



the tone poet

mark rickert

FIRST MOVEMENT
Astral Music

To his capable ears Silence was music from the holy spheres.

–John Keats, *Endymion*

A Symphony must be like the world. It must contain everything.

–Gustav Mahler

And everything under the sun is in tune but the sun is eclipsed by the moon.

–Roger Waters, Pink Floyd, “Eclipse”

Overture

The Sunday morning sky rumbled with lazy thunder. Thunderheads gathered over the old chapel. Standing in the windswept lawn, Reverend Alfred Kalek uneasily watched the storm approach. Those were ominous clouds, the sort of clouds that made God-fearing men nervous, especially when they had guilty consciences. It was May 5, 1995.

The wind made the folds of paper snap in his hands. He looked down at the handwritten sheet music, at the scrawl of notes and musical symbols. The notation meant little to him; he'd had a few classes as an adolescent, nothing more. So then how could he explain that he'd written it? Surely this was a miracle. The music had simply come through him, and he'd been nothing more than a vessel.

He turned around and looked at his chapel, the Church of Harmony Hill. With its ivy-veined clapboard walls, high-pitched roof, and tall steeple, the building looked like a relic from the Old South when parishioners could show up to church barefooted and no one would think twice. Impressively, the small structure had withstood a hundred years, but now she sagged with age; her ceiling leaked and her boards creaked. In the winter, she got as cold as a meat locker, and during the summer, she became an oven. She was old, just like him, and they were both falling apart.

At the sound of tires crunching over gravel, he turned to find several cars nosing their way up the hill. He checked his watch to find only thirty minutes left on the clock. He'd been out here too long. Time to get ready. He mounted the front steps and went inside.

The dark chapel seemed hauntingly quiet. The place looked bigger on the inside, with its high vaulted ceiling and its rows of wooden pews that flanked the center aisle. Despite all his efforts to refurbish the place, the chapel still lacked a certain warmth. Its floorboards were warped and faded, and its walls were yellowed and cracked. At least he'd gotten the stained glass windows repaired after someone had shattered them with rocks.

He still remembered the first time he'd come here with Judith. She'd asked him to bring her here and waited to tell him why until they were standing on the chapel's sun-bleached lawn.

"I want us to buy it, Alfred," she'd insisted, giving one of her special smiles while the breeze fluttered her fine silver hair. "I want us to start our own church."

Holding his hand, she'd told him all about the chapel. A group of Presbyterians had built the church in 1890. Then, in the early 1940s, a group of Southern Baptists took it over, and it stayed in their possession until vandals set it on fire one night. The structure had been spared, but damaged by smoke, and the parish relocated itself to the other side of town. It would be another five years before someone came along to restore it. But the builder lost his funding and abandoned the project. After that, the city took ownership, and it was left to fall into disrepair.

"And here it's sat for ten years," she'd said, looking her husband in the eyes. "Waiting for someone like us to love it."

"We can't afford this, Judith," he'd said to her.

She'd winked at him. "Like hell we can't."

And they had. They'd somehow found the money. She'd bullied the bank and appealed to the city. In the end, she'd gotten what she wanted. But then the real work began. Squatters had used and vandalized the church. He and Judith had spent weeks cleaning up their filth: liquor bottles, needles, pornography magazines. They painted over graffiti, the random profanity, and crude images and satanic symbols. Even worse was the thick, pungent odor that permeated the chapel, and no matter how many times he'd scrubbed the floors and washed the walls, they'd been unable to exorcise the stink trapped in the wood and plaster. Nonetheless, the two of them had restored the chapel and had made it their own.

Even then Kalek had known they'd made a mistake. Someone should have torn the chapel down long ago.

Shaking the thoughts from his head, he marched down the center aisle to stand beside the organ. He waited with a copy of the Holy Bible gripped in his gnarled hands, his shoulders square and a grin fixed on his face as his guests began trickling inside.

By seven a.m., the pews were filled with smartly dressed families with crying babies and restless children. Several blue-haired elders gathered toward the front. Mostly familiar faces, but a few new ones. Kalek was happy with the overall turnout. After a year-long absence, he still had a parish. Many had come to show their support. Others, he knew, had come just to see if the rumors were true and if he really had gone crazy. Oh yes, he'd heard the rumors buzzing around town, and he'd been deeply hurt by them, but then he reminded himself that Christ received similar accusations.

Giving his tie a quick adjustment, he thudded up the steps to the stage, a powder-blue carpeted area with potted gardenias and a wooden lectern with a microphone standing toward the edge. Several rows of plastic chairs lined the back wall. A music stand with sheet music was placed before each chair.

Kalek moved around to the back of the podium and bent toward the microphone. He cleared his throat and the sound grumbled from the speakers. Everyone looked at him, their voices dropping to whispers before falling completely silent. With a smile, Kalek jerked the microphone free of its perch and huffed into it. "Praise the Lord for this turnout! God bless you all for coming this morning."

Giving a toothy grin, he shuffled over to the edge of the stage and rested his hands on his knees as he bent over and smiled at the high school students gathered in the front pew. "You all look so pretty this morning," he said. "I tell you, I sure am glad to see you here today. I really am. I know I've been gone for a long time, but I'm back with a message straight from the mouth of God."

He rose and paced the stage, taking a moment to gather his thoughts. "I want to share with you what happened to me last year. I suppose it started the morning I found Judith. Found that she'd left us . . ."

The words suddenly became lodged in his throat like chicken bones. He held his breath and fought against tears as the memory surfaced, the memory

of that morning when he'd entered this very chapel and found her lying with her face to the floor. She was wearing her blue polka-dot dress, white stockings. The image held as he returned to the podium and braced himself against it.

"I, um . . ." he cleared his throat and pinched the bridge of his nose with his fingers. "The day I buried her was one of the hottest days of the summer. I was hurting inside, and I was sick with grief. And so I went home and did something . . . terrible. I tried to take my own life."

He closed his eyes and remembered. Still wearing his suit from the funeral, he'd parked his Buick in his garage. He'd left the engine running while the garage door clattered shut behind him, shutting out the sunlight. Then he'd taken the .22 mm from his glove box, shoved its barrel into his mouth, and pulled the trigger. There'd been no pain, but suddenly he'd shot upward, light as a feather, and a dreadful realization had come. *Oh Lord, what have I done?*

An agitated darkness had engulfed him with a sound, music, like the miserable wailing of a lunatic. Wanting desperately to be free of it, he'd flailed about in his spirit body, crying out for God to save him. But the music had grown louder, filling his soul with dread. He'd eventually given up the struggle, accepting that the music would consume him, and that he deserved it. *You selfish bastard. This is where you belong.*

But then a miracle had happened. His next door neighbor, Jason Miles, had heard the gunshot and rushed to help. He'd pulled Kalek from the car and resuscitated him. Even more miraculous: the bullet had somehow missed the reverend's brain. Only some nerve damage. Some hearing loss. His attempt at suicide had failed. Reverend Kalek had escaped death, but the music had stayed with him.

His thoughts returned to the church, and he cleared his throat. "In my moment of death, I experienced something remarkable. I heard music, a strange and terrifying music. Was this the voice of God? Yes, I think so. And I believe I survived so that I could share what I experienced."

His gaze swept across the multitude of upturned faces, hoping to see their eyes brighten with curiosity, but instead he found only bewildered frowns.

A few shifted in their seats. Kalek raised his Bible and waved it in the air. “Deuteronomy 31:19: ‘Now therefore, write down this song for yourselves, and teach it to the children of Israel; put it in their mouths, that this song may be a witness for Me against the children of Israel.’” He slapped the podium with his hand. “Ladies and gentlemen, brothers and sisters of this church, that’s exactly what I intend to do today. God gave me a second chance. He let me return so that I could share a secret with you . . . so that I could baptize you all through sound!”

He turned his eyes to the front pews where a group of students sat, their faces flushed with embarrassment. “I brought some special guests to help me deliver my message,” he said into the microphone. “Please welcome to the stage the Bernie High School band.”

He beckoned them with quick flaps of his hands. When the students hesitated, he said, “Don’t be shy, now. Come on up here.”

Slowly the students climbed onto the stage with their instruments. They hung their heads, their faces sullen, and Kalek felt like strangling every single one of them. They mulled over to the rows of plastic chairs and sat down, filling twenty-two seats. The reverend wrung his hands as he waited for them to settle down. He turned back to the audience with a grin.

“Now, I hope the students will all forgive me,” he said sheepishly as he glanced over at them, “but I haven’t been completely honest with them. You see, for the past few weeks, they’ve been practicing this particular piece, and they don’t even know what it is. But if I’d told them, they wouldn’t have believed me. See, I wrote a song after my . . . accident. Until then, I’d never composed a thing in my life. I still don’t understand standard musical notation and don’t intend to. This piece has no name. No author. And I can’t claim to understand it. But I want to share it with you today. I hope you will let me.”

The audience stirred. Kalek turned his back on them to face the musicians, who looked equally bewildered. The reverend gave them a moment longer to situate themselves and then raised a hand. The band waited. With a nod and a swish of his hand, the music began. First there was a reedy note wallowed from a clarinet. The violins came next, followed by the cellos, then an oboe.

One by one, the other musicians joined, until their strange, brooding music resonated across the chapel.

Swinging his hands in an attempt to keep time, Kalek coaxed the band on, even as a sick feeling overtook him. During the past few weeks as he and the high school band gathered to rehearse, Kalek had begun to question the music. It was so dark, like a horror movie backdrop. *Could this music possibly hold a mirror to God?* No, he didn't think so. And yet, he'd pushed these thoughts aside, choosing to accept that God's ways were, perhaps, beyond his understanding. For this reason, whenever the students complained about the music, he'd deceived them, saying, "You can't possibly understand this music. It was written a long time ago. This will all make sense later."

Now, in the chapel, with all these good-looking, clean people, the music just seemed somehow wicked. Everything felt wrong.

Still swinging his hands, he turned and looked at the crowd. He was met by confused expressions, gaping eyes, and slack jaws. *They hear it too*, he thought. *They hear it too!*

Just then a trumpeting fart erupted from the band.

Kalek's head whipped to the left and he snarled at the musicians, searching for the culprit who'd missed a note. His gaze fell on a boy with a crew cut in the front row, cradling a tuba in his lap. The boy's sparkling blue eyes flitted nervously at the reverend, and he hugged the instrument closer to his chest. After a moment, he pressed his lips to the mouthpiece and his cheeks swelled like fleshy balloons as he blew a low, trembling note.

Relaxing, Kalek reprised his smile and swung his hands to the beat. The band followed clumsily along. He slowed the tempo and allowed the woeful music to wash over him. *Yes, that's it. That's much better . . .*

Then the tuba erupted with a heroic, farting *Frhuuumpp!* The timing couldn't have been better.

Kalek, no longer keeping time, glowered at the boy. Thankfully, the band continued without his direction, even while giggles sounded from all around them. Meanwhile, the boy—his name was Joshua Hill, Kalek remembered—played dumb. He held his dented tuba up at arm's length and inspected it with a bewildered expression.

Kalek bristled. *The bastard knows exactly what he's doing!* The reverend

did his best to pretend nothing had happened. The band recovered. The music continued. A few students in the back giggled behind cupped hands. Joshua Hill, now flushed with embarrassment, repositioned the tuba in his lap, placed his lips to the mouthpiece, and blew.

FFRRHUUMPPP!

A few guffaws exploded from the audience. Several of the musicians covered their mouths, forcing back laughter, unable to keep up. The boys jammed into the chairs on either side of the tubist thought this was the funniest thing they'd ever seen and laughed until they turned red in the face.

Gnashing his teeth, Kalek hissed. "You stop that, boy. You'll ruin the whole damn sermon!"

Another blast of tuba fart.

Now the entire congregation was in an uproar. The kids on stage were having a ball with it, laughing with their heads thrown back, a few of them falling from their seats.

"You stop that!" Kalek called, trying to keep his voice lower than the music so the audience wouldn't hear. "This isn't funny!"

Joshua drew another chest-swelling breath and again blew a blast from his tuba, drawing a sound similar to the braying of a wounded animal. It reminded Kalek of a time he had, as a boy, discovered one of the neighbor's goats dying of a broken back in a creek. It had made a horrible baying sound of pain and misery—just like Joshua's tuba sounded now.

The audience laughed uproariously. It seemed everyone was in on the joke but Kalek, whose blood was at a slow boil. He swung his hands crazily, off-beat with the music.

When Joshua's eyes rolled back in his head and his cheeks swelled to unnatural proportions, Kalek's anger changed to alarm. Joshua's face had darkened to an angry shade of purple. This was no joke. It looked like the boy was choking to death. The laughter died almost immediately. The band stopped, but Joshua kept blowing.

Kalek decided to act. He reached for the tuba, clutching the rim of its wide brass bell, intending to wrench it free from Joshua's arms, but then new bellows of sound wailed from it. These were distorted and unnatural, a kind

of metallic skirl that reached deep into Kalek's ears and resonated all the way down to his toes, paralyzing him with panic.

Calvin Hill, Joshua's father, shoved Kalek out of the way while several men with alarmed faces gathered around the boy. Mr. Hill tried to wrestle the tuba out of Joshua's arms, but the boy fought, wrapping his arms fiercely about the instrument's coiled pipes, holding it firmly against his chest. Mr. Hill grabbed hold of the tuba's bell, and he and another fellow gave a final jerk. This time Joshua came out of his seat and the two men went reeling back.

Joshua gave a violent blow against the mouthpiece, causing his face to swell and darken. A sound erupted, sounding like a blast from a foghorn.

Kalek's ears rang. *The boy's going to kill himself!* he thought. *He'll have an aneurysm!*

Finally, something gave. Joshua's eyes opened, fixed on Kalek, and then he tipped the bell of his tuba toward the floor of the stage. Syrupy fluid gushed from its opening. It splashed the carpet and everyone's feet, and the men all hopped back away.

Kalek clapped a hand over his mouth, mortified, and uttered, "What in the Lord's name is that?"

Panic and disgust gripped the stage. A young girl shrieked and ran from her chair. The other musicians followed, screaming and kicking through the chairs and instruments as they shoved their way off the stage. The reverend's podium fell over with a crash. Someone nearly knocked Kalek over.

It took only a few moments for the stage to clear, save for the three men who had come to Joshua's rescue. The boy had now fallen to his knees but maintained his hold on the tuba, clutching it desperately. Strings of oozing fluid hung from the tuba's bell. Mr. Hill urgently patted Joshua's back and tried to console him.

Kalek swung toward the pews. Most of the parish had now moved to the back of the chapel, where they crowded in the center aisle and tried to squeeze out the main doors. Others sat with bewildered faces. Children screamed.

The reverend licked his lips as frightened eyes looked to him for an answer. "It's all right," he called to the parish. "The boy's just sick. Perhaps somebody could call an ambulance?"

Behind him, another three blasts of sound interrupted him.

Without turning around, Kalek closed his eyes and hung his head. *That's it*, he thought. *Joshua Hill, you have ruined any chance of success for me. They will never come back now.* With a heavy sigh, he once again addressed the church. "Maybe you all should step outside."

From behind him, someone screamed. Kalek's heart skipped a beat. He turned and found a young girl—she played the clarinet—shuffling backwards, her hands clutched over her mouth. She nearly walked into the reverend, and he gripped her arms and forced her around to look at him. Her eyes were wild with fright.

Reluctantly, Kalek looked over at Joshua, who had resumed his fanatical blowing into the tuba. With the instrument's bell tipped downward, more liquid spilled from its brassy rim. Kalek could see down into the instrument's bowels. Something obstructed the bore. He leaned forward, eyes narrowed.

A fist-sized mass the purplish color of a newborn baby emerged from the instrument's bowels. The force of Joshua's breath seemed to push it along, sliding with the consistency of pudding toward the rim of the bell.

Good Lord, thought Kalek. *The boy's choked up a lung! But that's ridiculous, physically impossible.* Wringing his hands nervously, he moved closer as Joshua continued to blow feverishly into the tuba. The meaty lump slid over the rim and fell, but it never hit the floor. Instead, it hung by a fleshy rope that reached back up into the bowels of the tuba like some kind of umbilical cord.

Kalek clasped a hand over his chest and whimpered, "My Lord."

Several people moved into his way, momentarily eclipsing his view of Joshua, and someone shouted, "What in Christ's name is that?" This was followed by another series of astonished gasps.

Kalek clutched the sides of his face as his heart thudded angrily in his chest. This was wrong. All wrong.

The stage became chaotic with shouts and gagging noises. Someone started praying out loud. Kalek glanced over his shoulder and watched the people fight for the back door. He couldn't blame them. He wanted out too.

The prayer was interrupted with a sudden shout of, "Oh, my God!"

Three men charged past Kalek, jumped from the stage, and shouted at those in the aisle: "Move! Move! Move!"

Only Mr. Hill and Kalek remained on stage with Joshua, who now lay face-down, the tuba next to him on the sopping floor. Something slimy and blood-covered thrashed about in the sticky mess. The thing was alive, whatever it was, and unfinished, as if struggling to find its form.

Mr. Hill gaped at Kalek, and the reverend rasped, “What in God’s name is it?”

When Hill failed to answer, Kalek moved closer and looked down at the flopping creature. Dark and glistening wet, the thing whipped its tail, coiling in on itself, using its tail to flop its way toward the pile of toppled chairs and instruments at the back of the stage.

Gripped with revulsion, Kalek charged forward and shoved the podium over on its back to smash the creature underneath. The podium crashed onto the pile.

There was no way of knowing if he’d succeeded in killing the thing.

Shoulders heaving as he gasped for breath, he backed toward the edge of the stage, where he and Mr. Hill watched quietly. A sense of dread overcame Kalek, tightening in his chest. Something moved beneath the fallen chairs, just beyond the toppled podium. He felt his knees give.

A man, naked and lean, stood slowly from the rubble. He was tall, with broad shoulders and long arms that hung at his sides. A sticky, mud-colored fluid covered his body and matted his hair to his head. But his eyes gleamed like pearls from the murk.

Screams rose behind him, accompanied by sounds of struggle as the last of the parish fought their way outside. But Kalek didn’t dare take his eyes off the strange man—if he was a man at all.

A threatening silence fell as Mr. Hill, Kalek, and the stranger stared at each other. Afraid to move for fear that this stranger would strike at him, Kalek stood fixed, drawing in sharp, shallow breaths. Suddenly Mr. Hill jumped over the edge of the stage.

You son of a bitch! Kalek thought as Mr. Hill stormed down the aisle.

The naked, blood-covered man glared at Kalek. After a long moment he tilted his head and said in a deep, resonant tone, “Where am I?”

“This is my church,” Kalek said in a trembling voice. “Who are you?”

The man kicked through the toppled chairs and music stands as he started toward Kalek, eyes glowing from his gory face.

“Wait a minute!” Kalek fumbled over his feet, overcome with panic, and then dropped to his knees. He threw his hands up. “Wait a minute! Don’t hurt me!”

Still the stranger came, kicking through the rubble with ease.

With his heart pounding dangerously, Kalek forced himself into action. He spilled over the stage’s edge, landed on numb, heavy feet, and started up the aisle. The door seemed so far away. Never had using his legs proved more difficult. Halfway up the aisle, his feet became tangled and he fell. Panicked, he threw a quick glance over his shoulder.

The stranger had followed him into the aisle and approached in a slow, easy gait, shoulders rolled back, arms swinging at his sides.

“Please!” the reverend shouted. He clutched the nearest pew and tried to pick himself up. “Stay away from me!”

But then a sharp pain exploded in his chest, sending tendrils of electricity throughout his limbs. Catching his breath, he released the pew and rolled onto his back in the aisle, his eyes fixed on the ceiling. Dark splotches filled his vision.

“Oh, God,” he gasped as the pain in his chest spread hotly throughout his body. His eyes pinched shut and he whispered, “Oh, God . . . oh, God!”

Distantly, he became aware of the stranger squatting over him, his knees planted on either side of his hips. He didn’t know what the stranger was doing to him, nor did he care, not even the fire that blazed in his chest mattered. But then the stranger clamped his hands over Kalek’s ears. Hearing his last ragged breaths escape his lungs, Kalek gazed up at the face that hovered above him. There was nothing to be afraid of now. The worst was over; even now, the pain was subsiding, like a calming tide against the ocean shore. *Yes, just like the ocean.*

Oddly, from the hands cupping his ears, Kalek heard the ocean, the heavy crash of the water against the sand, the rush and hiss of the foam as the waves retreated. The image was calming, and he decided to let go. After

all, Judith would be there, waiting for him. He would go to that ocean, where pain would not follow. No more work to be done. Only rest and dreams.

Even now, a welcoming and familiar light replaced the darkness, and faintly he heard wind chimes, an angel singing. Celestial harmony. But then the light went away.

His eyes fluttered open and he met the gaze of the stranger.

“Not yet, old man,” said the man in his baritone voice. “I need you.”

Somewhere far away, so deep that it seemed to come from outside the church, Kalek heard the sluggish thud of his heart. “No,” he whispered. He closed his eyes again, searching for that inward light. “Let me die.”

But there it was again, another beat. And another.

The stranger’s teeth shined through the murk on his face. “That’s it. Breathe.”

Warmth flowed in waves from the stranger’s hands and into Kalek’s ears, then his entire body. His heart lurched triumphantly in his chest; he felt blood surge through his arteries. Shuddering, he drew a ragged breath and looked up into the stranger’s face. “What are you?”

Someone called from the doorway. Then Mr. Hill marched down the aisle toward them with several men following.

“You get off of him!” Mr. Hill shouted.

The stranger rose slowly to face them.

Kalek rolled onto his side and saw the baseball bat in Mr. Hill’s hand. “No, it’s okay!” he called out, then added tenderly, “He spared my life.”

The men approached cautiously, all except Mr. Hill, who suddenly spotted his boy lying face down onstage and rushed to help him. It was Ron Harrell, a man Kalek had known for nearly twenty years, who came and helped Kalek to his feet. The reverend wobbled on shaky knees but found his balance. He felt only the slightest pain in his chest. His shirt was drenched in sweat and blood.

“Reverend Kalek?” asked Ron, staring in white-faced horror at the blood-covered stranger standing in the aisle with them. “What’s happening here?”

“A miracle,” Kalek said, without looking away from the stranger. There were shouts at the chapel entrance, where several men had taken it upon themselves to bar the door and keep out those who wanted to come back

inside and have a look for themselves. Kalek was grateful for this. He wanted everyone to go away and leave him alone. This was his miracle. His music had caused this to happen. And this stranger had spared his life. Onstage, Mr. Hill helped Joshua to his feet. The boy looked shaken, his eyes wide with grief, his face cast in a sickly pallor as he looked at the man to whom he'd given birth. The reverend followed his gaze and trembled with awe.

God did indeed work in mysterious ways.

Chapter 1

It was nine-fifteen p.m., March 5, 2013. Cameron Blake was already twenty minutes late when he stepped into the Reef, a small seafood restaurant on the corner of Third and Schooner near San Diego's historic Gaslamp Quarter.

He didn't see Barbara Hughes in the dimly lit waiting area, and when he moved toward the dining area, a pretty blond hostess with a diamond stud in her left nostril stopped him with an overly friendly, "Looking for someone?"

But Cameron had already spotted Barbara, sitting alone at a corner table with a martini, trying to catch his attention by waving a hand in the air. Cameron thanked the hostess and stepped into the maze of tables, making his way to the back of the restaurant. With its dim lights and brick walls, the ambiance of an underwater cavern, it was hard to see around the Reef. Barbara's eyes glittered as he approached, but she kept her seat when he reached the table. It was an obvious show of power, as well as a typical gesture on her part, and he smiled to himself. She was a passionate businesswoman, brazen and fiercely good at her job, but she was a little ridiculous in her ways too. She couldn't take a piss without first considering a desired outcome. After working with her for the past five years, he'd become all too aware of her little flaws. She seemed oblivious that her approach was often too strong. If she wanted something from you, she'd get you in a chokehold and wouldn't let go.

"Hey, Barb, great to see you," he said with an even grin. "Sorry I'm late. Parking around here's a pain in the ass."

"No, no," Barbara retorted, shaking her head. "Honest to God, I'm glad I

had a moment to myself. I've been so busy lately. And stressed. Besides, this place is cozy."

He nodded, knowing how she hated waiting and how she tracked each minute like a miser counted pennies. As he eased into the chair across from her, he couldn't help but notice that she looked a little more worn than usual. It was understandable, given that she was beyond the mid-forty age range, and smoking two packs a day wasn't helping her any. Still, she had a pretty face, and her striking green eyes still gave her a certain appeal, and she always dressed to impress. Seeing her wearing a formal jacket and skirt made Cameron wish he'd put on something a little nicer than a dinner jacket and a pair of blue jeans.

"I'm glad you came on such short notice," she said. "I really need to talk to you about something."

"So, how's life?" he said with a playful smile. It was a ruse, of course. He knew how Barbara hated small talk, but he hated jumping right to business even more. Besides, this was his turf, and if she wanted his business, she had to play his game.

With a knowing twinkle in her eye, she planted her elbows on the table and rested her chin on her entwined fingers. This was her attempt at appearing relaxed, but he noticed the tension in her muscles and the rigid angle of her back. She was trying at least.

"Oh, I'm good," she said with an uncomfortable smile. "Just busy. You know how it is."

The waitress appeared, bringing with her menus and a rundown of the evening special. Cameron thanked her and sent her away with an order of martinis—one for him and another for Barbara. He sat back and looked at her with a quiet smile.

She blushed a little and looked down, stirring the dregs of her drink with a skewered olive. "It is wonderful to see you, Cameron," she said quietly. "You look different somehow."

"Well, it's good to see you too," he said. "If I may say so, you look better than ever."

"Yes, you may say so," she said, eyes narrowing. "But I probably won't believe you. I've been up for days, and I quit smoking two weeks ago. I'm

ready to strangle someone. Anyhow, I'll take the compliment." She sat back and regarded him. "Cameron, I came here on behalf of the studio to ask for a favor."

"What kind of favor are we talking about?"

"SilverReel Studios is in a heap of trouble," she said.

He opened his mouth to speak just as the waitress came back with their drinks. They waited quietly for her to leave before picking up the conversation.

"So what's the problem?" Cameron asked as he sipped his martini.

"*American Sweethearts* is our problem. Janna Cather is our problem."

His brow arched. This was record timing. She'd plunged headfirst into business, and they hadn't even ordered hors d'oeuvres. She had every reason to act this way. He knew all about the studio's recent crisis, and as an executive agent for SilverReel Studios, Barbara served as crisis control, which meant that she'd been hammered hard by the previous week's news.

"I take it Cather's arrest on Friday is making your job difficult?" he said with a little smile.

"You bet your ass it is." At the mention of Cather's arrest, all the stress and exhaustion of the situation manifested in Barbara's eyes. Her smile quivered—a smile so accustomed to her face that it had become a kind of permanent fixture there, responsible for every crease and fold around her eyes and mouth, and so it almost startled him to see it disappear. She put on another five years on the spot. "The studio is bracing itself for a deathblow to the ratings."

Janna Cather's arrest had surprised everyone. Cather had one of those innocent, made-for-Disney faces. In fact, she'd worked for Disney for the first decade of her life before landing a leading role with *Sweethearts*. So when an L.A. police officer had discovered a small vial of cocaine in Cather's glove box after pulling her over for reckless driving, the media had had a holiday. The networks relentlessly exploited Cather's arrest. Every tabloid along every grocery checkout line exhibited Cather's bewildered, mascara-streaked face. Here was the twenty-something beauty that *People* magazine had only a year earlier named America's "little princess," reduced to a befuddled, intoxicated, and sadly misguided young woman.

"I always heard that no news is the only bad news," he returned with a crooked smile.

"Don't believe everything you hear." Barbara finished her martini. She paused and dropped her gaze. "Anyhow, the studio is worried. We've put too much into the show to lose our audience, so we want to do something different—give the show a makeover and try to recapture its earlier energy. And that's where you come in. We want you to write the score." With her hands folded beneath her chin, she once again fixed him with a penetrating gaze. "I'm sure you understand the value of this opportunity. We're hoping you can give us something like you wrote before."

With an uncertain nod, Cameron sat back in his chair and looked at her. He didn't know if he could do it again. He'd started working for SilverReel in early 2007, writing the score for a similar drama entitled *The Real Me*. The studio had gambled big with that one and they'd nearly lost their standings. The show's ratings had nose-dived by the time Cameron came on board. He had written a new score that became an immediate hit, broadcast over the speakers of every elevator in North America. The show's ratings had subsequently skyrocketed, and whether Cameron's work had anything to do with the show's success became irrelevant to the studio. They'd treated him like a hero.

"Cameron, we want you to come out to L.A. and get a feel for the show. Three weeks tops." Her gaze dropped and she added, "No pressure."

He knew better than that. No pressure meant *You are our last hope*. But he'd established a strong relationship with SilverReel, and a little massaging never hurt. Neither did having friends with real Hollywood clout, even if it did mean selling his soul to the highest bidder.

But who was he kidding? He'd financed that deal a long time ago.

"You know I've quit composing, Barbara," he said in a low voice. Not very convincing. "We talked about this already."

"I know that, Cameron. I know that. But we need you. I need you. Just this one last time."

"Barbara," he said, shaking his head. "I . . ."

She stopped him with a wave of her hand. "A few weeks. That's all I'm asking. Just come out and watch. You don't have to write a thing."

With a heavy sigh, he sank back into his chair. He knew that he'd say yes—that he'd break his promise to himself. He could pull it off one last time. Besides, the studio would pay him well. "I'll think about it," he said finally. "But if I agree to do this, you'll owe me big time."

Her smile returned, and she leaned forward and touched his hand. "I knew I could count on you. I just knew it."



She went home with him after dinner. They shared drinks on the veranda overlooking the ocean. Moonlight shimmered on dark waters. Afterwards, they stumbled to the bedroom and fooled around without saying much. The sex was sufficient. Cameron felt indifferent about her, and he suspected she felt the same. They'd slept together three or four times over the past few years, and they both regretted it every time. There were never calls in between.

As they lay naked and distant from each other in the ruffled bed sheets, sharing one of her Newport menthols (apparently her idea of quitting smoking had nothing to do with smoking after sex), she asked him, "Why do you do this to yourself? You obviously don't like me. I don't know if you really like anything."

"I suppose I could ask you the same."

She hesitated and said quietly, "Why did you quit composing for SilverReel?"

He watched the drifts of smoke moving slowly over his bed through shafts of moonlight and said in a flat voice, "Because it was killing me."

She said nothing for a long while, then snuffed the cigarette into the ashtray, got out of bed, and dressed. "You know," she said, stopping at the door to look back at him. "You've changed. I feel sorry for you."

He said nothing in return, and she left.



A limousine fetched Cameron on Monday morning the following week, and by noon he was on the set of *American Sweethearts*, located within a Universal Studios back lot. He spent several hours shuffling aimlessly through the

streets of a replicated West Coast suburb. Colorful bungalows, white picket fences, and rich green lawns. He felt eerily disconnected and blamed it on the fact that all these homes were fakes, cheerful facades, empty on the inside. He could relate.

Though he'd never seen *American Sweethearts*, he recognized a handful of actors. Cather was not among them. When the tapings began, he watched from the sidelines, gathering a feel for the show. He watched the actors and actresses deliver humorous, sometimes even clever, dialogue, and this proved mildly entertaining for the first day or so.

He left that evening with a melody in mind and retired to his hotel room. The studio had spared no expense. The suite was equipped with antique furniture and a fireplace, random books on the shelves, a baby grand Baldwin in the corner. He went to the bar and poured himself a glass of Glenfiddich, then walked out onto the patio and into the cool night air. He watched the headlights of cars rushing along the boulevard beneath him.

When he went inside and sat at the piano, his mind went numb. He couldn't remember the melody he'd thought of. He couldn't think of anything new. His frustration became a kind of panic. For hours he played around with various tunes until he became too tired and too drunk to go on.

In the morning he started all over with the frustrations. Every melody proved lifeless, flighty. Something was missing.



Thursday afternoon, *Sweetheart's* director Edmond Towers invited Cameron for lunch at Riso's Café, where they sat at a small table on an outside veranda facing Hollywood Boulevard. As the sun blazed and a warm breeze blew the foam from their beers, Towers yammered on about the direction he wanted Cameron to take with the score. Towers, an eccentric old man who wore a ball cap and sunglasses big enough to hide most of his face, talked frantically, never letting up for a moment. Cameron watched him with mild intrigue, nodding occasionally, not really listening at all. By twenty

minutes into their conversation, Cameron felt like he'd raced a hundred-yard dash.

"So you got something in mind yet?" Towers asked with a mischievous grin. "Yeah, I bet you do."

Cameron didn't have the heart or the balls to tell him that he hadn't written a single worthwhile note. "Yeah. I'm working with a few ideas."

"Well, I know your work, Blake," Towers said. "You've done it before. This show needs something spectacular. Got it? That's what it needs. Nothing less than spectacular."



It was dark when Cameron returned to his swanky hotel room. As usual, he first poured himself a drink from the bar and finished it on the balcony. Then he once again went to the piano, an impotent lover determined to prove his manhood. With sweat gathering along his upper lip, he stared at the glossy keys.

This is the last time, he promised himself. The last goddamn time.

He thought about what he'd said to Barbara, likening this sort of work to slow suicide. Now, sitting at the piano, the sullen mood stole over him once more. Waves of dark despair crashed against his mind. Blood thudded in his ears.

Come on, he hissed at himself. He rubbed his temples. Think of something for Christ's sake!

Tower's voice came at him, thin and snakelike: "Spectacular."

Cameron drank from the bottle and then ran his fingers along the keys. He played a few notes. Nothing came at first, but then he stumbled over a melody. A flash of inspiration, like something he'd dreamed. He explored the tune, teasing the idea out from his mind, allowing it to take form, note by note.

Around two in the morning, he stumbled away from the piano. He sat on the sofa and called Barbara. The phone rang a dozen times before she picked up.

"Who is this?" she said groggily.

“I think Christ said it best: ‘It is finished.’”

“Cameron? Is that you?”

“I’ll leave it at your office tomorrow on the way out. I’m going home.” He hung up, then stared at the notepad on which he’d written his newest work. *It is shit*, he thought. *Contrived and phoned-in, but the studio will love it anyway.* So why did he feel even worse for writing the thing?

That’s how you do it, he thought as he stumbled toward the bedroom, the scotch making his head spin. *That’s how you give yourself away. One note at a time.*

He sprawled onto the bed, still wearing his jeans and t-shirt, and for a while he stared up at the ceiling with his arms spread out at his sides. His thoughts turned to an article written about him five years earlier in *Music Makers Magazine*. Entitled “Hollywood’s Genius Tone Poet,” the magazine had portrayed him as some kind of magician with a special gift for composing pitch-perfect scores for TV dramas. That same article had alluded to a far less disillusioned Cameron Blake, an artist with greater aspirations.

What the hell happened to that guy?

As the hour grew late, his thoughts darkened and festered, and he slipped into dreams.



Sunday, July 22, 1984. Cameron awoke to the hum of tires and sat up, finding himself in the backseat of the family Toyota. The sleepy blue light of a burgeoning dawn filled the windows. His dad was driving. Mom was in the passenger seat. Brent, his older brother, snored lightly in the seat next to him. Music whispered from the radio.

Rubbing his eyes, he wriggled out of his blanket, wondering how he’d gotten there. Sometime during the night, someone had carried him to the car, and now they were far from home. He looked out the window as they drove past quiet shops with dark windows, none of them familiar. Nothing stirred in the sullen light. The hour seemed somehow sacred, even to a boy of six. Blinking, too tired to ask questions, he started to drift back to sleep when a hand fell on his knee and squeezed. He opened his eyes and met his

mother's gaze. She looked back at him from her seat, wearing a smile with down-turned corners.

"It's going to be okay, Cameron," she said in a soft whisper. "You just wait and see. God has something special planned for you." Tears glimmered in her eyes.

"Where are we going?" he asked.

Her brow shadowed over, and she looked at his dad, hopeful he would help her explain. It didn't take long before his father, Gar, got the hint. He spoke without taking his eyes from the road.

"You and Brent are going to Grandma Margie's for the summer," he said. Only then did his gaze break from the road to find Cameron in the rearview mirror. "You guys are going to have loads of fun. You can search for seashells on the Cape and . . . all sorts of stuff."

Cameron blinked, confused. No one had told him about this, and he felt certain it had something to do with the night before, when he'd woken to someone shouting. Worried, he had climbed out of bed and tried to wake Brent, but his big brother had only swatted him away. When sobs from the other room had grown louder, Cameron had decided to see for himself and had gone out into the hallway. At the doorway to the living room, he'd hesitated, watching his dad pace the room. His mother was there, too, curled up on the sofa with her legs folded beneath her. His parents hadn't seen him, and so he'd waited and listened.

"How could this happen, Gar?" his mother had said in a choked voice. "What about the kids? What will they do without me?"

"If it comes to that, then I'll take care of them," his father had returned. "But that's not going to happen."

"But you don't know that!"

"Gail," his father had said in a low, careful voice, "Not so loud. You'll wake the kids. I know you're upset but—"

"Upset? *Upset?* Gar, I'm scared to death."

Just then Cameron's mother had noticed him. She'd flinched, embarrassed, and tried to wipe the tears from her eyes. "Oh, hi, baby," she'd said, trying to smile. "What are you doing out of bed?"

"What's wrong?" he'd muttered just as his father had hurried over,

scooped him into his arms, then carried him back to the bedroom. Tucking him beneath the covers, his father had told him, “Nothing’s wrong, Cam. Now, no more getting up tonight, huh, kiddo?”

That was all he remembered. Now they were in a car, racing to Grandma Margie’s house, and nothing made sense. But one thing was certain: his father had lied to him. Something was wrong. His mom had a sickly smell about her, a smell that had nothing to do with his nose. Cameron sat back in his seat and everything—the quiet buzz of the tires beneath him, the dark giving way to light, his mother’s knowing expression—came into focus.

“Mom?” Cameron asked. “Are you going to die?”

A stunned silence followed. His mother dropped her eyes, as if slapped, and after a moment, she glanced at Gar, but he never took his eyes from the road. In the seat next to Cameron, Brent sat up, his blond hair a messy haystack on his head, but Cameron never took his eyes from his mother’s face, and his thudding heart counted out the seconds.

Finally, his mother cleared her throat and said, “Cam, Momma’s sick.”

There was a lump in his throat that he couldn’t swallow down. “What do you mean, ‘sick?’” he asked thinly.

“Mommy’s going to the hospital,” his father interjected, keeping his eyes fixed on the road. “That’s why you and Brent are going to stay at Grandma’s house. She’s going to look after you two while we get Mommy fixed.”

Cameron looked at his brother, who stared back at him with dark, thoughtful eyes, and suddenly it all made sense. Brent already knew. They’d all kept it a secret from him. Somehow this only made it worse, more frightening, and bands of pressure suddenly clenched about his stomach, driving the air from his lungs.

“Mom? I don’t want you to die!”

“I don’t want that either, baby,” she said softly and reached for him, and then the passenger window exploded in a bone-jarring collision.

Blindsided by another vehicle, the Toyota spun in circles before it tumbled off an embankment. Cameron struck the door, then the ceiling, and then the dash.

It happened so quickly, so violently, that he couldn’t understand why gravity had lost hold of him. After an eternity, when the car rolled to a stop

at the bottom of a ditch, he felt sick, and the world had turned upside down. Somehow, his mother hung suspended in the air above him, still belted to her seat, arms dangling at her sides, hands reaching out to him. Her eyes bulged with a look of surprise. Blood dribbled from the corners of her mouth and spattered like warm syrup on Cameron's forehead.

The shock hit him hard. He closed his eyes and became suddenly buoyant. He rose up, slowly at first, then faster, until he shot like a bullet into the darkness. Soon he saw a single star, a great blossoming light, and as he drew closer, he heard the light singing in waves of glassy whirs that somehow carried a melody. The music seemed as natural as a whale song but unlike anything he'd ever heard. If he were old enough, he would say it transcended music, especially in the way it swirled about him and spilled through him like water from a cool mountain spring.

And even more bewildering, the music was in some ways conscious. It was alive—alive and singing.



Cameron woke with a start and rolled off the bed, crashing against the hardwood floor of his hotel room. His head throbbed and a cottony film coated his tongue and the roof of his mouth. For a few moments, lying on his stomach, he drew shuddering lungfuls of air, relieved that it had only been a dream.

Just a dream. Fragments of it came back to him. He could almost hear its strange music, angelic and incomprehensible.

Hurry, he told himself. Write it down. Quick!

Driven by fierce determination, he crawled to the coffee table and found his leather satchel on the floor near the sofa. He turned it over and dumped out its contents, then found his journal amidst a splash of papers. Sitting with his back against a chair and his knees drawn, he opened the journal to a clean page and started to write. Already the memory was growing faint. Still, he held the tiny pencil in a death grip and scribbled frantically, allowing the content of his dream to flow through him. As always, it was like channeling a faint signal; he barely got anything down before the music began to fade.

He scratched a few more notes, then tossed the journal across the room in frustration. It was always the same. Always so close, but then gone, like a ghost.

Now his head felt like it would crack open. He buried his face in his hands and waited for it to pass. When it finally did, he stood and stumbled over to the telephone and dialed the lobby. The concierge answered and Cameron asked him to arrange for a cab.

By ten a.m., he was heading back to San Diego.