

THREE NIGHTS TO FACE THE DARK



BLACKWYNTM

THE DARKEST NIGHT

L.L. GALARZA

BLACKWYN

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Book 0

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First Edition: 2025

ISBN: 978-607-29-7517-0

Book 0 of the **Blackwyn™** Saga

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*As a child, I feared the dark.
But what truly terrified me...
was the loss of my light.*

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CHAPTER ONE



THE WAR OF DAY AND NIGHT

The windshield trembled under the rhythmic push of the wind, and the highway stretched ahead like an endless ribbon, gray and empty. Blurred trees raced past on either side.

In the back seat, his forehead resting against the window, Ethan Blackwyn, only nine years old, watched the world drift beyond the glass. He caught sight of his own reflection for a moment, fair-skinned, with straight dark hair; nothing special there. His eyes, though, they stood out. One was a deep brown, the color of melted chocolate, the other a pale amber that seemed to catch and hold the light. They were wide, alert, and carried something strange inside them, as if shadows and sparks

lived there at once. He always looked like someone listening to things no one else could hear.

His soft features held an innate tenderness, a quiet, almost unintentional charm that made him impossible to ignore. Some would call it inner light, though it didn't always draw good things.

Beyond the glass, the sun sank slowly behind the mountain, surrendering without a fight, swallowed whole by a colossal beast snapping its jaws shut. To Ethan, it wasn't just a sunset. It was the end of a battle, a tragedy.

The mountain loomed like a stone creature, its back bristling with dark trees, its muzzle devouring stars. And the sun was a fallen warrior, releasing his last golden breath between unseen fangs.

Ethan stared, hypnotized. His heart hammered in his chest. There was something solemn in the moment, the sky shifting colors, the trembling light flickering through branches, the world sliding deeper into gray. He knew what came next. Darkness. And though he never said it, he hated it.

He sighed, almost mournfully.

"I wish the day would never end..."

Then, suddenly, his eyes lit up. An idea struck him like lightning. He straightened in his seat.

"I know what to do!" he whispered, as if summoning something only he could see.

He unbuckled his seatbelt, rolled the window down completely, and leaned halfway out. Closing his eyes, he clenched his fists and filled his lungs. The air was cold, tinged with the smell of warm earth.

"One... two... three!"

He pushed off with his knees and leapt, yet he didn't fall.

Ethan floated, suspended in the air several yards ahead of the car, as if the sky itself had caught him mid-flight. His feet never touched the ground. Power thrummed beneath his soles. A golden light pulsed there, glowing like roots of energy breaking free.

He pressed down firmly on the emptiness and, with a single stride, launched toward the mountain. With every step, the light beneath him burned brighter.

The beast waited, still, as if feigning sleep. Towering higher than a skyscraper, it bore a single eye at its center, a circular rift so dark that no light dared enter.

Ethan halted before the abyss. Then he raised his left arm. His hand reached across his back, and from his palm burst a pure light. From that light, a sword emerged. He drew it solemnly, the blade gleaming like molten gold. Golden flames coiled upward from the hilt, winding across the edge. The fire danced, gentle, alive, comforting, like the sun itself.

Ethan gripped the sword tightly. His gaze sharpened; his body lightened. Leaning forward, he drew a deep breath. Then he shouted and charged at the beast.

The sword, wreathed in light and fire, illuminated everything in its path. His arm burned with its force. Golden sparks streamed behind him like comets. When he was close enough, he raised the blade high and drove it deep into the monster's eye.

The beast roared—a roar of collapsing shadow rather than sound. Darkness cracked. The world trembled. And the sun, moments from dying, blazed again with sudden strength behind the clouds.

Ethan felt it—he had done it. He had saved the day.

Then a voice broke through, distant, yet real.

“Ethan, what are you doing?”

The boy blinked. He was still in the back seat of the car. The window was open. His seatbelt was securely fastened. His father was watching him through the rearview mirror, his face stern.

Outside, the sun had vanished. But inside Ethan, it still burned.

“Ethan!” his father barked from the driver’s seat. “Close that window, now!”

Ethan quickly rolled it shut.

“You know you’re not supposed to open the window that much. It’s dangerous,” his father scolded. “You need to be more responsible, understood?”

“I was looking at the mountain,” Ethan murmured, his shoulders tense, still gazing outside.

There was a pause.

“It’s beautiful, isn’t it?” his mother said warmly from the passenger seat, smiling before turning to her husband. “Don’t you think, Adam?”

“Yeah, yeah... very pretty,” he replied dismissively, his reproachful tone unchanged. “But that doesn’t change the rules, Ethan. Don’t do it again.”

Ethan nodded quietly. He had learned long ago that arguing only made things worse. There was only one thing he feared more than the dark: making his father angry.

“It’s fine, Adam,” Ethan’s mother said softly. “Let him enjoy the ride. We don’t visit your mom that often... and it is her birthday, after all.”

His father paused, lips pressed tight as if ready to argue, but he held back. He gave a small, reluctant nod without turning.

“Listen carefully, Ethan. When we get to Grandma’s, you’re going to help her with anything she asks. Everything. That will be the best birthday present you can give her.”

“Everything she asks?”

“Absolutely everything, no excuses,” his father insisted. “This year’s special, you know? She’s turning eighty. Eighty! Isn’t that incredible?”

“Yes, Dad. Okay.”

He didn’t have much choice anyway, but he didn’t mind. Even though his grandmother could be just as strict as his father, her smile and gentle gaze always made him feel safe, as if nothing bad could happen when she was near.

The thought carried him back to her last birthday. He remembered sitting beside her while the whole family sang “Happy Birthday,” with more enthusiasm than rhythm. When she blew out the candles, applause erupted. She smiled, surrounded by friends and noisy relatives. She looked happy, though she tried to hide it with her chin high and back straight.

That’s when Ethan, eyes sparkling with mischief, leaned to her ear and whispered.

“Will you take a bite of your slice? Just a tiny one, please?”

She glanced sideways at him, one eyebrow arched as if considering something terribly serious, then nodded.

“But only because you asked.”

With exaggerated drama, like an old movie actress, she rose as if to deliver a presidential speech. She leaned closer, then closer, until her mouth hovered just inches above the strawberry-and-cream cake. Then, chomp! She took a fearless, direct bite. When she straightened, she wiped her lips... and everyone saw her dentures stuck in the frosting between whipped cream and strawberries. The whole family burst into laughter.

Ethan doubled over, clutching his stomach, unable to contain himself. Grandma turned to him with a mischievous spark in her eyes, met his gaze, and, without warning, chomped his cheek with a toothless bite.

“Birthday bite!” she shouted, laughing.

He was left with a cheek smeared in cream and strawberries, as if she had branded him forever. And he, delighted, didn’t protest. That was their bond, playful, tender, full of laughter.

From then on, whenever Ethan misbehaved even once, Grandma threatened him with another bite.

“Don’t make me go for your other cheek, Ethan!” she teased with a mischievous grin.

That day, she had wrapped an arm around his shoulders, and he, as always, nestled against her side, hugging her tightly around the waist. Both of them beamed, faces streaked with cake. His mother caught the moment in a photo that still sat proudly on Ethan’s nightstand. That memory wasn’t just funny; it was a piece of his heart. Thinking of it now, Ethan smiled to himself.

“It’s getting dark,” Adam noted, glancing at the fuel gauge. “We’ll stop at the next station for fuel, and grab dinner, too. We’ll reach my mom’s late anyway.”

“Wouldn’t it be better to keep going?” his wife asked, brow furrowed. “I don’t love the idea of being on the road so late.”

“Don’t worry, babe. This stretch is quiet. I’d rather have a full tank before we push on,” he said evenly.

In the back seat, Ethan stayed silent, eyes on the window. Daylight had vanished completely. What had been distinct trees moments ago were now streaks of shadow sliding across the night, like spilled ink on glass.

But within that darkness, something caught his eye. At first, he thought they were branches or night birds, but they didn’t move like birds. Some shadows leapt. Others darted past too quickly to follow. They were darker than the night itself. Sharper. As if they didn’t quite belong to the landscape.

Ethan narrowed his eyes, trying to focus. Whenever he thought he caught one, it vanished. But when he managed to follow them long enough, they seemed to slow, or maybe his mind was slowing them down.

They leapt in zigzags, moving with eerie grace. He couldn’t see legs, but wide, heavy wings unfurled and folded with each bound. Their bodies were long, with small, flat heads and tails tapering to needles. Black as pitch, they reminded him of deformed crows, but without beaks. Without eyes.

“What are they?” he whispered before he realized.

Then, nervous, he looked at his parents.

“Dad... Mom... I saw something outside. Shadows. By the window.”

His father glanced in the mirror, then briefly out the side window.

“Just tree branches, Ethan.”

His mother leaned in, studying the dark more carefully, squinting.

“I don’t see anything, honey,” she said softly, though uneasily.

Ethan turned back to the window, scanning the darkness—but nothing was there. No movement, no trace of life. Only the night: thick and still, as if the world itself had never existed.

He sighed, frustrated, and slumped back. Pulling out a spiral notebook, he flipped to a blank page, grabbed the pencil tucked into the spiral binding, and began sketching. They weren’t exact, but the speed of his hand, the pressure of the graphite, captured what he’d seen: broad wings, stretching bodies, sharp tails fleeing into shadow.

Whenever something struck him, an imaginary creature, a strange dream, a figure in the clouds, it always ended up here, in his notebook.

“We’re here!” his father announced, steering sharply toward a dim exit.

Ethan looked up just as the car slowed and rolled into an old gas station. The place looked frozen in time. A cracked concrete platform stretched beneath a roof held up by two rusted pillars, both stained black with oil. The fluorescent tubes swung like loose teeth, one dead, one flickering on its last breath, and only two casting steady but pale light. Their glow stretched long, warped shadows across the pavement.

There were ten parking spaces, nine empty, one occupied by a dusty old car with peeling paint and fogged windows. No one inside. Abandoned.

Behind the station, about sixty feet away, stood a squat orange-brick building. Above it, a weathered sign flickered: GR_ND N_RTH GATE R_STAUR_NT. Some letters were burned out, others torn away, but the message remained legible. Still, the place felt forgotten.

“Let’s stretch our legs and grab dinner,” his father said, cutting the engine with a sigh.

Ethan’s mother stepped out first. Gravel crunched underfoot as she hugged herself against the sudden chill. His father circled the car to pump gas, the metallic click of the nozzle echoing in the stillness.

“Come on out, honey,” his mother coaxed.

Ethan stepped out slowly. The air carried the scent of rust, fuel, and stale dust, while behind them the highway stretched into a bottomless void, no headlights, no engines, not even a whisper, only the dry scrape of their footsteps.

He stopped beside the car, staring at the horizon. Something unseen pressed at him from the brush, or maybe from deep within the asphalt. His palms tingled. It wasn’t fear, but something unsettled him.

“What if... we keep going?” he asked softly. “I’m not hungry anymore.”

His mother gave him a look of surprise. His father, less patient, frowned.

“Don’t be dramatic,” he muttered, slamming the trunk. “We’ve been driving almost five hours. We need to stretch, eat, and use the bathroom.”

Ethan dropped his gaze, silent. The uneasy buzz in his stomach lingered, like a warning he couldn't name.

"Let's head to that restaurant," his father said, offering his wife his hand. She took it, warm and steady, then reached for Ethan's with her other hand. Together, the three of them walked toward the building.

The façade was lined with massive windows that revealed the inside clearly. Not a single customer. Only empty tables. Smudged handprints covered the glass door. Ethan hesitated.

"Are you sure it's open?" he whispered.

"Yes, look," his mother said, pointing to a faded decal: OPEN 24 HOURS.

"Go on," his father said, holding the door open for them.

Ethan stepped across the threshold, though doubt clung to him. And just behind him, for the briefest instant, he thought he saw a shadow dart between the gas pumps, leaping like the others, as if it had been following him all along. But when he looked again, there was nothing.

Ethan lifted his eyes to his mom, uncertain. She answered with a calm smile.

"Come on, honey. Time for dinner."

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wasn't by accident.*

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even in the dark.

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