

THE
UNDELIGHTENED

BENTZ DEYO



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“Light thinks it travels faster than anything but it is wrong. No matter how fast light travels, it finds the darkness has always got there first, and is waiting for it.”

--- T. Pratchett

CHAPTER 1

“So what are you gonna do to her?” the young man with the blue eyes asked, looking across the center console of the Range Rover into the black eyes of his brother.

“That’s exactly the point, Leam,” the black-eyed brother laughed, a shrill, almost mechanical laugh, unbecoming of a handsome seventeen year-old boy who had been sixteen last night. “I’m not sure what I’ll do to her. That’s the beauty of this whole thing. Once the ceremony is over, I’ll know what my new self will be capable of, and then I’ll just know what to do...like instinct.”

The silver SUV exited off the highway and cruised its way down the one lane Boulevard toward the plush suburbs of Harbing, New Jersey. The rain was lightening a bit, and a thick hazy mist seemed to be emitting from the wet leaves of the many oaks that lined both sides of the street. The mist was so dense, the tree branches looked to be spewing clouds of smoke.

Sitting with his feet up near the dash, Leam stared at his brother, studying his face. Zach had the look of someone who had been waiting for something for a very long time and could now see it coming to fruition, like children staring at presents under the tree on Christmas morning, waiting for permission to start opening.

“And Mother is sure that when it’s over,” the younger brother continued—younger by a year less one day, “I will go on to accomplish tremendous acts of Darkness. In her exact words, she said, ‘Zach, my child, you will have it all! You will be capable of the unspeakable. You will be more beautiful than you are now!’”

“Beautiful? Who’s she kidding, you’re disgusting.”

“Really?” Zach said, sliding a cell phone out of his pocket with surprising speed.

“Yeah, you’re a monster.”

“Care to see how many girls text me a day, begging for me to come over? And it’s not to study, Leam. They don’t text me to study.”

Leam shrugged, glancing over his shoulder. Muffled thumping sounded from the cargo area in the back.

“I’ll give you a couple of their numbers,” Zach went on. “Might do you some good to have a little fun instead of moping around all the time like some loser crybaby. You gotta snap out of this, Leam, I’m serious, you’ve been like a zombie for a year now. No one can stand to be around you for more than a second. And because you stink, too. Take a shower and cheer up.”

Leam turned back around, peering out past the raindrops that were sliding down the front windshield. His eyes adjusted focus, catching a distorted glimpse of himself reflecting off the glass. It was the same woeful face that always looked back at him, whether it be off a windowpane, his bathroom mirror, or the giant stainless steel refrigerator in the kitchen. The reflection he had grown to expect never smiled.

The Range Rover turned right onto Whitewax Way, its headlights illuminating only a few feet ahead, unable to penetrate the thick fog that had lowered over the town. Zach didn’t slow down, accustomed to the heavy fog at dusk near their home.

“But enough about you and your misery,” Zach said, with a handsome, toothy grin. “Tonight is all about me. I’ve waited forever for the 18th of July and now it’s here.”

“You’re under the assumption that the ceremony will automatically be a success.” Leam looked down at his hands: identical, pure white, C-shaped markings on both, stretching from the inside tip of the index finger to the inside tip of the thumb. He looked over at his brother’s unblemished hands gripping the steering wheel. “Nothing that should or shouldn’t happen is ever a certainty.”

“I don’t really feel like figuring out what you’re trying to say,” Zach said, “but this is definitely happening, whether I get the fat-ass who did yours or not. You’re just pissed that yours was a massive failure. Mine won’t be. And then...”

He stopped speaking. Zach seemed to be struggling to suppress his emotions, and sure enough, a second later, he burst out laughing, shrill and mechanical. “And then tonight I become an immortal!” Zach shouted. “I’ll finally be able to leave this nagging humanity behind me, ready to serve the Cause in any capacity.”

“Watch the road,” Leam said as the passenger-side tires scraped up against the curb. “Why do you get so excited? It’s weird.”

“God, you’re jealous of me.” Zach veered the SUV back onto the even pavement. “It’s so pathetic.”

“See, I think it’s pathetic that you think you’ll become immortal,” Leam scoffed. “You don’t have a clue, do you? Have you ever taken the time out of your stupid day to read any of the books in Father’s library, or do you spend all that time trying to keep your hair looking so luscious and chasing around slutty Unknowing girls? He’s got about twenty on delightment alone up there—what it is and how to prepare and stuff. You ever taken the time to glance at any of them? Hmmm?”

“Read all the books you want.” Zach’s eyes were shiny with defiance. “Father’s always gonna like me more.”

“You won’t be immortal,” Leam said. “Gideon only *delays* your natural progression of aging. This is one of the many powers he has over you once you delighten. When you upset him, which you will, you age. You make a mistake—BOOM—he scorges you and you’re a year older. You have no idea what you’re in for because you haven’t even—”

“I DO KNOW!” The back of Zach’s neck was a bright shade of pink. “I know what’s in store for me and I know how it works! And it’s *my* turn now! Get that through your head. Come midnight is *my* time! You had your chance last year. It’s over, Leam, for you it’s over, so come to grips with it, all right?”

“You think I care?” The Range Rover approached the end of Whitewax Way. “Do you think any of it matters to me?”

“I know it does,” Zach answered, pulling into the only driveway that branched off the cul-de-sac, the SUV coming to a stop in front of a black, wrought iron gate. The gate was laced with intricate, metal ivy leaves, and the posts on each side of the gate were capped with dull, slightly-rusted silver statues. On the left post, a crow perched, with a drooping flower hanging from its beak; on the right post stood what looked like a cloaked monk, hood lowered, eyes hidden.

Zach inhaled a large breath and blew toward the crow. A few seconds passed and the weathered crow started gleaming with such intensity that its now freshly-polished silver was almost white. The crow’s mouth opened and the flower fell from its beak. Its petals separated away from the stem and began to dance with the fog as if a swirly wind had arisen from the cobblestoned driveway. The bright petals made their way along the length of the gate, one of them brushing the cloaked monk, settling on its shoulder. The inanimate monk now sparked to life, also gleaming as brightly as the bird. The monk’s stubby hands pulled the hood away from its face, revealing red eyes, like lasers, and they penetrated through the windshield, scanning both faces.

“Proceed,” the monk whispered, then pulled his hood back over his eyes, causing the flower petal to blow off his shoulder. The gleaming petal was blown back toward the crow, along with the others, reforming into a flower. When it found its way back into the waiting crow’s beak, the flower

began to lose its luster, as did the monk. In the blink of an eye, the two gateposts were again muted, rusty and still.

“Say what you want, Leam, but we all know it crushed you,” Zach said, as the gate began to creak open. “Regardless, you should know that Mother believes you’ll never delighten, *if* you even get another chance. She said the cursed spark inside you will never fully extinguish.”

“I don’t take stock in anything your mother says.”

“She’s your mother, too.”

“Not by blood,” Leam said.

“Oh, that’s right, your mother’s dead,” Zach sneered, his foot back on the gas.

Leam said nothing as the Range Rover crept up the cobbled driveway that snaked its way toward Whitewax Manor. Protected by tall stone walls that surrounded the estate, the Manor resembled something that might be described as half country club half medieval castle. But from this distance the fog was masking most of the vast structure—only the very tip of the tallest chimney was cleanly visible.

Zach parked up front and cut the engine, a wild expression on his face. He took his hands off the wheel, running his fingers through brown hair that fell almost to his shoulders. “You want to bring the Unknowing through the back for me? I need a shower. And I need to prepare.”

“She was your idea. Do it yourself.”

“Just do it, I’ll owe you one.”

Zach flashed Leam his striking grin, hopped out of the car with a casual ease, and walked toward the front door like a proud naked man strutting across a nude beach, passing the plush trees and tall statues that lined the Manor’s approach. Reaching the threshold, he pressed the palm of his hand against the center of the huge, iron door, which creaked open upon contact.

Squinting through the fog, Leam watched Zach disappear as the door closed behind him. It was a big night for his brother. Life changing. Leam thought back to the night of his own seventeenth birthday, the night he had failed *his* delightment. Something his father had said to the fat man who'd overseen the ceremony had stuck in Leam's mind. Something his father had said like it was a matter of life and death.

"Are you not aware of what he qualifies to be? That he has the potential to become..."

And that was all Leam had heard. He thought about that snippet of conversation often, though, and had spent countless hours in the second-floor library searching for anything his father could have been alluding to. Over a period of months, he had immersed himself in every pertinent volume, but had found only one reference—one person of Darkness—that could be as important as the tone his father's voice had suggested. Leam dismissed it, though; there was no way he could be the one mentioned in that book. Not a chance. He was way too ordinary. Plus, he was a failure. He couldn't even delighten.

It nagged him, though, what his father had said to the fat man, and a couple of months later he asked his dad about it. The reply was gruff, and upsetting.

"Only the questions of the delighted get answered. Out of the thousands of Dark families around the world, the Holts have remained one of the most distinguished and honorable. We have had, and will continue to have, a strong influence over the war against the Light. We live to serve Gideon, and do anything he asks of us, play any role he chooses for us, so that we may carry out his orders to aid in the fulfillment of the Cause.

"But you, Leam, you aren't one of us anymore. You will not be taught our secrets. You will never be welcomed into Darkness Headquarters. As of now, you are not meant to know our ways. Most likely you will never know. But do know this, Leam. You have stained our honor."

That was the last thing the man had said to him, ten months ago, and it was this conversation that shoved Leam into the deep hole of depression he had been trapped in since that day; and to make things worse, he had no friends who could lower a rope and try to pull him out. At school, every so often, some of the normal, non-magical kids would invite him to join their lunch table or to go get stoned behind the janitor's van, but Leam always declined. If any of them were to find out about him and his family, it meant their death. He had been taught at a young age that regular humans were dirty and weak, and—like the caged mice in old man Scotterson's AP Biology class—they deserved no respite from the experimentation that Darkness administered on them in its quest to rid them of the Light's protection. Put simply, Unknowings couldn't know. It had always been that way. But the Unks at school that made an effort with Leam didn't really seem too terrible.

Another thump, accompanied this time by frightened whimpering, pulled Leam's thoughts away from his sad, sorry little life. He got out and walked to the back of the Range Rover. With a heavy sigh he opened the hatch, and a stench of sweat and urine wafted out at him.

The unlucky woman Zach had grabbed behind a supermarket a few towns over was still tied up, but had somehow bitten through the strip of duct tape covering her mouth. She looked almost comical with two giant, silver lips. Her eyes were watering and bleary; she reminded Leam of a frightened house cat. Her purse was on its side in the corner, its content sprawled out around her feet.

"Please!" the woman pleaded. "Please let me go! I have children, two children! My twin boys! Please!"

"It's not about that." Leam noticed his tone was eerily flat, which was probably freaking out the lady even more.

"Please let me go, please, I beg you! I didn't hear anything, I don't know anything! Digeon or whoever...delightment...I didn't hear it. I won't say a word, I promise, you can just let me go!"

Leam stared at the pitiful woman. A lump rose in his throat that he had difficulty swallowing back down. He closed his eyes, opened them, and then struck the woman's head with the heel of his right hand, knocking her out cold. He lifted her out, hoisting her onto his upper back and started walking through the fog around the mansion toward the back of the estate.

"It's best this way," he said to the unconscious woman draped over his shoulder.

Other than his words, the only sound was the crunching of wet gravel beneath his sneakers.

"You don't want to be conscious any longer than you have to be. Not for what's in store for you tonight."

CHAPTER 2

Eloa parked next to her father's white pickup at the top of the steep driveway, grabbing her dance shoes as she got out of her car, and headed to the narrow pathway that twisted through the hedges and heavy brush all the way to the back door.

Excited to see her dad's truck home, she started up the path. It was well after 10 p.m.—she had stayed several hours after class to work one-on-one with her instructor, Miss Chetwidth—but she doubted her dad would care that it was so late, or even notice. He had been so busy with work things lately that they had spent next to no time together since her graduation from high school a couple months ago. Still, it'd be nice to give him a hug and say hi. She pictured him and couldn't keep a smile off her face. He looked just like one of those corny dudes with long, flowing blond hair on the cover of cheesy, paperback romance novels.

She pulled out her hair elastic with a moan, shaking her long black hair out of a ponytail. It had been stretched back for so long it ached. She started around the corner of the one-story ranch, her finger absently rubbing the dove-shaped birthmark on the back of her neck. It barely showed, even when her hair was up for dance class, because she was so pale, although her dad always said that a soft light radiating inside of her gave her skin a glow.

Her iPhone buzzed against her hip and she pulled it from her bag. A text from Bridgette, a friend she had met at dance class a few years back:

Party! RIGHT NOW! My house! Cute boys everywhere! Get over here now! ☺

Eloa's cheeks flushed. That sounded like it could be fun—once all the awkward introductions to the Harbing High guys were out of the way, of course—but the pull to see her dad was a bit stronger than the allure of a party. Besides, unlike all those lucky Unknowing teenagers getting ready to drink

and flirt with each other, school was not yet over for Eloa. Tonight she had to study and prepare for her upcoming Purification: the ceremony that would endow her with magical abilities—if she passed—which would be amazing. But a part of her longed to switch lives with Bridgette or any of the other girls from class. What it would be like to have no idea about the existence of Darkness and Light, and live an ignorant, blissful, normal life. She sighed, coming up on the back door.

After a quick text back to Bridgette—*Can't ☹️ Next time for sure...let me know if ur precious Flower Boy shows up*—she looked up and froze midstep. The screen door was popped out askew, the top hinge busted, and fresh blood was smeared on the door frame. She immediately backed into a thin break in the hedges, pulled up her Favorites, and tapped Dad.

“Pick up, Dad, pick up,” she whispered, her hand shaking, struggling to keep the phone pressed tightly to her ear. Five rings. Voice mail.

She tried again, listening for sounds of approaching footsteps or chainsaws cranking to life.

“C'mon, Dad, c'mon, c'mon, answer the phone!” Five rings. Voice mail.

Crap. Okay. What were her options? She had nobody else to call—no one of the Light lived anywhere near here, not that she knew of. In fact, other than her father the only person of magic she'd ever met was Sebastian, and why would a man so skilled in magic need a cell phone? She only had one option: to go in. But not through the screen door into the living room, that'd be too reckless. A roundabout route would be safer and give her a chance to find her nerve. There'd be no avoiding the living room altogether, though—not if she was to adhere to her father's protocol for in-house emergencies.

She squeezed through the hedges, shimmying alongside the house to the nearest window. She slid it up and hoisted herself into her dad's office, her leg scraping against a fire poker that had for

some reason been wedged in the window sill, tearing a run in her tights. She gritted her teeth and yanked out the poker.

The room was trashed, papers strewn on the desk and all over the floor, overturned chairs, her father's peace lily lying sadly on its side. Even his magnificent, white-marble bust of a stallion was broken, cracked in two.

Behind the shattered closet door, Eloa could see the safe where her dad stored all sorts of charts, graphs and faded leather journals. She had never seen it open, and the fact that it was empty spiked her anxiety with sharp jagged peaks—her dad was obsessed with keeping it locked with defensive enchantments. So if *he* hadn't emptied the safe, someone with formidable magical powers had. She placed her hand over her heart, struggling to push down the terrible thoughts and gruesome images popping up in her head.

She crossed to the door and pushed it open, tiptoeing down a hallway that stretched to the living room. It was in there that her dad had installed a threat indicator up in the corner of the ceiling above the piano: a simple device with a small bulb that—if all was safe—flashed with white light every five seconds. A blink of blue light, however, if followed directly by a white, meant that she was to stay home and wait for his word. Two winks of blue in a row, and she was to arm herself with the gun duck taped underneath the coffee table and hide behind the basement refrigerator. And if she saw three consecutive blue flashes: haul ass to her dad's bedroom bathroom and hide in the secret compartment beneath the tub.

With silent breaths she kept moving, clutching the fire poker with an iron grip. If she could manage it, anyone without a wild mane of blond hair who jumped out at her was getting stabbed in the face. Reaching the hallway's end, she slowed a step before the living room, and with trembling breath, turned the corner.

At first look, it appeared there had been no struggle at all until her feet sunk an inch into wet carpet—warm, red liquid bubbling up between her toes—and her eyes found a blood-drenched trail extending all the way to the broken screen door. And there was something odd stuck in the trail... what was that? Eloa took a few weak-kneed steps and bent down, tossing the fire poker aside. She peeled whatever it was off the carpet with her right hand, then smacked her left over her mouth to silence a scream.

A lock of long blond hair, caked in blood, lay shivering atop her fingers.

“No...”

She yanked her head to the side, just catching the flash of white above the piano before it dimmed cold.

Eyes trained on the tiny bulb, it flashed again, five seconds later.

BLUE.

With sweaty palms and eyes unwavering, she waited for the next flash.

BLUE.

Hands shaking, she dropped the lock of hair, ready to either grab the gun under the coffee table or dart to the bathtub. The bulb blinked once more.

RED.

“Oh God no...”

Red. Red. How could she have forgotten red? Fear crippled her body as her father’s measured voice sounded in her head.

“And blue, blue, red, Lo, if you ever see blue, blue, red... get out of the house and drive away as fast as you can.”