

Woman of Shadows

Book Two of The Lightborn Saga

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Woman of Shadows

Book Two of The Lightborn Saga

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To my mother – Carmen.
She taught me to look for the good in others.
I learned to look for their light.

PROLOGUE

The Naturi, Lucari, and Boundary Walkers

Two primal forces exist on Shadowed Earth: the Spark and the Void. In the Earth Realm, people speak of light and dark as if they are moral forces—good and evil, purity and corruption. But in the deeper truth of the Codex, “light” is the steady luminance of the Spark, and “dark” is simply the stillness of the Void.

The Spark is at the core of every being—a perfect, unchanging sphere of living radiance, an expression of the Creator’s Soul. It emits luminance in a steady, flowing stream.

The Void is inert, dense, and still. It is not evil. It is simply the backdrop of non-light against which luminance reacts.

Shadow is not darkness, nor corruption, nor a substance. Shadow is the turbulence created when luminance touches the Void—the violent whipping at the Boundary, like a drop of ice-cold water striking a burning skillet. The luminance radiates outward from the Spark, steady and untroubled. The Void has nowhere to go; it tears, shreds, and collapses under the contact. The rupture throws off a spray of flickering resonance.

That spray is shadow. And shadow is what gives shape.

From this boundary-born turbulence came the **Naturi** and the **Lucari**. They are not tribes, nations, or bloodlines.

The Naturi— Embodiments of the Earth Realm

The Naturi were shaped from a patterned Boundary: woven fabric made from thread fragments, whipping filaments of bent light—structured shadow—wrapped around a Spark of living radiance. Their Boundaries were thick and firm. Their tone was pure and steady, quantumly entangled with the

creator Soul's Boundary.

Shadow, within the Boundary, was not corruption for them—it was structure.

It was the visible turbulence that appeared as shadow against the Spark's steady luminance. The woven fabric that sheathed this turbulence held the imprints of the Naturi: the individual's blueprint, carrying identity, memory, and thought. Even the Naturi's created tone—their original resonance—was imprinted on the woven fabric, becoming part of the individual's blueprint.

But the Naturi carried a vulnerability: **fracture**.

When strain tore at their Boundary, the woven fabric split, exposing the flowing luminance beneath. The Void pressed into the tear, clinging to the exposed light and widening it. The Spark remained steady—perfect and unchanged—but new filaments at the fracture thrashed against the intrusion, warping its tone into jagged emotion.

Some Naturi burned with rage.

Some trembled with fear.

Some collapsed beneath sorrow.

Some became prey to the shadowed will of others.

Fractured Naturi walked the world dimmed, their weave veiled, their resonance weakened. Those who understood turbulence well enough could bend it.

The Naturi were strong—yet their strength carried a cost.

The Lucari—Souls Thinned by the Earth Realm

The Lucari were shaped from the same patterned Boundary as the Naturi: woven fabric made from thread fragments, whipping filaments of bent light—structured shadow—wrapped around a Spark of living radiance. Their Boundaries were not created thin. They were once as thick and steady as any Soul in the Resonance Realm.

But the Earth Realm carried a density the Resonance Realm

never had. The outer layers of the woven fabric wore away first, thinned by the realm's turbulence, leaving only the inner, colorful, porous layer—the portion that held the Soul's imprints. Its turbulence pressed against the Boundary and thinned the weave. The Spark's luminance pushed outward, unshielded, creating the Lucari condition.

Shadow, within the Boundary, was not corruption for them—it was structure. But with the weave thinned, that structure became faint, fragile, barely enough to give form and seldom enough to protect.

The turbulence showed itself as a soft, colorful shadow against the Spark's steady luminance. The woven fabric that sheathed this turbulence held the imprints of the Soul: the individual's blueprint, carrying identity, memory, and thought. Even the Soul's original resonance—their created tone—was imprinted on the fabric, becoming part of the individual's blueprint.

Their Boundaries were porous, their edges soft. Their light flared outward in moments of fear, love, or instinct.

They were the luminous ones. The empathic ones. The restorers.

Their sensitivity was their strength—and their burden.

The Lucari felt the world deeply. They heard others' trembling tones. They absorbed the sorrow of strangers. They carried the ache of every fractured weave they touched.

Some Lucari believed this was too much to bear. In their longing for quiet, they wrapped themselves in shadow, hoping to dull their senses and silence the resonance that overwhelmed them.

But encrusted shadow does not silence. It distorts.

Those who encrusted themselves became as the Naturi—their Boundaries thickened, their tone darkened, their resonance dulled. They carried burdens never meant for Boundaries that were made to sense, not bear weight. And in the confusion of their altered form, some grew hungry for

power, bending fractured Naturi to their will.

Thus, the Lucari mistake became a wound upon the world.

Recognitions—The Patterns of Light and Shadow

Across ages, the Codex has recognized many who walk the ancient patterns of light and shadow.

There are the Naturi, whose shadows run deep, whose fractures widen easily, whose trembling light hides beneath old wounds.

There are the Lucari, whose porous edges make them feel too much, who seek medicine or belief to quiet the resonance that overwhelms them.

There are the fractured Naturi, vulnerable to the pull of shadowed influence.

And the shadow-encrusted Lucari, who become predators of resonance, feeding on the tones of others.

Some Lucari harden themselves with shadow.

Some Naturi soften under fracture.

And a rare few who walk between the two—carrying both truths in equal measure.

The lineages are not opposites.

They are complements—two expressions of the same underlying pattern, two ways the Boundary learns to hold light and shadow in a single form.

The Woman of Shadows—A Boundary Walker

Among the Lucari, some are born into shadowed lineages—children of Naturi parents whose homes echo with old fractures. Their light is porous, their radiance quick to flare, yet their woven fabric carries imprints of ancestral weight.

The Codex speaks of one such being.

Born Lucari in a shadow-dense place, raised by Naturi whose fractures shaped the air she breathed.

She was not a hybrid, but a lived convergence—Lucari by

birth, Naturi by upbringing, her nature settling into balance rather than war.

In her, luminous sensitivity meets ancestral darkness—and the two do not war. They intertwine.

Where others are overwhelmed by turbulence, she can take hold of it. Where others are dimmed by shadow-spray, she can shape it. Where Naturi attract shadow through fracture, and Lucari encrust with it, she can seize that shadow—and fling its bearer across the room with a single motion. Where others would fracture at the Void's touch, she remained whole.

Her gift is rare:

She can project razor-thin threads of Lucari luminance—filaments sharp enough to pierce the air. When these threads touch the Void of the Earth Realm, the Void reacts violently, whipping shadow-spray into jagged tendrils. She can compress this turbulence, bend it, and release it in a single, focused strike. She did not wield shadow. She wielded the Boundary's reaction to the Void itself.

In her hands, shadow becomes lightning—black and living, a force born from the Boundary where light meets dark.

Her path is neither corruption nor escape. It is revelation.

Through her, the nature of shadow within light will be understood.

In the Lightborn Saga, her name is **Alice Prescott**.

CHAPTER ONE

Alice's Innocence

Lightning cracked across the morning sky, tearing open the darkness for a single white instant. Thunder rolled after it—low, heavy, shaking the quiet street.

On the Prescott fence, a lone crow landed, its feathers slick with the rising rain. It tilted its head, one black eye fixed on the house as another flash split the sky. The instant clash of thunder didn't make it flinch.

With a single hop, the crow took flight, wings beating against the storm until it settled on the windowsill. Rain pattered against its back as it leaned forward, peering into the warm glow of the bedroom beyond.

Inside, a little girl sat at her play table, arranging her doll and stuffed bunny for a tea party. The crow didn't blink.

Lightning flashed again, and the crow's shadow stretched long across the glass, reaching toward her.

Five-year-old Alice Prescott sat having pretend tea with her friends in her spacious bedroom. She had dirty-blond hair

held back with a thick pink bow her mother had affixed that morning. The caw of two crows flying outside her window carried into the room. She ignored them.

To Alice's right sat her dolly, who'd been with her as long as she could remember. Her name was Suzy. She told Suzy everything and trusted her. Suzy never talked back to her. She just listened.

To her left sat a large, stuffed bunny — Harry. He was new. Her old one had disappeared the week before, after she'd been ill and kept in bed for almost two weeks. She didn't like remembering the dark dreams she'd had while she was sick, when her fever raged. They were dreams of violent thunderstorms that filled the night with flashes of cracking lightning. That bunny had comforted her that whole time. She felt safe with him. That old bunny had known every secret she'd ever kept, and always told her the truth. The last time she remembered seeing him was when she fell asleep, hugging him tight. When she woke up, her fever was gone, and the room smelled of something acrid—burnt cloth. Her mother had ushered her to a bath, and when she returned, her bedding was fresh, and her trusted bunny was gone.

"Here's your bunny. He'll help you as your strength returns," her mother had said. "I love you."

Alice knew immediately that it wasn't her rabbit. The fur didn't feel right in her hands. It was stiff and smelled like a real animal. She took it anyway, even though she didn't want to.

She wasn't sure she could confide her secrets to the new bunny as she had to the old one. Harry didn't listen the way her old bunny did. Like his fur, he was stiff and cold.

She brought the teapot close and held it carefully, as if it really held tea. She poured a cup for Suzy and winked at her,

wearing a loving parent's smile.

"Sip that carefully. It's very hot."

Suzy returned a blank stare.

She turned abruptly to the bunny and hesitated. Her head tilted back, her jaw slack.

"Harry! Please don't be ridiculous. I can't move things with my mind." She blinked and grimaced at the bunny. "Of course, I believe in magic."

She took a breath and narrowed her eyes at the bunny. Then she let it out, shaking her head.

The corners of her lips lifted. Her eyes narrowed. "I could turn you to ash if I wanted."

She shook her head, her shoulders tightening as if she'd heard fingernails scrape across the blackboard on her wall.

"Don't be rude. That kind of language is not allowed in this house."

She let out a soft exhale and her shoulders relaxed.

She filled the bunny's cup with imaginary tea. She smiled gently.

"You know I wouldn't do that."

The corner of her lip curled upward, and she leaned toward the bunny. "Now, what do we say when someone has poured you tea?"

She waited patiently, and then a broad smile spread across her face.

"You're welcome."

Her eyes swung to the empty chair across from her. A nervous smile tugged at her lips. She didn't like how quiet the empty chair felt today.

"Tea?"

She nodded, took the cup from the place setting across

from her, and poured tea into it.

Her mother's moan came from behind her—from the other side of the closed door to her mother's bedroom. Her father's muffled voice drifted in from there, too, along with the woman's voice from earlier. A clatter of footsteps followed, and the creak of her parents' bed.

She paused, the teapot frozen mid-pour, and cast a sidelong glance that almost reached the doorway behind her.

"It's time!" her mother's voice wafted sharply into Alice's room.

Alice shifted in her chair. Her eyes darted back to the empty chair ahead of her. She finished pouring and set the teapot down. She placed the teacup at the place setting across from her. It settled a little crooked and spilled.

She gasped. "I'm sorry." She grabbed a napkin and carefully wiped the table beside the cup.

"There. All cleaned up." She smiled at the air across from her and let out a soft sigh. "Enjoy your tea."

She took a sip from her cup. She wished her mother would call for her instead of sending her to her room, like her father had earlier.

"My father forbade me from leaving my bedroom. I think my mother is ill."

Her eyes shot to the bunny, and her head tilted.

"She's having a baby?"

Her face tightened. Her eyes darted to the chair ahead.

"A brother?"

Her jaw dropped, and her eyes widened in shock. Another louder moan came from behind her.

She winced and set her teacup down hard. It clanked loudly.

Her eyes snapped to the bunny, fierce and bright.

“That isn’t true. I am special! My mommy told me so.”

A loud wailing cry came from her parents’ room. The cry felt too loud, too sharp, like it was cutting into her room.

Her mother’s affectionate laugh followed.

Alice’s breath stuck in her throat. She straightened in her chair; her stomach twisted. She turned toward the door. Just beyond stood the door to her parents’ room. The baby’s wailing and the muffled voices continued. She jumped from her chair. Her legs still felt wobbly when she stood too fast. She closed her eyes for a few seconds, then hurried to her door. She hesitated for an instant, her gaze fixed on her parents’ door.

Why didn’t her father come to get her? She wanted to see her mother. She didn’t want to be alone. She let out a sharp exhale. Was that baby going to take her place?

She blinked once, then twice, and shut her door.

She returned to her chair, her lip trembling.

Her eyes flicked to the bunny.

“It was too noisy.”

She stared at a picture on her nightstand, taken a few days ago. She was standing next to her mother, smiling. Her father’s face was expressionless, his eyes glassy and hollow. He stood behind the chair where her mother sat. Her mother’s face held a frightened stare, her hand tense on Alice’s shoulder. What was her mother afraid of? And her father—he was stiff. His smile didn’t even reach his eyes. Neither of them looked like that before she got sick.

Alice sighed. She didn’t understand why they changed. She wished her mother looked happy.

Her eyes darted to the bunny. “Nothing is going to

change. Mommy and Daddy love me. They told me so,” she said, her words sharp and measured. She didn’t want her parents to love anybody else.

The light bulb in the lamp next to her bed flickered. Her eye caught sight of a shadow moving across from her where it shouldn’t. Then it suddenly darkened, and the teacup nearest the shadow vibrated slightly.

She took a sip of her tea as if everything were normal.

She sniffled. Her eyes locked onto the shadow sitting in the chair across from her. She didn’t like the way the shadow felt. She wished it wouldn’t stare back at her—silent—gawking.

Her eyes darted away, her heart thumping hard in her chest. The air thickened.

As she set her cup down, a faint glow lit her hand. She raised it, palm up, and smiled as shadows danced chaotically along its edge. A soft, crackling sound accompanied their patterns, slow at first, then fast. The sound, only she could hear, echoed loudly into the room, like fabric tearing.

She smiled as the dark light sharpened into thin, angled sparks—white at their cores, black at their edges. A miniature lightning storm danced in her palm, though it looked more like black lightning than anything else. She liked how warm her hand felt and how a faint hum emanated from it.

She turned to the bunny. Her eyes darkened, and a tentative smile spread across her face. “You should be nicer to me.”

The bunny filled with terror, staring blankly at her. The air around it was hot enough to singe its fur.

The shadow across from her seemed to lean closer. It didn’t blink.

The air in the room thickened; the hum deepened.

Alice smiled, pleased.

CHAPTER TWO

Baby Brother

Alice sat quietly at her tea table, her fingers tracing the rim of the cup. The hum in the room had faded, leaving only the soft tick of the clock on her wall. She didn't like the quiet. It felt as if the room were waiting.

Her dolly sat to her right, stiff-backed and proper. Her stuffed bunny slumped in the chair to her left, one ear folded over like it was listening. And across from her, the empty chair. The one she never touched. The one she never moved. The one that sometimes felt warm.

Her parents' door squealed open, followed by hesitant footsteps coming her way.

Alice's eyes shot to the empty chair.

"Quiet," she whispered. "My daddy's coming."

A soft knock came at her door.

Her father stepped inside, his shoulders stiff, his face pale. He tried to smile, but it looked like something he'd practiced just outside her door.

"Your mother is asking for you," he said softly. "She wants to show you a surprise."

Alice's heart fluttered. A surprise. Her mother. She wanted her mother more than anything. She stood, wobbling slightly, and steadied herself on the table's edge.

"Is the surprise my new baby brother?" she asked.

Her father froze. His eyes flickered—confusion, then fear.

"How did you know?"

Alice lifted her hand and pointed to the empty chair at the tea table. The one that still felt warm. The one that leaned closer when she wasn't looking.

"He told me."

Her father's throat bobbed as he swallowed. He didn't look at the chair. He didn't dare. Instead, he reached for her hand, his fingers trembling.

"Come along," he whispered.

They walked across the hall. Alice gave the empty chair a tiny smile, then took her father's hand. The air felt heavier here, as if it were pressing against her skin. The baby's cries grew louder with each step, sharp and shrill, cutting into her ears. Her stomach twisted.

Her father pushed open the bedroom door. It squealed as it had earlier.

Her mother lay propped against pillows, her hair damp with sweat, her face flushed. She smiled when she saw Alice—a real smile, warm and trembling—but her eyes still held that frightened shine.

"Sweetheart," her mother whispered. "Come meet your baby brother."

The woman who had shown up that morning held a tiny bundle wrapped in blue. The baby's face was red and tightly

scrunched, his mouth open in a wail that felt too loud for the room.

Alice stepped closer. Her legs shook. Her breath caught.

The baby's cry softened as she approached. His eyes fluttered open—dark, unfocused, searching.

Alice stared at him, her nose slightly wrinkled.

Something flickered in her palm—a faint warmth, a soft hum.

Her mother's smile faltered.

Her father's hand tightened on her shoulder.

Alice tilted her head, studying the tiny face.

"He's loud," she giggled.

Her mother laughed nervously. "Babies cry, sweetheart."

Alice didn't look away. "He told me he was coming."

Her father stiffened.

Her mother's breath hitched, her eyes darting to him for an instant, a flash of irritation.

The baby blinked once, then began to cry again—louder this time, as if he felt something in her.

Alice frowned.

Her hands flew to her ears and covered them; her shoulders tightened.

"I don't like it when he cries."

The hum in her palms deepened.

Her father stepped between her and the baby.

"Alice," he said gently, "let's give your mother some rest."

Alice's eyes darkened. Her hands fell to her side. Her fists tightened.

"But I want to see him."

Her father's voice trembled. "Not right now."

Alice stared past him at the baby, her jaw tight, her hand

warm with the faint crackle of something she couldn't place. Her hand reached slowly toward the baby.

The baby wailed.

Her father quickly took her outstretched hand and gently pulled her away.

Alice's breath shook, and she looked back at her mother.

"I love you, Alice," her mother said, then turned back to the baby.

Her father led her back to her room. He stood by the door like a sentry, guarding the exit.

She stood next to her chair, tears gathering in her eyes. "Why can't I stay longer with mommy and my new brother?"

He let out a long exhale. His eyes darted to the empty chair across from Alice's. "You know I love you, right? Your mother and I both do."

"Yes," she said, her voice trembling.

A warm smile filled his face. "Your mother and I had another surprise for you."

She wiped her tears, and her eyes brightened. "You do?"

"Wait right here. I'll go get it."

He left, closing the door behind him. His shoes clacked on the hardwood floor and stopped at the door, which squealed again. The muffled voices of her parents wafted toward her as she sat waiting in her chair, her eyes fixed on the door.

She straightened as her father started back. Her tears were gone, and her smile grew with anticipation.

He burst into the room, this time without knocking, carrying a large box almost as tall as she was. It had shiny pink wrapping paper, tied with pink-and-white ribbon. A large pink ribbon sat at its center.

Alice's eyes grew wide, and her mouth fell open. No words could escape her excitement.

"Aren't you going to open it?" her father asked.

Alice giggled, and within seconds, a doll almost her height stood propped beside her. She turned to her father, her heart racing, her face filled with glee, and ran to him and hugged him.

"She's beautiful! I love her."

"Your mother and I love you very much."

"I love you too, Daddy."

Her father picked up the empty cardboard box that held the used wrappings and ribbons and placed it in the hallway. He rushed back inside.

"Now you can have a proper tea time at your table with both your dolls and your bunny."

He pulled her chair back and motioned for her to sit. "Madame?"

She giggled and sat. "Thank you, Daddy."

He plopped the new doll into the empty chair across from her and smiled at his daughter.

Alice's breath hitched. Her heart skipped. Her eyes widened with horror.

The doll toppled sideways in the chair.

Slowly.

As if someone had pushed it.

CHAPTER THREE

Daddy's Angry

The days slipped by, and the Prescott household eased into an uneasy rhythm. Mornings still looked normal, but by the time her father returned home, some small thing would spark and set him off. At first the changes were barely noticeable, but they gathered weight as the week wore on. He began coming home later—always tired. Running a global conglomerate had worn him down, even though travel usually revived him for a short while. The relief never lasted. Soon he was staying late at the office again, and each day he seemed a little more drained, a little more shadowed.

Alice sat in her room in her usual spot. On her right was her old dolly, the one that never spoke, the one that only saw. On her left was her new bunny; the old one was long forgotten. She trusted this one now; it always spoke directly and never minced words. At first it was off-putting. But now, the bunny told her the truth. It understood things she couldn't—at least not yet.

Her new doll stood by her side. It didn't speak either, just

like the old doll; it just stood tall.

Across from her, the once-empty chair held the form of a shadow—the shape of a young boy. Its voice didn't match the shape; it was old and bitter. At first he would say nice things to her. She first met him when her fever broke from the illness that had kept her in bed. Everything changed the day her father set her new doll into the chair opposite her. That's when the shadow grew too large for the chair, and its yellow eyes grew brighter. It said things—things that frightened her.

The bunny told her not to listen to the shadow. The shadow smiled and revealed its name.

"I'm your great-great-grandfather. My name is Silas."

Alice gasped. She jumped from her chair as it fell back to the floor with a thud. She grabbed her new doll and ran out the door.

Alice's father and mother argued with hushed voices in their bedroom.

Her father said, "After what she did to that bunny of hers, how can we trust her near the baby?"

"She loves the baby. What happened with that stuffed toy of hers was frightening, but it was—"

"That was her favorite toy. She's loved that thing since the day we gave it to her," he said. "If she can do that to something she cherishes, there's no telling what she'll do to her baby brother."

"You're overreacting. She was playing with matches. We found some in her room before. Remember? She was probably playing with them again. The fur caught on fire, and she snuffed it out. She didn't want to tell us. She knows she's not allowed near matches."

He scoffed. "That's ridiculous. Half that thing was gone. It was burned away. Besides, that 'accident' happened while she was sick. That's when all this imaginary friend and burned bunny stuff started."

Her mother rolled her eyes. "I suppose she somehow used her laser eyes to burn that thing." She laughed, almost mockingly. "Just give her some slack. That illness of hers was hard for her."

He let out a sharp exhale. "I'm going for a walk."

He stormed out. Her mother's gaze lingered on him as he disappeared down the hallway.

Her mother exhaled in a huff, and when she turned, Alice was standing in the doorway clutching her bunny.

She gasped; her eyes widened.

"Sweetie, come and say hello to the baby."

Alice walked in hesitantly, carrying her bunny. She looked back over her shoulder once, then stepped toward her mother.

"Is Daddy angry with me?"

"No, of course not. He loves you very much. He's just a little tired. He's been working much too hard."

Alice said, "When I was sick, I was grouchy, too."

"I'm sorry, my darling. I'm glad you're well now. Your cheeks are back to normal, and I've noticed you have that bounce in your step I love so much."

Alice glanced away for an instant. "I do feel so much better."

Her mother nodded. "Come see your brother."

Alice hesitated for an instant as her eyes flicked almost behind her, then her smile returned. She ran to the bassinet where her brother was

Her mother hesitated, her gaze dropping to the floor. She

took a shallow breath. "Darling, do you remember what happened to your bunny — the old one?"

Alice's eyes moistened. "I told you, Mommy. I don't remember except that I think he was protecting me."

"Protecting you?" She hesitated. "From what?"

"The man with the yellow eyes. He's—" Her eyes darted away again and then swung back to her mother.

Her mother's eyes were fixed on her, filled with dread.

"Let's go have some lunch."

The next few days blurred together. Morning light still spilled gently through the Prescott windows, but it no longer warmed the house. It felt thin now. Brittle. Like it couldn't reach the corners anymore.

Alice's father moved through those mornings like a man walking underwater. His footsteps were slower. His shoulders heavier. His eyes unfocused, as if he were listening to something no one else could hear.

The bunny warned her that Silas was hurting her father, but it didn't know how. So she watched.

At first, Alice only noticed small things.

He forgot his keys twice in one week.

He poured coffee into an empty cup without noticing, then stared at it like he didn't understand what was missing.

He jumped when she walked into a room too quietly.

But the changes grew.

He began rubbing the bridge of his nose, wincing at a pressure that never went away.

He blinked hard, as if trying to clear something from his vision.

Sometimes he paused mid-sentence, his eyes drifting

toward the hallway—toward her room—toward the empty chair.

He didn't speak of it.

He didn't have to.

Alice felt it.

A heaviness in him.

A trembling in his light.

A crack widening.

The bunny was right; Silas was hurting him.

Every fear her father felt, every doubt, every moment of guilt—Silas pressed against it like a thumb into bruised fruit.

The house grew quieter.

The shadows grew longer.

And her father grew darker.

One night he came home long after sunset, his tie loosened, his shirt wrinkled, his eyes bloodshot. He stood in the doorway of Alice's room, staring at her tea table.

At the empty chair.

Alice sat still on her bed, clutching her new doll.

Her father's voice was barely a whisper.

"Alice... who sits there?"

She didn't answer.

She couldn't.

His breath shook. He stepped back, bumping into the doorframe. His hand trembled as he reached for the light switch, but he didn't turn it off. He just stood there, staring at his own shaking fingers.

Something inside him was breaking.

Her eyes flicked to the corner. Silas was there, his shadows pulsating, stretching, and darkening. Two yellow eyes glowed where his head should be. Darkness reached from the floor to

the ceiling.

Silas was watching.

A tingling rose in her palms, a hum slowly building.

The baby cried.

Not a normal cry—not hunger, not discomfort.

A sharp, startled wail that cut through the house like a blade.

Alice's mother rushed down the hallway, her footsteps frantic. She scooped the baby into her arms and whispered soothing words, but the child's eyes were fixed on the doorway behind her.

On the father.

On the shadow behind him.

Alice watched her father's face twist—confusion, fear, guilt, something darker. He pressed a hand to his chest as if something inside him had tightened.

The baby's cry rose again, shrill and terrified.

Her mother turned, her voice trembling.

"Sweetheart... what's wrong?"

But the baby wasn't looking at her.

He was looking at Alice's father.

And screaming.

Her father staggered back, gripping the doorframe. His breath hitched. His eyes darted to the corner of the room—to Silas—then back to the baby.

"I... I didn't do anything," he whispered.

Alice's mother froze.

She hadn't heard the whisper.

But Alice had.

And Silas had.

The shadow stretched upward, its edges rippling like

smoke. The yellow eyes narrowed, amused.

Her father blinked hard, then shook his head.

He rubbed his temples.

He muttered something under his breath—a word Alice didn't recognize.

The bunny leaned close to her ear. "He's cracking. You've got to do something before it's too late."

Alice's stomach dropped.

Her father pointed toward the darkness, then turned abruptly and walked away, nearly stumbling as he left the room. Her mother followed, bouncing the baby gently, whispering comfort.

Alice stayed where she was, clutching her bunny, staring at the corner where Silas stood.

The shadow leaned forward. Its voice rumbled low—ancient and cold. "He's mine."

Alice's light flickered—a faint warmth in her chest, unsteady and frightened. Alice clutched her bunny tighter.

Silas smiled.

CHAPTER FOUR

Don't Let Go

The following morning, her mother sat at the kitchen table, her baby in the bassinet beside her. Alice sat with her bunny in her lap to her mother's right, eating buttermilk pancakes. Her mother made them just as she liked them: a stack of three with a pat of butter between each, and drizzled heavily with maple syrup. A glass of water stood next to her plate. Today, she wouldn't get the glass of milk.

Alice carefully sliced a piece of pancake, dipped it deeper into the syrup, and ate it. It was her favorite. Usually, her mother would put a strawberry or two next to the pancakes, but not this time.

"Sorry about the strawberry and the milk. I guess I'll have to get to the store myself." She glanced at the stairs leading to her bedroom, then served herself pancakes.

Alice glanced at the bunny and nodded. Its words weren't spoken with breath—its thoughts appeared to her, soft and clear, like whispers.

She turned to her mother.

"Isn't Daddy going to eat breakfast?"

"No, sweetie. He's not feeling well. He wanted to sleep a little longer."

The baby stirred, made a small grunt, and then settled back into sleep.

Alice smiled at the bassinet. "I love my baby brother."

Her mother smiled softly. "I'm so glad. I can see it now—you two are going to be very close."

Alice nodded.

"Your birthday is next week. I'm amazed at how fast you're growing. Before you know it, you'll be going off to school."

Alice giggled. "I'll be in first grade."

"Yup. You'll make lots of friends. It'll be wonderful!"

"Will—"

A loud thump came from upstairs. Alice froze mid-sentence, her eyes snapping toward the stairs.

Her mother jumped to her feet. "Alice, darling, keep an eye on your brother, okay?"

She didn't wait for Alice to answer. She ran to the stairs and took them two at a time.

Alice's face tightened. Her breathing turned rapid and shallow. A high-pitched hum hovered near her right ear—soft at first, then suddenly shrieking for an instant before cutting off.

Upstairs, Alice's mother rushed into the bedroom. Her husband lay collapsed on the floor. Her breath caught as she ran to him and gently shook him. "What happened?"

He didn't answer. She put her ear to his mouth. His breathing was shallow. She felt his forehead. He was burning

up.

“My God!”

She sprinted to the phone.

“Operator, I need an ambulance.”

An hour later, Mr. Prescott was lying unconscious in a hospital bed, his breathing shallow beneath the thin wool blanket the nurses had tucked around him to keep shock at bay. A glass bottle of IV fluid hung from a metal pole at his side, each drop ticking softly in the quiet room. The rubber oxygen tube beneath his nose rose and fell gently with each breath.

Mrs. Prescott sat close to the bed, her gloved hand resting lightly on her husband’s forearm, as if afraid he might slip away if she let go. Her face was composed, but her eyes were red—the kind of quiet grief that comes from holding yourself together for others.

A smaller bassinet than the one she usually used sat in the corner, holding her sleeping baby. The baby moved occasionally as he napped, his face soft and relaxed—more so than it ever was at home.

Alice stood beside her, small and solemn, clutching her bunny. She watched her father with wide, uncertain eyes, knowing that something was wrong but not understanding its shape. A nurse had brought in an extra chair, but she refused to sit. She wanted to stay close to her mother.

The room smelled faintly of antiseptic and warm linen, the atmosphere calm but unmistakably grave.

A nurse stepped in to check his pulse, counting quietly as she watched the second hand of her wristwatch. The creases around her eyes deepened as she let out a slight gasp. She

nodded at them and then left.

Alice tugged at her mother's arm. "Is Daddy going to be okay?"

"Of course he is. He's going to be fine. The doctor will give him his medicine and make him well."

Alice's eyes dropped to her bunny. Her jaw slackened. She looked up at her mother.

"No! He's really sick," she said, her voice trembling and tears filling her eyes.

The doctor hurried in and grabbed the chart from the foot of the bed. His eyes narrowed, his face pale.

"Doctor!" Mrs. Prescott said. "How's my husband doing?"

His eyes flicked to her for an instant, then back to the chart.

"We're doing all we can." He hesitated. "Right now we're keeping him comfortable."

Mrs. Prescott gasped.

He exhaled slowly. "I'm sorry."

A nurse burst into the room, breathless. "Doctor, we need you upstairs. Room 212."

He turned to Mrs. Prescott, jaw slack. "I'll be right back."

The nurse followed him out.

Mrs. Prescott's breath hitched. She turned to Alice and forced a small smile. "Honey, are you okay?"

"Daddy's going to die, isn't he?"

"No, dear. We need to wait for the medicines to work. Okay?"

Alice blinked, her tears sliding down her cheeks. She glanced at her bunny, then back to her mother. She shook her head and then ran to the corner where her baby brother slept.

She sat on the floor crying softly.

Mrs. Prescott leaned over her husband. "I love you. Don't leave us. We need you."

Mr. Prescott continued his shallow, rhythmical breaths.

Her gaze swung to her daughter crying softly next to the baby. She walked over and knelt beside her. "Alice, I want you to hear me clearly. Your father and I love you dearly. I'm here, sweetheart. I'm right here."

A nurse walked in to check his pulse, holding her watch.

Mrs. Prescott watched her.

The nurse gasped. She grabbed the small vial from the table and waved it under his nose. No effect. "Help! In here!"

Mrs. Prescott pulled Alice close, shielding her from the nurse's frantic movements.

Another nurse rushed inside and ushered Mrs. Prescott, her baby, and her daughter into the hallway.

"Ma'am, we need room to work."

The nurse rushed back inside along with the doctor.

A few minutes later, the two nurses walked out, avoiding eye contact.

Then the doctor stepped out. "I'm sorry."

Mrs. Prescott's face went hollow. "No. It can't be."

"We did all we could."

Alice watched her mother and the doctor talking. Her bunny's instructions were clear. Her chest tightened, her heart thumping hard against her ribs. She wiped her cheeks and sniffled.

"You can fix him," the bunny had said. "You just have to want to."

She eased into her father's room and approached him

slowly.

He was still. His face pointed toward the ceiling. She glanced at the tiles above, then back at him. He seemed peaceful—neither happy nor sad.

She looked over her shoulder. No one had seen her come in.

“Hurry,” the bunny said. “Take his hand. He’s not all the way dead yet.”

She reached for his hand. A hum tickled her palms.

“Use both hands,” the bunny said.

She clamped her hands around his.

At first, his hand vibrated softly. His natural color spread from his hand up his arms and into his face.

Her hands glowed brighter. Slight tendrils of dark shadow crackled at their edges. The air around her smelled metallic—the kind that lingered after a thunderstorm.

His body jerked violently.

Her eyes widened. She cried out louder.

“Don’t let go,” the bunny said.

Outside, Mrs. Prescott exhaled shakily. “Thank you, Doctor. I know you did your best.”

She wiped her tears—then froze. Alice’s seat was empty.

“Alice! Where’s Alice?”

The overhead lights flickered. A violent hum blasted behind her.

The doctor grabbed the wall for balance.

Mrs. Prescott turned toward the room where her husband lay.

A brilliant blue-white flash erupted from inside.

She grabbed her baby and rushed in. The doctor followed.

Mr. Prescott sat upright on the bed, legs dangling over the side, grinning. Alice hugged him tightly.

Mrs. Prescott ran to them and embraced them both.

The doctor stepped closer and pulled his stethoscope from his neck. "Give me some room."

Mrs. Prescott guided Alice aside. "Let's sit next to your brother and give him space."

Alice grinned ear to ear. "My bunny told me what to do."

After a brief examination, the doctor shook his head. "I don't understand."

Mr. Prescott frowned. "What do you mean?"

"You were... dead."

Mr. Prescott chuckled. "You're joking. Right?"

"I'm serious. This—whatever happened to you—isn't possible."

Mr. Prescott's smile faded, then returned as he looked at Alice. "My lovely daughter."

He knelt beside her. "It was you, wasn't it?"

Alice hugged him tight. "I'll keep you safe, Daddy."

"I feel wonderful. What did you do to me?"

About the Author

Roger Mendoza is a storyteller, designer, and multimedia creator whose work blends frontier grit, mythic imagination, and emotional truth. As the founder of Romen Graphics and a creative force behind Dark Sheriff Records, he builds interconnected worlds across books, music, photography, and handcrafted physical editions.

Roger spent most of his career as a software engineer in the defense industry, where he honed his analytical mind and lifelong passion for problem-solving. After twenty-three years in California and fifteen years in Colorado, he returned to his hometown of San Antonio, Texas, settling on the outskirts where rural quiet meets city convenience. There, he continues to write, design, and produce his work with a hands-on approach that reflects both precision and artistry.

A professional photographer, Roger explores the natural beauty around San Antonio, capturing light and quiet moments that inspire his stories. Family history is another cornerstone of his life; as the eighth of ten children, he has spent years preserving photographs, documents, and memories that connect generations.

His curiosity about human behavior, life's mysteries, and the drama that unfolds in everyday lives fuels his storytelling. Whether writing frontier dramas, ghost stories, or modernized classics, a single creative philosophy unifies Roger's work: stories should feel lived-in, personal, and unforgettable.

He continues to expand both the World of the Dark Sheriff and the emerging mythic universe of the Lightborn Saga—two interconnected story worlds that explore the shadows, histories, and hidden forces that shape the human experience. His work invites readers into stories that feel lived-in, mythic, and unmistakably his own.