

D.B. WOODLING

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Immortal
Twin

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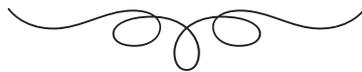
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In Memoriam

*All my beloved departed friends awaiting me
on the Rainbow Bridge*

CHAPTER 1



I don't remember the bomb blast that brought down the upper floors of the Kansas City Courthouse in 1997, but because of Bianca and one of her many special abilities, I now have a simulated memory of all the horror, chaos, and death that took place. Renegade vampires—or the Harvesters, as Bianca called them—perpetuated the savage carnage. They were amphibian-like creatures whose translucent membranes exposed throbbing black veins and glossy pock-marked bones while their demented crimson eyes pulsated like tacky neon signs—the pulsations possibly a form of herd communication. Capable of phenomenal speed, they soared through the air, their movements impossible to track with the human eye. Recalling how their knifelike fangs dripped a gooey bile substance while exsanguinating the mortals who had survived the blast sent a pronounced shiver down my spine.

“They will always be after you to snare your father,” Bianca warned. Her usual flamboyant cheeriness was lost while accessing my private thoughts.

I returned my biological mother's photograph to the table, perhaps a bit too harshly. I had wanted nothing more than to

recall the few memories I had of her, but now I decided this would be best accomplished once I was out of Bianca's clairvoyant radar. Today, after all, was the anniversary of the bombing.

"Tell me, darling, why is it you have those miserable traitors on your mind?" Her dark eyes turned darker, and she wagged a finger in my direction, her unfashionably long fingernail bringing to mind a miniature dagger. "It is best your thoughts never stray to such a formidable enemy."

"Why is that? Can the Harvesters read minds?" I asked as a chill once again wreaked havoc throughout my body.

"Yes, most undoubtedly." She threw frigid arms around me, afterwards lifting my chin and searching my eyes. "Know this, my darling: Those vile creatures desire Razvan's extinction above all else! Both you and Nicholas will forever be their pawns."

My twin brother Nick and I were only four years old when our parents died in the explosion. Memories of them too are a little fuzzy. Nick told me once he has never forgotten them, yet he didn't volunteer that information until *after* Razvan and Bianca Torok—commanders of the Realm's East Coast Coalition—told us they weren't our biological parents. So typical of charismatic Nick, the mysterious, secretive one.

The Toroks came clean the year my brother and I should have begun school. We'd become somewhat skeptical long before the physical disparities fed our suspicions. For starters, Razvan has thick black hair while Bianca flaunts vibrant auburn locks. Both Nick and I have blond hair, although to be fair, his calls to mind sunlight and wild daffodils while some have compared mine to dirty dishwater. Our eyes are blue, so different from the Toroks' distinct deep-set black orbs—their pupils surrounded by a golden halo, sporadically framed with a bloody blush when tempers flared—which should have been yet another aha moment. I followed Bianca into a kitchen the size of a school auditorium, yet mine were the *only* footsteps

echoing throughout the eerily quiet manor, and it wasn't because she was barefoot.

I took a seat at the enormous marble island and watched as she struggled with the ritual of cooking, one of the few things at which she did not excel. Maybe she had at one time, centuries ago, when her daily sustenance and that of Razvan's included traditional food. I studied her eyes as she attempted a simple grilled cheese sandwich. Her heavy-handed application of eyeliner always brought Egyptian culture to mind; it's no surprise she insists she once taught Cleopatra a thing or two. *Everyone assumes Cleo was Egyptian, but she was the last of the Greek Dynasty to rule Egypt*, Bianca had offered more than once.

She set the blood-red, gold-rimmed china before me and slung her long hair behind her shoulders. Leaning across the wide counter between us, after displaying a dazzling smile, she said, "Cleo was quite homely without a little magic. Alas, the poor wretch."

I often wonder if she pities me in much the same way. Bianca possesses the level of beauty that stops traffic and turns heads. The only time I'd ever stopped traffic occurred while chasing a ball into the street. I cringe when asked if Nick and I are *really* twins because I know they're wondering how one can be so perfect and the other such a dud. I looked away in my struggle to swallow a second mouthful, wondering how she could possibly burn the bread without melting the cheese.

She drifted toward the refrigerator, and I took the opportunity to hide the remainder of the sandwich in a monogrammed napkin. Across the room one nanosecond, and standing before me the next, she'd returned with a bottle of water. "Sorry, my darling, of course, you require something to quench your thirst. At times, I forget the mortal inconveniences. Has Nick decided who will accompany him to prom?"

I arched a brow and resisted narrowing my eyes. "As if you don't know."

“This may come as a surprise, Celestine, but I don’t *always* know what Nick is thinking.”

That was probably a good thing. Undoubtedly, Nick’s private thoughts were comparable to an R-rated comedy. He was considered the hottest guy in Madison High School. Nick never had to ask anyone to prom. Five of the most popular girls, all cheerleaders, had already *begged* him. And I was confident, mostly because Drew Dandridge blushed and detoured around me, that Nick had persuaded the team’s quarterback to ask me to prom. To my surprise, Warren Flaherty beat him to it.

“Do not waste your time on that lubberwort,” Bianca said suddenly, her cobalt stare demanding my full attention.

I’d heard the bygone expression many times, usually when Bianca discussed my friends, and I immediately grew defensive. “Warren is not *lazy*, Mom. He’s always working.”

“My darling, Celeste! He is most certainly lazy, and the few thoughts in his head are not his, rather mere imitations of popular opinion. I suspect he was a mynah bird in another lifetime.”

“Aubrey says he’s not so bad,” I said before thinking it through.

Bianca puffed her cheeks and blew out a Romanian insult. “What does Aubrey know?”

I felt my face flush. Heated words defending my only real friend gathered on the tip of my tongue.

“What do you have against Aubrey?”

“She’s the albatross around your neck. Aside from that, darling, I have nothing against her.”

My scalp was tingling now too, the way it always did when Bianca insulted Aubrey. I chewed the insides of both cheeks, knowing a verbal battle with Bianca was unwise.

“Just because she doesn’t plan to go to some big university is no reason to hate her, Mom.”

“Am I left to assume Aubrey has no collegiate plans?”

I kept quiet, realizing Bianca hadn't found this out yet.

Bianca's lips twisted into a smirk. "Aha, just as I presumed! Her expectations are limited to owning the latest fashion and bedding the football player possessing the most proficient anatomy." Her eyes flashed, and the oxygen temporarily left the room.

I attempted to shake off my growing resentment because I knew, deep down, most everything she'd said about Aubrey was the truth.

"Can we not talk about Aubrey or Warren?"

Whooshing around the kitchen island, before my eyes could even begin to follow, she wrapped an icy arm around my shoulders.

"You are a promising young woman. Why can't you see that? You mustn't settle for someone the likes of Warren Flaherty."

"I've already told him I'll go," I said just as Yesenia floated in from the expansive hallway. "Thanks for lunch, Mom." I hugged her and hurried past Yesenia—a fifteenth-century vampiress stuck in her thirties. To outsiders, she was Bianca's personal assistant. To those within the household and throughout the coalition, she was the Realm's trusted advisor. To me, she was a malicious, self-serving witch. Because her loathing for me had only increased over the years, I swept around her quickly toward the winding wrought-iron staircase that led to my room.

CHAPTER 2



I watched as Nick swaggered into the school lunchroom shadowed by his harem of five. He slung himself quickly into the seat beside mine as though afraid someone else might claim it. His vivid blue eyes squinted in my direction, and it was easy to understand why so many swore they could get lost in them.

I rolled my own blue eyes and scowled when Emily, Kaitlin, Amie, Brianna, and Olivia fought over the chair to his right.

Judging from the look in her eyes, Kaitlin contemplated removing me from Nick's left; I'd seen her pull that stunt on most of the other girls before. Nick ignored the chaos and faced me.

"I get the impression you haven't made your decision about prom yet," I said with a nod toward the power struggle in play to his right.

Nick grinned, and I wondered how on earth his teeth could be that white. He leaned close and whispered in my ear. "Actually, yeah, I have; I just like to watch them squirm."

I fisted his bicep but resisted a grin of my own. "You're such a jerk."

He cursed under his breath, pretending I'd caused him real pain, then suddenly furrowed his brows.

"You think Dadcula had anything to do with the timing of the graduation ceremony?"

I puffed my cheeks and glared. "Knock it off, Nick. You know how I hate it when you call him that."

As a young boy, shortly after the Toroks took us in, Nick openly idolized Razvan and accepted him as our father. Now he seemed to despise him.

I counted the number of times his jaw flinched before his expression softened; the combativeness left his eyes, swapped for the typical empathy he always reserved for me, his pathetic twin. "We don't owe them anything, Celeste." Nick glanced over his shoulder. Satisfied the girls were engaged in a new argument and oblivious to anything else, he added, "If it weren't for freaks like them, our real parents might have survived that day."

We'd had this conversation before, and I knew any response from me wouldn't change his mind. Maybe I'd made a mistake when I pleaded Bianca and Razvan to spare Nick the vision they'd revealed to me. They referred to it as going inside the Circle—a ridiculous label for something about as far removed from innocuous as a bolt of lightning. With their combined preternatural capabilities, Razvan and Bianca induced in their victim, willing or otherwise, a trance-like state, revealing anything they wished them to see. I'd always thought a better label for the Circle might have been the Time Machine, because that's essentially what they accomplished: transporting one either back in time or propelling them into the future. I blew out a fitful exhalation.

Maybe Nick witnessing the bombing firsthand as I had would have made all the difference. I didn't intend to tell Nick, but I was aware that the Toroks had everything to do with the commencement's time change. To express their gratitude for moving the ceremony from 5 p.m. to 8 p.m., the Toroks would

fulfill their promise and contribute to Madison High School's renovations. This entailed an updated gymnasium to include new bleachers and sports equipment; a state-of-the-art computer lab; an auditorium twice the size of the current one, offering posh velvet seating, dressing rooms, an orchestra pit, and gilded balconies as well as a stage floor equipped with a trap door, ironically referred to as a Vampire Trap.

I touched Nick's arm softly and ritually traced the long five-year-old scar which extended from his bicep to his hand. He stopped me, as he usually did, but I knew from his expression that he understood how grateful I would always be to Razvan for saving his life one horrible night. I never mention his attacker—the werewolf, Vykoka—around Nick, not anymore. But we're both aware he's still out there and that he commands the majority of the werewolves on the east coast. After the injuries Nick sustained that night, he has never run away again.

"Nick! My man," shouted Brandon, a Neanderthal so feared he confidently and routinely strutted around school flashing disturbing spandex boxers and a tooth-barred, ominous smile with a full set of braces accentuated by tiny smiling skulls on nauseatingly full display. His voice reverberated throughout the cafeteria, causing a hush to settle over the entire room. To infer Brandon Closter was subdued was like insisting a candy bar belongs in the five food groups. "I knew if I found you, I'd find the hot babes," he told Nick. Then he snickered, more a growl really, as he picked up Emily *and* the chair she occupied, tilted it, and laughed as she spilled out.

"Asshole!" Emily snarled as she launched a knockoff Louboutin stiletto at his shin.

Nick unsuccessfully hid a grin. "You'll never get a date that way." He got to his feet and pulled Brandon aside. "You keep that shit up and the coach will kick your ass off the team."

Brandon puffed out his chest. "I'd like to see him try."

Nick's laughter rang insincere. "No, you wouldn't, asshole. Take it from me."

"I'm out of here," I told my brother and made a run for it. I collided with Aubrey as I rounded the corner.

"No friggin' way! Don't tell me you're leaving." She groaned and let her books slide to the ground, then dropped her arms to her sides. "Come on! I need some pizza."

"Sorry, but the caveman showed up and ruined my appetite."

"Brandon?"

"Who else? He's practically extinct, thank God."

"What have I told you about opening your mind to new adventures? I've heard when he shuts his mouth, he's not so bad."

"And I'd rather not know what it takes to achieve that miracle."

Aubrey laughed and twirled a hoop earring that she sometimes wore as a bangle.

"What's with the basketball hoops? Aren't you afraid you might catch those on something?"

She rammed her hip against mine. "Afraid? Good God, girl! I'm surprised you don't run screaming from your own shadow. Live a little, Celeste. Life is too short for what-friggin'-ifs."

She was right about that. I'm hopeful, but I often doubt Aubrey will live to thirty. "I'm only making an observation."

"Yeah? Well, it wouldn't hurt you to try a little harder. If I lived at that mansion with Tristan dropping in all the time, I'd sure as hell try to look like a runway model seven days a week."

My spine stiffened in response to her description of our house. Although the four-story monstrosity occupied one acre, swallowing up the majority of the land, the customary reference to the Torok home as a mansion never failed to make me

uncomfortable. It was a difficult thing to deny. Aubrey's reference to Tristan only amplified my anxiety.

"Why's he always at your house anyway?"

"He does stuff for my dad," I said. "You know that, Aubrey."

"What does he do?"

I shrugged my shoulders. Whenever Razvan slid the pocket doors to his study closed, I'd always resisted the temptation to place my ear against the thick mahogany. Partially out of respect. Mostly out of consequence. I knew by Aubrey's intense stare that she expected some sort of response.

But how does one tell one's best friend that the class valedictorian, with the bizarre syntax who wears a hoodie regardless of the temperature, first walked the earth long before Jesus had?

Whatever he did for my father, he accomplished after dark, and it sure as hell didn't involve conventional assignments. I fought to refocus as Aubrey impatiently shifted her weight.

All I could come up with was: "How should I know?"

"Are you into him?"

"No," I lied, stammering unconvincingly.

"Bullshit! You are!"

Defiant, I locked both arms against my chest. "I told you, he works for my dad!"

"Okay, let's say that's true. And if it is, you shouldn't mind if I make a move."

"Knock yourself out!" I grabbed her by the arm, unconsciously digging in a fingernail or two. "Just not at the freaking house."

"Why not?"

"Seriously, Aubrey? Bianca will freak out."

"Why?"

I chewed my bottom lip and kept quiet.

"She doesn't like me, does she?"

“She thinks . . .” I took a deep breath and may have briefly squeezed both eyes shut. “She thinks you’re a sex fiend.”

Aubrey laughed, observing me out of the corner of one eye.

“You know what I think? I think she doesn’t want any competition. Because *she’s* interested in him. Maybe that’s why Tristan’s always at your house.”

“Oh, my God! Do you know how disgusting that is? You’re talking about my mom, Aubrey!” I thought about something I’d seen earlier in the day. Surprising them in the kitchen, I caught Tristan and Yesenia involved in some intense fondling. Thinking about it now, my pulse quickened, and I was convinced sweat now dotted my forehead. “Besides, I’m pretty sure there’s something going on between him and Yesenia.”

“Who’s she? Your maid?”

I swallowed past the lie spilling from my lips. “She’s my mom’s personal assistant. Besides, what difference does it make?”

Aubrey stomped one foot and served me an impish smile. “Damn it, I knew I should have seduced him by now!”

“Oh, God,” I muttered and rolled my eyes at the ceiling.

“So how old is this Yesenia?”

I shrugged my shoulders. “Older than the two of us, I guess.” Yesenia was much older. According to Bianca, she’d courted both Julius Caesar and Marcus Antonius. Aubrey would need over two thousand years to perfect the kind of feminine wiles Yesenia held in her arsenal.



THAT NIGHT, Bianca took me shopping for my prom dress. It’d been some time since I’d made the trip from New Jersey to New York, and I assumed, mostly because of the way Bianca kept smiling, my excitement was palpable. Climbing from the

limo, I took Bianca's cue and assumed the lead. Bianca was lagging far enough behind that the store associates greeted me with a disinterested once-over, changing their attitudes drastically once they recognized Bianca Torok, *the socialite*.

"Let me guess," Bianca teased me, "the gown one might choose to wear on an expedition."

"Why? Because it's green?"

Bianca tapped a fingernail against her cheek, examining the gown I had chosen. "Is it? I thought it brown, although come to think of it, it does bring a swamp to mind." She grabbed both my hands and pulled me toward her, then away, as if we'd found ourselves in a senior citizens' ballroom rather than a posh department store. "Oh, darling, the red taffeta is much more becoming! Why would you want to cover your body in that insufferable fabric?" she asked, nodding toward my selection. "Never mind the absolute lack of style! It looks as if something a toad might wear."

"Mom, you promised," I managed through clenched teeth.

"Yes, yes, I know I did. But darling, I merely want you to find yourself the belle of the ball."

I blurted out laughter. In my defense, it erupted involuntarily, like a fart in church. "And you honestly think a dress is going to make all the difference?"

Bianca pulled me close and whispered, "It will certainly shine a light on my brilliant star."

"Fine, I'll reconsider, but it's not going to be the red taffeta."

"But darling, why not?"

"Because I don't intend to look like a hooker."

"What, pray tell, is a hooker?"

I had to think about it for a moment and take into consideration Bianca's limited grasp of current slang.

"A courtesan. A Mata Hari."

Bianca's hand flew over one breast.

Soon after, she shared explosive laughter. I scanned the store, aware that all eyes were now upon us.

“Exactly my point. Maybe now you can understand that is not the response I want when I walk into prom.”

“Oh my good God, Celeste! In my time, you would have positively starved. Men ruled the world, and with an iron fist, I might add. A young maid’s only salvation was the hope of attracting a well-to-do mate.”

“Mom, attracting a mate is the farthest thing from my mind. Right now, the only thing I want to find is a dress we can both agree on.”

“Of course! How I do rattle on. Consider my point moot. How fortunate you were to be born into a time of grand possibilities, Celeste!” She drew me close and studied my eyes for what seemed like a long time. “You can have whatever pleases you. I just can’t believe how much time has passed.”

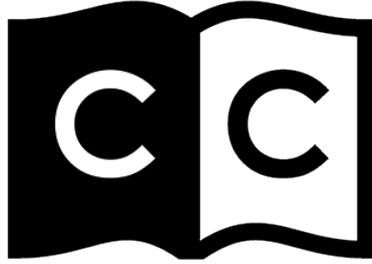
“Me either.” I squeezed her hand as I thought how much I loved her.

“And I adore you, Celestine,” she whispered in my ear as she handed me her credit card. “You were truly a gift.”

Upon leaving Bloomingdale’s department store, located in the heart of Manhattan, we planned to celebrate our compromise over lunch. Instead of the red taffeta gown, we agreed on a sapphire-colored one, embellished with far too many sequins. Slinging the bag over my shoulder, I lugged it through the revolving doors toward the limousine and a chauffeur, who was compensated handsomely for his patience.

“I so enjoy the energy here,” Bianca said as the limousine, per Bianca’s instruction, detoured past Central Park, Times Square, Carnegie Hall, and Rockefeller Center. “It’s positively electric!”





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One Twin's Immortality Could Lead to the Other's End.

The Toroks will stop at nothing to ensure their adopted children, Celeste and Nick, remain mortal. When Nick's rebellious ways place Celeste in danger, she is forced to leave behind everyone she loves to seek safety in the Midwest, where she follows in her biological father's footsteps by joining law enforcement. But her past follows her, nonetheless, and she soon finds her work and her family life crossing in the worst way possible when her community is endangered by renegade vampires.

“Tristan was already halfway to the exit when another bolt of lightning lit up the swimming pool beyond the glass enclosure. I strained to see through a curtain of brutal rain and caught a glimpse of Nick floating lifelessly.”


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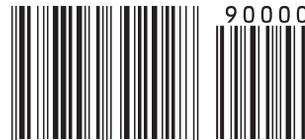
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