

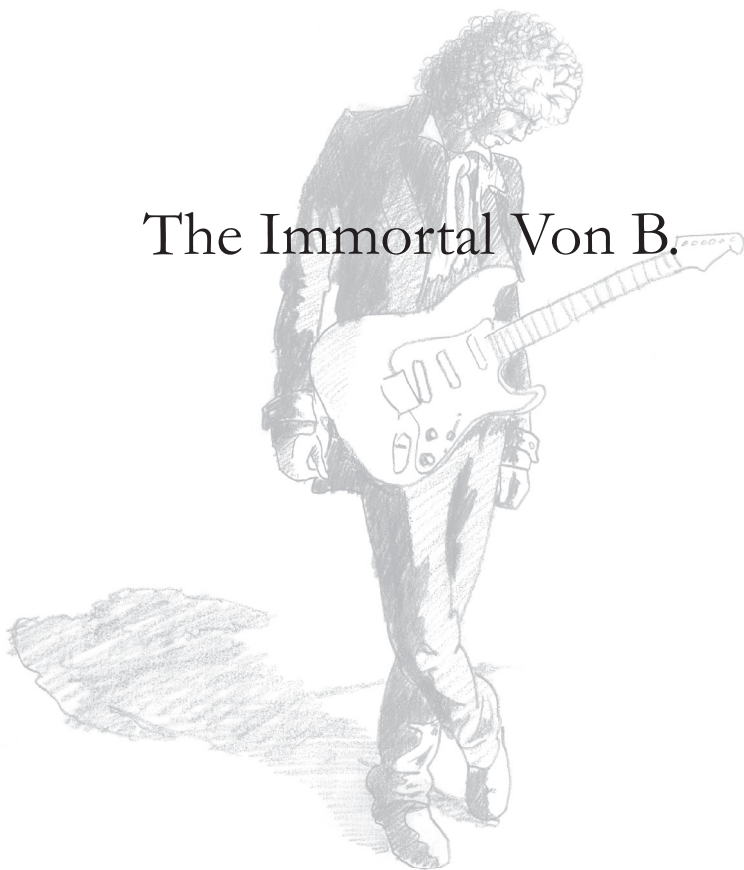
THE IMMORTAL VON B.

A NOVEL

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The Immortal Von B.



*“What you are, you are by accident of birth;
what I am, I created myself. There are, and will be,
a thousand princes; there is only one Beethoven.”*

— **Ludwig von Beethoven**

Prologue

THE MUSIC WAS SCREAMING, but it was all wrong. I stood in the middle of the garage, surrounded by a huge, throbbing (off-key) guitar wail that rattled the windows and shook the stage. Behind me, a stack of Marshall amplifiers throbbed and pulsed every time I hit a chord — or every time Tria slid her fingers down the neck of her metallic purple Stratocaster.

The three of us — me, Tria, and Michelle — were practicing in the garage Dad had converted to a studio for me when we moved back to Oklahoma after the nightmare. He tacked up soundproof insulation, installed a recorder and a mixing board, and topped it all off with a ton of digital, high-tech equipment.

At one end, he had built a small stage. On it he stacked lights and a wall of amplifiers. There aren't too many garage bands that come this well equipped. But even with all the technology and the posh studio, my fingers wouldn't work. I tried a G chord and it came out sounding like a dying animal. I turned to Tria and made a slicing motion across my throat.

She scowled and stopped playing.

"What is it this time?"

Michelle threw her drumsticks to the floor. They rolled across the cement like small castanets. She wiped her face with her bandanna.

"Come on Josie, again? That sounded pretty good to me."

I shook my head, as Tria rolled her eyes and Michelle pouted.

The Immortal Von B.

They don't intimidate me. I know what I hear.

"Nope. It's still not balanced. It's not there yet. It needs more attitude, you know, more grit, more anger."

I pointed at Tria.

"You and that Strat have to snarl and growl. You have to play like you're going to rip out the throat of some hopeless guy in the front row and then stomp around in his blood."

Tria grimaced.

"Okay. Okay. More anger. I get it," she said. "But seriously, just how angry should you make Beethoven? I mean, *Ode to Joy* isn't known for its venom. It's a symphony about love and brotherhood."

I plugged my Flying V back into the amps.

"True, but the man who composed it was angry, very angry at the world when he wrote it. He poured every feeling, every emotion he had into these notes. This is my interpretation of that. You have to understand this isn't just another rock song. It's not three minutes of drum and a couple of guitars. This is pure emotion — raw, sensual, and angry."

Tria gave a nod.

"Okay, well, I usually don't think of classical music like that."

I pushed the Flying V's neck out of the way and put my hand over my heart, trying to still it so I could explain.

"Most folks don't. But understand I am not looking for something typically classical. This isn't about universal brotherhood. This is primal. This is about regret, about loss. This is new Beethoven. Metal and amplified with the top pulled down and the wind howling in your face like a wild animal. I want to feel music roll over me like a rogue wave. I want an eyes-roll-back-into-your-head sound. I want something so unchained that it makes you go numb."

Tria stepped towards me, flashed her perfect white teeth, and growled furiously, like a lioness taking down an antelope. She grinned.

"Something like that?"

I nodded with a big smile.

"Oh, yeah. Now do that with your guitar."

I slid my fingers down the strings.

"Let's try it again."

The chords weren't that difficult, pretty much G, D, B, A, and E.

The fingerpicking, however, wasn't easy. Not the way we were playing. We were two minutes deep in the chorus when my right index finger hit a stray guitar wire. It sliced my finger open in a long ragged gash; blood shot everywhere.

Tria dropped her Strat and rushed to help.

"Josie? You okay?"

I put my finger in my mouth to stop the bleeding. Michelle ripped off her headband, grabbed my cut hand, and wrapped the bandanna around the wound.

"I know you said you wanted to see blood, but I thought it was a metaphor," she said, with a grin.

I laughed, then winced. Michelle put my other hand on the bloody cloth and applied pressure.

"Hold that tight until it stops bleeding."

Blood coated my shirt and my hand. I looked at it, almost in shock. *I closed my eyes and the world spun out of control. I'm not sure what's wrong with me, but I know it's not about the blood or the pain. It's about the music. I can't seem to get it right. I've played guitar for years, but for some reason this piece — one that's so important to me — I just can't do it justice.*

Tears threatened. Everything — every feeling, every memory from that time, every regret — returned, leaving me stammering and helpless. I told myself it's because I still don't have the right sound. But it could as easily be because I still miss Mom. Or Fa8 or . . . him.

Whatever the reason, the tears not only spilled over, they wouldn't stop. Tria and Michelle stood in front of me a little in shock themselves: the Josie Brunswick they knew never cried.

Before they could ask, I took control.

"I . . . I'm sorry," I said, gulping for air. "Didn't mean to fall apart."

Tria put her arms around me.

"Josie, what's wrong? Why are you so upset? It's just a little cut."

I tried to answer her, really I did, but I choked instead. What words I managed to get out were garbled: "I . . . you see; it . . . ah . . ."

Michelle grabbed a chair, turned it backwards, and sat down in front of me. She put one finger on top of my hand. I looked up to see her more serious than I'd ever seen her before.

"Come on, Josie. We've played together for months and you act like we're strangers. Some days you're all fun and happy, but more days

The Immortal Von B.

than I think you realize, you're a black cloud. And now you're freaking out. Seriously. I hate to tell you, but *Ode to Joy* is neither that hard nor that important in the big scheme of things. Even your angry-radical-ear-splitting version. Wanna fill us in on what's really going on?"

"I'm . . . I'm just a little emotional right now. That's all." Like a turtle, I could feel myself pulling into the safety of my shell.

Michelle would have none of it.

"Rubbish," she said. "I don't believe you. You've been this way a long time. And it makes no sense."

Her gaze ran from one end of the garage to the other.

"You have all this," she said, with a sweep of her arm, "but it's like you're still not happy. It's like you're somewhere else — somewhere far away. I swear, if my dad did this for me, I'd never ask him for another thing."

I wiped my eyes on my sleeve. "You guys wouldn't understand."

Tria pulled me close, wagging a finger at me like I could not be more wrong about them.

"Try us," Tria said. "We're friends. Heck, we're more than friends — we're bandmates, right? Can't get any tighter than that."

She had a point.

"It's just my life has been messed up for so long, and you guys are busy and have your own problems, and, well, we're just now getting our sound right and I don't want . . ."

Michelle stood up with an exasperated sigh.

"Josie. Stop. If something is bothering you, we want to know. Tell us. We're your friends. You don't have to deal with this alone!"

I so wanted to believe her.

I had been on my own for way too long. I wanted to talk to someone about what I had lost. I walked over to a small shelf by the door, grabbed a large leather notebook, and turned back to look at my two friends, who were staring at me like they didn't know what would come out of my mouth next.

"Are you sure? Cause it's pretty messed up," I said. "Look at me, I'm pretty messed up. The past few years of my life have been scary-movie strange. And you probably won't even believe me. This is your last chance to bail. I would understand if you did."

Tria's eyes grew big — she glanced over at Michelle.

“You . . . you didn’t kill anyone, did you?”

“No, silly.”

Michelle stepped towards me, a determined look on her face.

“Are . . . are you pregnant? I remember that one jerk . . . what’s his name, Darren, drooling all over you the other night.”

I stomped my foot in frustration.

“Come on guys. Get serious, will you? It’s nothing like that.”

I sat down and placed on the sofa a large, leather notebook, overflowing with newspaper clippings, notes, photographs, scraps of paper, cocktail napkins, and some torn (slightly burned) pages.

“It’s all here. The story of my life before I met you.”

Tria sniffed the air. “Smells like smoke. You must have had an exciting life if it involves fire.”

I sat down on the edge of the stage and grinned sheepishly.

“You have no idea.”

While Michelle and Tria drew closer, I opened the notebook and removed a small photograph, slightly torn on one end with colors beginning to fade.

“I . . . I guess it starts here,” I said.

Michelle pointed at the woman in the photo.

“Who’s that at the piano?”

I took a deep breath.

“My mother — the photo was taken in her studio.”

“I didn’t know your mom was a musician,” Tria said. “A pianist?”

“Yeah. She was amazing. She toured all over the world.”

Michelle took the photo from me, handling it as carefully as if it were a priceless artifact.

“She looks like she’s smiling, happy. You said she was famous?”

“Yeah,” I gulped more air. “Her name was Anna Heigle.”

Michelle looked at me like I just told her Elvis was alive and working at the local Burger King.

“Anna Heigle. Your mom was Anna Heigle?”

“Yeah.”

“Anna Heigle-Brunswick? The Anna Heigle-Brunswick?”

Tria shook her head apologetically. “I don’t know who . . .”

Michelle jumped in before Tria could finish.

“Anna Heigle-Brunswick toured the world playing Beethoven in

The Immortal Von B.

places like Vienna's Musikverein and the Boston Symphony Hall. She just might have been the most famous female pianist in the world. Jeez. I had no idea she was your mom. I saw her live in New York when I was eight — I'll never forget what she could do at the piano."

"She was pretty amazing," I said.

"I am so sorry, Josie," Michelle said. "I never realized, I mean, you said your mom died when you were young, but you never ever talk about her."

Tria reached for the faded photo and pointed at a small mound under the piano bench. "Is that you?"

I fought back tears at the sight of the small sleeping child.

"Yeah, it's me. I was three, I guess, maybe four. I used to sneak into her studio and listen to her practice. I guess that time I fell asleep."

Michelle smiled and now tears rimmed her eyes. "Now I understand. This piece, the Ninth, it's about your mom."

"Well, yes and no," I said.

Michelle and Tria exchanged looks. I smiled sadly at my two confused bandmates — I had told them it was complicated.

"Yes, I miss my mom," I said. "After she died I stopped playing the piano and started playing the guitar. But a couple of years ago, my whole world turned upside down again and only then did I realize just what she — and her music — meant to me."

Michelle flipped through the pages of the notebook, then looked up at me as if she had figured something out.

"Is all this stuff here about your mom?"

I shook my head. "No, remember how I told you I lived in Vienna for awhile? There's stuff about a boy I met there, too."

Tria handed me back the photograph, stood, and strapped her guitar back on. She looked at that moment like the most powerful woman on earth.

"A boy," Tria said, with a knowing grin. "It's always about a boy."

"He wasn't just any boy," I said, quietly.

Something in my voice brought both Tria and Michelle up short and left them speechless for a few seconds.

Finally, Michelle broke the silence. "Go on," she said.

"Let's just say I have to get this song right for him," I said. "It's important to me . . . and it would be important to him."

“Why didn’t you just say so in the first place?” Michelle asked, walking back to her drums. “Let’s play this song the way you hear it in your head. But after we get this right, you have to tell us the whole story. Okay?”

“Yeah,” Tria added, grinning. “You want angry Beethoven; baby, you’re gonna get angry Beethoven. We are your girls. We will give you a Beethoven that’s furious and loud and all sorts of mean, but when we are done, you have to start at the very beginning and tell us everything. Promise?”

Her fingers ran up and down the frets on her guitar, releasing a raw rip of sound.

“And I do mean, *everything*,” Tria said.

What could a girl say?

I nodded and slipped my Flying V around my neck.

“Okay,” I said, “but it is not your typical boy-meets-girl story. Trust me.”

Tria pulled me up on the stage. She cranked up the volume on the amps and strummed a perfect C chord — it echoed throughout the room and into the night.

“Josie, we never thought it would be.”