I wanted, what I craved, for so long.

Now here I was, home again, staring at my dashboard like it might have the answers. The game started at eight. It was seven. I should have gone inside, showered, changed, done something to feel human again. Instead, I lingered, my eyes fixed on the tree line at the edge of the yard.

The shadows there looked wrong. Almost too thick or too still, I couldn't tell.

A flicker of movement.

There, then gone.

“Hello?” My voice sounded small against the stillness. No answer.

I shook my head, forcing a laugh. “You’re fine. Totally fine. Probably just a squirrel or something.”

Still, when I reached my door, I hesitated before unlocking it. My reflection in the window stared back at me. Wide-eyed, tense, not at all like someone about to go on a date. Inside, the apartment was dim and waiting for me. I tossed my keys onto the gray granite counter, flipped on the light, and kicked off my shoes. The silence pressed in around me, broken only by the low hum of the refrigerator.

I made my way to the bedroom, trying to shake off the unease. Maybe a change of clothes would help. Maybe pretending everything was fine would make it true. I stood in front of the mirror, the faint light from the hallway washing over me. My hair was a mess from the day, my mascara smudged just enough to make me look tired. Jeans and a white sweater, it would have to do. I wasn’t trying to impress Brad.

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And yet, as I ran my fingers through my hair, I caught myself glancing toward the window. My chest tightened.

He wouldn't be out there. He couldn't be.

But the thought rooted itself anyway. The memory of gray eyes watching me from the shadows at *Eleanor's*. The warmth of a hand that had never truly left my skin. I swallowed hard, forcing a laugh that didn't sound right.

"You're fine," I whispered. "You're imagining it."

But, I wasn't so sure.

The curtains stirred, slow and deliberate, though the window was closed. I crossed the room and brushed them aside. The yard beyond was still. Just grass, streetlight and the quiet tremor of trees. Empty. And yet my pulse refused to settle.

Still, I found myself moving differently.

Slower, more aware, with every gesture deliberate. As if the air itself was watching. I smoothed my hair, adjusted my sweater... and pretended like I wasn't performing for someone unseen. The sound of my heartbeat alone filled the room.

*Stop it*, I scolded myself. I gripped the dresser until my knuckles ached.

He's not here. But my body didn't believe it.

This is insane. I was being insane. Finally, I grabbed my jacket and purse. When I looked one last time through the curtain, the yard was empty. Only the fading glow of the streetlamp and the soft rustle of wind through the trees.

Empty. I exhaled.

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“See? Nothing.” I told myself.

But as I locked the door behind me and stepped out into the cool night air, that strange sensation crept back in. The weight of being watched. And for the briefest moment, just before I reached Brad’s Mustang pulling up to the curb, I could have sworn I saw movement again at the edge of the woods.

A dark silhouette. Still. And Watching.

# Chapter Six

*Thalon*

I perched in the shadowed alley across from her apartment, the night air heavy with rain-soaked earth and the faint hum of mortal electricity. The city pulsed faintly around me, a thousand mortal hearts beating too fast, too loud. None of it mattered.

I could hear only one.

Hers.

Leyla's heartbeat was a rhythm I shouldn't have known but couldn't forget. It thudded softly against the hum of this realm, steady and bright like a beacon calling me closer. I could feel her warmth even through walls and distance; every step, every shift in breath tugging at something buried deep inside me. I told myself I was only watching. Only assessing.

That was a lie I had already stopped believing.

When she moved through her home, the lights kissed her skin. When she stilled, the air bent around her like it recognized its master. The first time I saw her, my father's command had flared inside me – *eliminate the magical disturbance*. But, the sigil that bound me to his will had burned without taking hold.

It was the first time in thirty-nine years that I had been able to disobey him.

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The sigil obeys the King's blood, not mine.

And yet, for her, it faltered. That terrified me more than I'd like to admit.

She stepped out onto the porch, pausing like she'd heard something. My grip tightened on the dagger at my thigh, an instinct older than memory.

She didn't see me, but I knew she felt me. Her shoulders tensed; her lips parted. And then she laughed softly, dismissing the instinct that might have saved her life. Like all mortals do.

A car pulled to the curb. The human male leaned out the window, grinning like a fool. She smiled back, small and practiced, the kind meant to hide unease. The sound of her voice when she greeted him, light and almost shy, hit harder than any blade. He was courting her.

My heart began to race.

They drove away.

The taillights vanished into the mist. The urge to follow clawed through me, feral and consuming. The shadows beneath my feet stirred as if awaiting my command. But something in the air shifted first.

“Still stalking the mortal, I see.” Elias’s voice cut through the quiet, smooth and edged with amusement. My oldest friend, my fiercest irritation.

“You shouldn’t be here, you are supposed to be keeping watch back at the house,” I said.

He arched a brow. “Neither should you.”

I turned my gaze back to the road. “This isn’t your concern.”

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He laughed softly. “When it involves you disobeying your father’s direct command, I’d say it’s very much my concern. He’ll start to suspect something is amiss soon. The King doesn’t tolerate ghosts in his bloodline.”

A muscle in my jaw ticked. “He would know if I were dead. The sigil would tell him.”

Elias’s smile faltered. The night itself shifted. The air warped, feeling wrong and heavy. Shadows twisted, splitting apart like flesh.

Elias’s tone dropped. “You feel that?”

“Obviously.”

The distortion tore open a breath later, and a Rift Wraith crawled through. Pale and skeletal, its eyes glowed molten silver, its limbs moving with a jerky hunger. The stench of decay and old magic filled the air.

“Damn,” Elias muttered. “How did that slip through?”

“Because she exists,” I said, drawing my blade. “The realm can feel her awakening. The disturbance has a pulse now, and it’s hers.”

The Wraith lunged. We moved together, a seamless violence honed by decades of training side by side. I slipped beneath the creature’s claws, dagger flashing upward in a clean, brutal arc. The Wraith screamed, high and metallic, before collapsing into dust that shimmered once and was gone. Silence returned like a held breath.

Elias exhaled, running a hand through his hair. “So, it’s her.”

“Yes.”

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His gaze hardened. “Then you know what must happen.”

I met his eyes, saying nothing.

“You have to bring her to Orrynne,” he pressed. “To your father. You can’t protect her from what she is.”

I sheathed my dagger slowly. “No.”

“No?” He frowned. “Thalon, you can’t just...”

“She is mine to find. Mine to understand. My father will not touch her.”

Elias studied me, “How are you going against his orders? You have never been able to... The sigil...”

“I do not have the answer. This planet? The weakening of magic in Orrynne? Her? Who is to say?” I looked over to him. “But, my body is now my own. And I want to see what the little mortal is about.”

He followed my gaze toward the road where her scent lingered. Sweet, strange, and lightly threaded with magic. “Where’s she going?”

“A gathering of sorts.”

He gave me that insufferable grin. “Then let’s go watch, shall we? Wouldn’t want your little mortal to get eaten before you decide what she is.”

I glared at him, but didn’t stop him when he slipped back into the shadows. The air folded around us as we moved, silent and unseen. The city blurred into streaks of light, the mortal world nothing more than an echo beneath our feet.

Her scent pulled me onward, steady and bright; a tether I couldn’t sever even if I wanted to.

I didn’t know what would happen when I reached her.

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Only that every step toward her felt like defiance. And destiny.

And desire I could no longer name without burning for it.

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*End of sample chapters*

The Darkness Saves

*The End—  
of the Beginning.*



K.L. Rutledge

## Thank you

When I first began writing The Darkness Saves, I wanted to tell a story about love that shouldn't exist, and what happens when two people risk everything to choose it anyway.

Leyla's strength, with her quiet hope, and Thalon's fight against the darkness in and around him are pieces of all of us.

This book was meant to introduce Orrynne to readers, introduce the characters and their back stories. So, thank you. Thank you for letting me share this world with you.

And if you're wondering whether this is the end of Leyla and Thalon's story... Let's just say the Bridge has only just awokened.

With love,

K.

## About the Author



K.L. Rutledge draws inspiration from years of navigating the intricate web of human emotions and decisions, which she channels into her writing.

Her stories feature characters faced with tough choices and the kind of stakes that push them to their limits. When she's not crafting her next story, she can be found in her home in Indiana, surrounded by her husband, two kids, and an ever-present cup of coffee. And her bernedoodle, Tuno. He is the supervisor of all writing sessions.

Her days are filled with balancing family life and her love for storytelling. And, if you ask her, there's nothing better than getting lost in a good book or dreaming up her next great love story—because, in the end, truly the best tales are the ones that make your heart race.