

The Tone Poet

By Mark Rickert



Alpharetta, Georgia

The Tone Poet

© 2014 Mark Rickert. All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, digital, photocopying, or recording, except for the inclusion in a review, without permission in writing from the publisher.

This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, names, incidents, organizations, and dialogue in this novel are either the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

Published in the United States by BQB Publishing
(Boutique of Quality Books Publishing Company)
www.bqbpublishing.com

Printed in the United States of America

978-1-939371-42-3 (p)

978-1-939371-51-5 (h)

978-1-939371-43-0 (e)

Library of Congress Control Number: 2014935909

Book design by Robin Krauss, www.bookformatters.com

Cover design by Dave Grauel, davidgrauel.com

Dedication

I dedicate this book to my parents, Arnold and Pamela, and my brothers, Matthew and Andrew; the roots of this book began with you guys, and so it's only fair to include you. Also, this is for my wife Cathi and our daughter Rowan. Thanks to my editor, Kim Fout, who helped me bang this thing into shape. Finally, to Stan Cooper, aka Stanager, who pried the novel from my hands and became my biggest supporter—I owe you one, Stan.

Foreword

I wanted to write horror stories at a very young age. I mostly blame my father for this. He hoarded paperback novels, and even turned the garage into a kind of library with walls packed with pulp fiction novels written by Stephen King, H.P. Lovecraft, and Peter Straub. He also hung model spaceships by fish wire from the ceiling and nailed movie posters to the wall—posters like *Alien* and *A Clockwork Orange*. I spent a lot of time in that room, sifting through floppy-eared novels before I could even read, and when I finally got the knack of it, my dad encouraged me and my brothers by bribing us—he paid us a buck for every novel we got through. Looking back, I think the first dollar I ever pocketed was earned from reading a book.

But let's face it. Most kids start off with fanciful dreams, and I think most kids eventually let them go, like a snake shedding its skin. That's probably the norm. But that's not my story. I didn't shed the skin so much as cling to it out of desperation.

When I was maybe fourteen years old, I got hooked on playing with fire. I'd take my toys outside and torch them because it made for grand special effects. Eventually, I got more creative with my experiments. Aerosol cans became flamethrowers; Dad's English Leather cologne became an agent for handheld fireballs. I'd even douse my desktop with rubbing alcohol, light it, and watch the liquid combust into seemingly harmless flames.

In retrospect, it never occurred to me that my pyro-playtime correlated with my parents' divorce, with my mother's eating disorder, or with my childhood coming to an end.

One day, I skipped school to play with fire. I conducted my experiments in the library, using a corner desk as a makeshift lab table. With rubbing alcohol and matches, I sought to unravel the secrets of fire . . . until I found myself standing there with my arm in flames. *Woosh*. I slapped at the flames with a dishrag, but then it caught fire too. I panicked. I jerked the backdoor open and threw the flaming rag outside, and then I got busy putting out my arm. Can anyone say drop and roll? In the shaky aftermath, I went to the bathroom and washed up, amazed at my luck, having escaped without burning myself to death. But in the meantime I'd forgotten all about the flaming dishrag, and by the time I returned to the library, a bigger fire had started outside, and now flames were licking up through the gaps around the backdoor. The drop ceiling tile caught fire. I tried to stop it—I went and filled a jug with water and splashed at the flames—but it was too late. The fire was spreading fast and melting plastic was falling all around me.

From that point, it was all about survival. I grabbed my dog and ran outside, and from the front lawn, I watched smoke coughing up from the rooftop. In moments there were sirens, and soon a couple of fire trucks came squeezing down our narrow street. Firemen spilled out of those trucks and squirted water all over the house until the flames went out.

The fire destroyed everything—my clothes, my books, my toys—and worse, it destroyed everything my brothers owned too. And everything my parents owned. And it gets worse. We didn't have home insurance. My dad told me this on the front lawn while the house was still smoldering. Of course, this wasn't my fault—this was my dad's responsibility—but try telling that to a fourteen-year-old kid who just burned his house down; it wouldn't matter to him, and it certainly didn't matter to me. I shouldered the blame for that too. I shouldered the blame for everything.

Obviously, my family suffered a traumatic blow. I come from a loving household, but the family quilt had come unraveled long before I set fire to that house. The fire was only an outcome of darker undercurrents; an outward expression of a dysfunctional family in the grip of eating disorders, drug addiction, and alcoholism. In the following years, I wanted to end my life. I was hurting inside, and no one thought to ask me how I was doing. Eventually I came up with a plan to rectify my screw up. I would jump off the

Briley Parkway Bridge and end it all. I already knew how to access the catwalk along the underbelly of graffiti-painted trestles. This would be a fitting and even romantic finale to my broken life.

I kicked around this idea for the next two years, all the while working up the nerve to go through with it, and by sixteen the idea was just sort of part of me. Then one day while walking to meet a friend, I was struck with a marvelous idea. What if, instead of throwing myself off a bridge, I went after my dream and committed my life to becoming a writer? The idea was so good that I had to sit down on the side of the road. I'd always known, even as a kid, that the hope of becoming a novelist was farfetched. But now what did I have to lose? I had nothing. Absolutely nothing.

So I made a pact with myself. I promised to devote my life to writing, and in return, I would get on with my life and give up this idea of doing away with myself. The parts of my fractured self shook hands, and from that moment on I had purpose, and I'm fairly certain it saved my life. At the least, it kept me going.

That was a long time ago. Even so I never forgot my agreement. I wrote short stories for the next few years but nothing much came of it. I went to college and earned a bachelor's in English. At twenty-three, I joined the Army Reserve as a photo-journalist. When I was called to duty in 2003, I started writing my first novel in Baghdad, Iraq. I wrote for two hours each day: not much, but it got me through that long year. Of course, the reality of writing proved much more difficult than the dream of writing, and it took me another nine years of rewriting and restructuring before I finished my first novel, *The Tone Poet*.

In many ways, it was this novel that got me out of that mess, and I think back to my dad's library, with all those bookshelves bending beneath the weight of paperbacks, and I can't help but wonder, would my book have a place on those shelves? I think so. In fact I'm sure of it.

—Mark Rickert
May 11, 2013

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

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 nine 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 seven-fifteen p.m., March 5, 2013. Cameron Blake was already fifteen 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 poured another scotch, took a heavy gulp, 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.

Chapter 2

It was the fourth day in May, and Cameron had spent most of his day in the cramped control room at one of SilverReel Studios' sound stages. Piles of complex-looking sound equipment were heaped near the walls, while cables snaked across the floor. Allen Filtzer, the desperately overweight sound engineer, sat at the soundboard. He was wearing his big headphones, his hands fluttering over the switches as he watched the small orchestra on the other side of the window. Despite the noise, Cameron, sitting back on his uncomfortable chair, found himself nodding off. This was his third trip to L.A. in the past month, and he'd long ago passed the Point of No Concern.

Lethargic, his eyes settled on the orchestra in the adjacent room behind the glass like fish in an aquarium, only this aquarium was dark, save for the little lights hovering over their music stands and a large movie screen that hung on the far wall showing scenes from *American Sweethearts*. Somehow the images and the music were supposed to work together. In his opinion, it looked and sounded too obvious—too heavy-handed—but what did he care? No one else seemed to.

John Bhorman, the conductor, a big man with a salt-and-pepper beard and a large pair of headphones cupped to the sides of his head, stood on a raised wooden platform at the center of the cluster of musicians. Having worked with him several times in the past, Cameron knew Bhorman was great when he wanted to be and lousy when he didn't care for the project

at hand. Today was one of those latter days. Bhorman walked the orchestra through the score with almost flippant strokes of his baton, as if he despised the music as much as Cameron did.

Cameron's ear detected an imperfection. One of the musicians had fallen out of rhythm, and Bhorman heard it too. The large man suddenly threw his hands up and shouted, "No! No! No!"

Cameron rubbed his face in frustration. *Christ Jesus. This is never going to end.*

Three times now Bhorman had stopped the recording. It wasn't the musicians' fault. They were unprepared. Rushed. And each time Bhorman shouted at them, Cameron shrank into his chair, knowing that the scathing insults were in some way directed toward him.

"What the hell?" Filzer muttered to himself as he leaned his massive body back in his chair. "I wish he'd quit doing that." He flipped the lights on, causing the musicians, all of them dressed in blue jeans and t-shirts like a bunch of hipsters, to squint and squirm in their seats.

Among them, Bhorman rubbed his brow and flapped the sheet music at them. "Are we reading the same music?" After a moment, he turned and looked at Filzer through the window. "Sorry about that, Allen," he said with a shrug. "It wasn't working for me."

"Whatever you say, John," Filzer said into his microphone. "You want to break for lunch?"

"I think that'd be terrific."

"That's fine. Let's break until one." Filzer jabbed another button and turned around, facing Cameron. "I sure as hell wish he'd let me decide what sounds right or not. Fuck it. I'm ready to eat. You hungry?"

Cameron sat up and rubbed his eyes. "Not really. I think I might hang back for a while."

"Have it your way, but there's a café up the road that makes a mean hamburger."

"I'll pass."

Filzer didn't press any further as he collected his things. Moments later Bhorman stepped inside with a frustrated expression. "You guys catching lunch?"

Once again Cameron turned down the offer. “Not much of an appetite,” he insisted.

Bhorman sighed heavily. “I know it’s going rough today. The guys didn’t get much time to rehearse.”

“Yeah, I know that, John,” said Cameron with an apologetic smile. He knew how the studio bullied them around and he felt partially responsible. Barbara had been in a panic ever since the day she’d called to say how much the studio liked the piece, how they wanted to go ahead and record it, and how they wanted Cameron to oversee the project. He had immediately resisted, pointing out that Bhorman hadn’t had the score for more than a week and that the studio was rushing things. Barbara had sympathized, but the studio didn’t care. They wanted their score, and that was that.

Cameron got out of his chair and clapped Bhorman on the arm. “You’re doing a hell of a job.” He looked at Filzer. “Both of you.”

Bhorman shrugged, smiling crookedly. “Well, we’re trying.”

The two men exited the small room, leaving Cameron to himself. Alone with his thoughts, he sank into his seat, his arms folded over his chest, wondering what had gone wrong, and not just with the score, but with his whole useless life.

Twenty minutes had passed when a man wearing a black suit entered the stage room, unaware that Cameron watched him from the window of the neighboring room. Cameron started to get up but hesitated. There was something decidedly striking about the stranger. He was tall, dignified, with a strong jaw and handsome features, a face sketched with creases. His white hair formed a widow’s peak above a prominent brow, and he had eyes that sparkled like chips of blue ice.

The man turned toward the window and met Cameron’s gaze.

Startled, Cameron raised a hand in a half-hearted wave, hoping to mask his embarrassment. The man grinned and returned the gesture, then crossed the stage and let himself into the small control room.

“Hello,” he said. “I’m looking for Cameron Blake. Do you know him?” There was a trace of a British accent underscoring the man’s voice, like something buried and forgotten but nonetheless leaving an impression.

“You found him.”

The man's brow arched in surprise. "Ah! Mr. Blake. I apologize for not recognizing you sooner. Do you mind if I have a moment of your time?"

Cameron didn't answer right away. He didn't want to chat. He felt tired and tangled up inside, but what choice did he have? For all he knew the guy owned SilverReel. "Yeah, that's fine." He waved to the chairs. "Have a seat."

The man took a seat, folded his legs neatly, and clasped his hands over his knee. Cameron sat on the sofa across from him.

"I'm so glad to have finally tracked you down," said the man. "Someone recently brought this to my attention. I started searching for you the moment I read the article." He held up a worn copy of *Music Makers Magazine*.

The February 2008 issue. Cameron knew it well enough. He had a whole box of them at home in his attic.

"You have a remarkable story," said the man.

"Thanks," said Cameron, still trying to figure out who he was talking to. "Do you work with SilverReel?"

"No. My name is Leonin Bloom. I'm a composer for a chamber orchestra. Very small." The man's eyes beamed when he revealed this.

Cameron raised an eyebrow. Not what he expected. So this guy was just wasting his time. "Oh. Right on," he said, feigning interest. "Here in L.A.?"

"No. Tennessee. I'm quite sure you wouldn't know of us. We keep a low profile."

"I see."

"I wanted to talk about your music. Particularly the piece entitled 'Hear After.' It is a remarkably inspired work."

Cameron shifted in his seat. That particular work was a reminder of aspirations he'd given up on a long time ago.

"You are a truly gifted composer," Bloom went on. "But I fear you are wasting your talent with this television studio."

Cameron frowned without completely dropping his smile. For a moment, he didn't know what to say. "Wait . . . What are we talking about, again?"

Bloom's eyes narrowed. "What happened to that man I read about—the man with a passionate perspective of his music and of his art? What has become of Cameron Blake?"

“Listen. If you came just to insult me, then you succeeded. Now I think you better get out of here before I call security.”

Bloom was unaffected. “First, I must know: Why have you chosen to abandon your artistic pursuits?”

“I haven’t,” Cameron retorted flatly.

“But you have. You are pandering your art.”

“I’m not pandering,” Cameron growled. “Did you see the sign out front? It says SilverReel Studios. One of the biggest television studios in the world. They pay me a shitload for my work.”

“I’m sure,” said the man, his grin patronizing.

Grinding his teeth, Cameron stood up and handed back the magazine. “You know what? I just remembered something. I gotta go. But it’s been real nice talking to you.”

Making no move to get up himself, the conductor fluttered through the pages of the magazine until he found a large black and white studio shot of Cameron. “You know, Mr. Blake, you relayed a remarkable story in this article. When I discovered that you based ‘Hear After’ on a near-death experience . . . well, I was extremely eager to hear it. When I had a listen, I knew you were a true artist.”

“Well, I’m glad you liked it.” Trembling with anger, Cameron made a move to leave, but then hesitated at the door when the man spoke again.

“You are not the only one who has heard the music from the Other Side. Did you know that? Nor are you the first to try to capture it on paper. I should know; I’ve spent my entire life trying to capture it.”

Cameron’s sneakers squeaked as he spun around. Goosebumps rippled down his arms. “Who the hell are you?”

The man turned slightly in his chair and once again smiled at him. “Please. Hear what I have to say.”

Reluctantly, Cameron returned to his chair, feeling both curious and skeptical. The conductor wanted something from him, that much was obvious. Still, Bloom seemed like a man who knew things.

“Few people in this world have heard the Astral Music,” the man continued. “Fewer have done so well to mimic it. Among them, you have come the closest.”

As if for the first time, Cameron looked at the stranger's stern face, composed of sharp angles and hard lines. His deep-set eyes suggested a fierce intelligence.

"You have a remarkable gift, Mr. Blake. You have the ability to bring the Astral Music into physical interpretations. But I'm afraid you've squandered this talent." He looked up and made a sweeping gesture at the surrounding studio. "This is no place for an artist of your caliber. You've whored out your talents. You must know that you are capable of doing so much more. That is why I am here—to save you from yourself."

Here it comes, thought Cameron. The catch. "How?"

"I want to help you continue your work. Just think of what it would mean to the world if you captured the music from the Other Side and shaped it into a symphony. You came close with 'Hear After.' But I can take you further."

Cameron smiled bitterly. "This is some kind of joke, isn't it?"

"No, not a joke." Bloom reached into his coat and produced a card and handed it to Cameron. "Of course, you will need to come to Holloway and prepare to stay for a while. It will take some time to do this. I will pay you for your trouble. How does a hundred thousand dollars sound?"

Tell him no! the voice in his head shouted. *Goddamn it. Tell him no!*

Before Cameron answered, Bloom stood and brushed the wrinkles from his jacket. "Think it over. Call me when you are ready to come and visit. My contact information is on the card."

Bloom didn't wait for a response. He walked to the door and let himself out. With the control room to himself, Cameron looked at the card. In basic black and white letters were the words: *Maestro Leonin Bloom, conductor of Holloway Symphony Orchestra*. There was also an address and phone number.



Three months passed without Cameron giving another thought to the man who had managed to insult him and praise him in the same conversation.

He grew increasingly restless in the summer months. He avoided his friends and ignored Barbara's phone calls. His piano collected dust because he had no desire to play, and nothing left to write. He spent his days aimlessly

perusing the Gaslamp Quarter's harbors and boutique shops, watching the tourists, drinking beers on the open terraces, engulfing himself in the smell of fried foods and the sounds of live music and snapping awnings. Some days he walked the beaches until his feet hurt and the sinking sun cued him to turn around and go home.

But then one night the dream returned—this time stronger than the last. He'd woken in the middle of the night, sobbing openly in his lonely bed with the dream music echoing in his ears. He'd gotten out his journal and scratched down what he could remember. In the morning he woke and found Bloom's card in a desk drawer next to the phone.

He didn't call the conductor.

It rained through the afternoon. After lunch he threw on a rain jacket and stepped out onto his back porch. Twenty yards out across the bleached sand, dark blue curls of the Pacific crashed into milky froth against the beach. The thrumming waves and the salty breeze calmed his nerves. He drew a deep breath and gazed out toward the horizon, where thunderheads gathered offshore like iron warships poised to attack the bungalows huddled along the coastline. Beyond them, the sun threw off ribbons of pink and orange as it sagged lazily toward the ocean. He loved the ocean, and after spending his youth with his grandmother near Oregon's Cape Lookout after his family's death, he could never get enough of the power of the sea. It was inspiring and mighty, something he liked for writing music, but it hadn't been his biggest inspiration.

He finished his drink and turned his attention to his leather-bound journal. A relic from his undergraduate years at Julliard, the journal was brittle and yellowed at the corners. It held more than fifteen years of random entries. A musicology professor by the name of Dr. David Weis had given him the idea after pulling him aside one day after class. Cameron's grades had been in serious decline after a bout with self-doubt, and Weis wanted more out of him.

"This isn't like you, Cameron," he'd said in his thick German accent. "You are better than this."

Cameron had confessed that he hadn't been sleeping. Nightmares plagued what little rest he did get; his dreams were haunted by strange

music. Dr. Weis suggested that he keep a journal. “Try to write the music. Maybe you’ll learn something about yourself. Maybe the dreams will go away.”

The journal had proven surprisingly effective. The nightmares did go away, but in return, he’d opened doors to deeper caverns of his consciousness, and he’d discovered a secret that his mind had tried desperately to keep: he’d heard this music as a child during a near-death experience.

He opened the journal and surveyed the pages. There were more than forty entries of musical composition. None of it made much sense when played out loud. A strange, new-agey mess. But he’d spent most of his college years obsessed with capturing this dream music—to wrench it from his mind and force it down into the journal’s empty pages. The project had become like chasing his own tail, driving him crazy.

In many ways, this obsession had led to his eventual divorce. He had met Amber Novak at Julliard during his sophomore year. A Polish virtuosa concert pianist, beautiful and hyper-sexual, she’d turned his world upside down. They’d known from the start they shared very different perspectives. Unlike him, Amber was impossibly grounded, suspicious of anything she couldn’t touch or measure, and repelled by organized religion, romantic notions, and pulp fiction. Cameron, on the other hand, remained open to life’s mysteries, especially when it came to love, and so he saw Amber’s hardened sensibilities as something that needed to be challenged, confident their differences would only make their relationship more interesting.

But as the years passed and Cameron spent increasingly more time on his somewhat unconventional pet projects, Amber had become disenchanted with him. She hadn’t trusted what he was doing, even when he’d produced a hit with “Hear After” and made them lots of money. She’d found his music alarming. It bothered her. Eventually, she’d withdrawn from him. Then, after their third year of marriage, she’d asked for a divorce. It was then, in the lonely aftermath, that Cameron had shut the door on his fantasy music. It had already taken up enough of his life. Eventually the dreams had gone.

But now they were coming back, and this worried him.

Thumbing through the pages to this last entry, Cameron studied the last

piece he'd written while working in L.A. on the *American Sweethearts* project. This one looked even stranger than his previous attempts. He ran the tip of his finger along the scratchy symbols, wondering what the music would sound like. *No, I don't care.* With a sigh, he closed the journal and shoved it into the inside pocket of his rain jacket, then went barefooted down the porch steps, determined to walk a few miles before the rain came.

His feet dug into the warm sand as he trudged headlong toward the expanse of blue-gray ocean. At the tide line, he crouched down and rolled his pants up to his knees, then splashed into the foaming water as waves exploded against the shore around him. Standing there, he gazed upward at the underbelly of pastel-colored clouds. For a moment the sun pierced the overcast and doused him with its warmth. Though the sensation was fleeting, it invigorated him, like the tingling pinpricks that signaled the return of sensation to a foot that has fallen asleep.

For a while he waded into the milky foam that fizzed and roiled about his ankles, while the waves beat the sand. When he spotted a handful of seagulls cawing at each other, he made his way back onto the beach to investigate. He scared most of the birds away as he drew near. Through flapping wings he saw a severed tortoise head lying in the sand, surrounded by clumps of brown seaweed. Ropes of muscle and tendon spilled from a hole where the head once connected to its neck. Its eyes, roughly the size of boiled eggs, gaped at Cameron, who stood watching for no other reason than to satisfy a feeling of pertinence. Moments later a seagull hopped closer and plucked out one of its eyes.

He thought of his mother's eyes. She had shared a similar expression that day, long ago, after she'd slammed face-first into the dashboard. Gaping eyes. Horrifyingly empty. So empty that they'd collapsed like stars to form black holes. And they'd nearly drawn him in. And he'd almost gone.

Something caught his eye further up the coast beyond the tortoise head. Drifting toward him was a lone figure, a thin silhouette, wearing a black poncho that flailed and flapped about him like batwings.

Wiping his face with the back of his hand, Cameron turned and started back along the coastline toward his home. The wind met him head on. His jacket snapped violently about him, his hair fluttered in his eyes. When he

threw a glance over his shoulder, he found the stranger following, hurrying now, waving a frantic hand at him. A muffled voice reached him across the distance.

“Something to show you!”

Cameron lowered his head into the wind and walked faster, kicking up the sand with his feet, not wanting to talk with anyone, wanting only to be alone with his thoughts. Footfalls thudded behind him.

Suddenly the man appeared before him and blocked his path. “Hey, mister! Just a moment, please!”

The man was crane-like, with long, wiry legs and torso. He had a gaunt and leathery face with a wild smile and teeth best suited for a horse. Long tangles of windblown hair spilled over his brow. Scruffy whiskers outlined his jaw and spread down his neck. Wide, crazy eyes bored into Cameron.

“Please have a look!” the stranger insisted. “I have something to show you.”

He raised a fist. Something dangled from it—a stretch of netting with scraps of trash caught in it. A gust of wind curled outward from the sea and sent the netted scraps into a flurry, producing a glassy, chattering sound.

“Wind chime!” the man said proudly. A smile stretched across his face. “Make ‘em myself.”

Cameron shook his head. “I’m not interested.”

“Oh, but you are!” the stranger insisted. “Trust me, sir. You are! Don’t ya see ya’self in them strings? These are your bones, my friend. *Your* bones.” He shook the wind chimes and made them chatter.

Cameron looked closer. Different lengths of fishing line hung from a dome made of driftwood. Glass beads and metal slugs formed a spiral in the strings, but there were also tiny bones; bird bones, maybe. Harbor boutique shops sold similar affairs, except those sported seashells, dried bamboo, or metal cylinders. This thing looked like it belonged hanging from the rafters of an African witchdoctor’s hut. It gave Cameron an unsettling feeling, and for a long moment he couldn’t tear his gaze from it.

“What’d I tell you? Something pretty to take home.”

Dazed, Cameron shook his head. “I’m not—”

The man threw his head back and cackled. “I think you are, friend. I

think you are. And I'll tell you what, I'll give it to you for whatever's in your pocket."

Cameron started to protest but decided against it. Again, he felt the sensation of pertinence, like he'd dreamed the whole thing, and it was worth a few bucks to get this odd man to leave. He dug his hand into his pocket and found a ten. As he held it out, the man snatched it lightning-quick, then handed him the chimes.

"Nice doing business with you," said the stranger with a knowing laugh. He pocketed the bill, gave a gratified nod, and started back down the coastline.

Cameron returned home and hung the chimes from the rafters of his veranda. When a soft wind gusted up from the shore, it stirred the thing into motion. The scraps of metal, glass, and bone made a dry chattering sound, both morbid and irresistible. He stood and stared in a kind of stupor, while something tickled the back of his mind.

Those are your bones, the man had said. *Your bones . . .*

Behind him, the rain fell again with a sudden hiss, and far away the waves roared and boomed against the sand. After a while, he went inside and dialed the number on the card that Maestro Bloom had given him.



Cameron arrived in Nashville on the third of August with only an Army-issue duffel bag packed with a few weeks' worth of clothes and a leather satchel where he kept his compositions. He didn't bother with renting a car at the airport, because he didn't know how long he would stay, and because he didn't feel like waiting in line at the checkout counter. Instead he hailed a taxi.

His first stop was a small café a mile or so from the terminal where he ordered a Reuben sandwich and washed it down with a Miller. As he scarfed down his sandwich, a big man in blue jean overalls and a Peterbilt ball cap sat down on the barstool to his left. After a moment, the guy introduced himself as Bob Fulsome. An ex-truck driver, with a face like saddle leather and thick-rimmed glasses that magnified his friendly green eyes, Bob missed the road and felt comfortable talking to strangers. Drinking a draft beer, he talked about politics and the "dumbshits" running the White House.

Cameron listened only half-heartedly while he ate. He shook his head at the appropriate moments, and Bob seemed to like that.

“So where you heading, anyway?” the man asked after finishing his beer.

“Place called Holloway,” Cameron said around a mouthful of bread.

“Holloway? That’s on the Cumberland Plateau. I’m passing right through there.”

Cameron rose up in his chair. “Think you could give me a ride?”

The old man considered this for a moment, and then shrugged. “If you can handle riding in the back of my pickup.” He turned on his stool and pointed at an old, red Ford truck sitting in the parking lot beyond the window. “I ain’t alone, see. My dog Queenie’s in the cab. She don’t share too well.” On cue, the large black Labrador poked her head out of the driver side window and sniffed the air, as if she knew they were talking about her.

Cameron laughed. “You know, I think the back of that truck would be just fine, Bob. I could use the fresh air.”

Cameron paid for both their tabs and they left. For the next several hours, the old Ford rattled its way down I-24 with Cameron in the back, propped against the wall of the cab. The wind roared in his ears as he watched the world rush away from him. Wide fields of floppy-leafed tobacco and corn. Rickety barns with walls the color of driftwood. Ranch homes with front porch swings and old cars on blocks. He dozed for a while and woke with the sun falling beneath the horizon. He stretched his aching back and leaned over the truck side so he could see ahead. Twenty miles up the road, the horizon jutted sharply, forming a great mountainous swell, with the highway disappearing into its folds. They’d reached the Cumberland Plateau.

Grinning, he closed his eyes and breathed in the crisp scent of newly tilled earth and fresh greenery. Every nerve in his body hummed, and he rode that feeling for a while, dissolving into stillness as he watched with half-closed eyes the world rolling away from him. Nearly an hour later, the old man took the Holloway exit.

Chapter 3

Madison Taylor parked in the small gravel lot of the shop on the corner of Liberty and Frontier Avenues, and hesitated before she got out of her car. A sinking feeling in the pit of her gut forced her to wait. She shook her head and refused herself permission to let the usual anxious feelings crash over her.

“Not today,” she whispered to herself, shoving open her door. She talked to herself more and more these days. “Only good thoughts today.”

Taking a moment to lean against her car, she closed her eyes behind her glasses and took a deep breath. In her late twenties, she was tall and lean, with hazel eyes and honey-brown hair, worn back in a ponytail. She wore a loose shirt over a tank top, fitted jeans, knee-high boots, and a little straw Panama hat, just for fun. It was a cute outfit, but she felt hopelessly overdressed; considering the declining popularity of her shop, she'd be lucky if five people saw her today.

Her gaze shifted to the stylized words hanging over the front door: Beethoven's Closet. She remembered her initial excitement when she and her father had watched the carpenters erect the sign. That had been the year her mother died of cancer. Seven years ago. Back then, this had all seemed like a fine idea. She'd spotted the small two-story home, zoned for both commercial and residential prospects. Perfect for what she'd wanted to do: create a clothing shop that culled hand-tailored clothing from local and independent designers. Then she'd gone and made the mistake of telling her dad. He turned her casual interest into a passionate pursuit. He'd wanted so

badly for her to have the shop. Neither of them had considered that maybe it wasn't such a good idea. Most businesses struggled here on the plateau, unless they sold hiking gear, feed, or fertilizer.

Dad, she thought with a sigh, what the hell did we get ourselves into?

She started down the cobble path, where she found her A-frame sign lying on its face. Frustrated, she stood it upright and brushed off the dirt. A portrait of a scowling Beethoven, caught in a rage, his wacked-out hair, his puffy jacket, even his thick brows—all deep violet to match the sign—stared back at her. She used to like the yard sign's wildish appeal in the small town of fifteen thousand. Today the portrait just seemed to express her own frustrations.

Clapping the dirt from her hands, she climbed the front steps and stopped at the door, frowning when she saw the sign in the window: "Sorry, We're Closed." She didn't like that one bit. *Carrie Belle, why didn't you open the shop? It's nearly ten-thirty for Christ's sake.*

She found her keys and unlocked the door, then shoved it open and stepped inside. The cow bell rang frantically overhead. "Hello?" she called, shutting the door behind her. "Carrie? You here?"

She's here, all right, thought Madison. Her Beetle's parked in the driveway. This is why you don't hire friends to help run your shop.

She stepped into the dark showroom. Six round tables, painted pink, displayed various clothes. Blouses and skirts and pieces of jewelry, all hand-tailored, every bit of it—even the clothes hanging on the racks against the walls, the older stuff that didn't sell. There were a few paintings on the walls, all of them bright and eccentric; she'd handpicked them herself. There were more upstairs. In an adjacent room, she kept a stockpile of French milled soaps, shea butter, moisturizers, those sorts of things. These products always made her shop smell nice. It was a nice contrast to the franchise stores at the nearby shopping mall.

Someone moaned from within the shop. Madison held her breath, suddenly worried. Her eyes settled on the curtain of chestnut-colored beads at the far end of the room, leading to the stockroom.

"Ungh!" There it was again—not a pained grunt, like she'd thought at first. No that was definitely not it.

“Oh, yes! Now! Now! *Now!*”

“You’ve got to be kidding me!” Madison said under her breath, as she charged across the room and swept back the curtain of beads with her arm. At the end of the narrow stockroom stood a skinny boy, his back to her, his jeans gathered around his ankles. A pair of cream-colored legs were wrapped about his waist.

Madison froze and clapped a hand over her mouth. Over the boy’s shoulder she caught Carrie Belle’s startled gaze.

“Carrie Belle!” Madison cried, as much out of surprise as disappointment. “What the hell are you doing?” Of course, she knew exactly what Carrie Belle was doing.

The contents of one shelf spilled behind Carrie Belle. Her boyfriend dropped and gathered his jeans, hiking them up his slender legs.

“Oh God, Mad! I’m sorry!” Carrie Belle cried.

Madison backed out, letting the beaded curtain fall, and braced herself against the wall, hands cupping her mouth. *Oh my God, I can’t believe I just saw that!* She didn’t know whether to laugh or scream.

From the other side of the curtain, Carrie Belle went on, “I’m sorry, Mad. Please don’t be mad at me.”

Her head rolled back against the wall, Madison stifled a nervous giggle beneath her hands.

Moments later, the beads rustled as Carrie Belle rushed out from the stockroom. She was short, round, with silky black hair that fell just below her ears. She sometimes called herself fat, but such a harsh label failed to aptly characterize her figure. Big boned, perhaps; a little plump. Either way, Madison thought Carrie Belle had a darling face and striking green eyes. But now her features were damp from aroused titillation, and her eyes were wide and desperate. “You’re not mad at me, are you?”

Madison looked at her, no longer smiling. “Carrie Belle, I’m so shocked right now, I don’t know what I feel. I mean, honestly. How could you do this?”

“I know! I said I was sorry!” Carrie Belle’s face glowed a violent red. But a grin lurked behind her eyes.

“You think this is funny?” Madison shouted. “Absolutely not!”

Carrie Belle’s boyfriend, Jon, hurried out from the stockroom, fixing

his belt, grinning unabashedly. He looked sort of thuggish, with a clean-shaven head and tattoos along his forearms. “We didn’t mean no harm by it, Madison,” he said, his acne-scarred face burning red. “It was an accident.”

Madison scoffed. “Seriously? You call that an accident?”

Carrie Belle covered her mouth with her hands to muffle a giggle.

Madison threw her hands up. “I give up, you guys. I just give up!” She went to the cashier’s counter, plopped down on a stool, and buried her face in her hands. “Jon, I think you should leave.”

He looked at Carrie Belle with a shrug and then left. The bell jingled over the door.

When they had the shop all to themselves, Carrie Belle walked over and leaned on the counter opposite Madison.

“The sign blew over again,” Madison grumbled, avoiding eye contact with her.

“Somebody forgot their coffee this morning.”

Madison glowered at her. “Don’t you dare turn this around on me. I just caught you guys with your pants down. Jesus, Carrie.”

Blossoms of bright scarlet colored Carrie Belle’s face as she giggled. “What can I say? It was exciting. Maybe you should try it sometime.”

Madison gaped. “Carrie Belle! You are pushing it. I should fire your ass.”

“You can’t fire me. I’m your best friend.”

With a cry of frustration, Madison grabbed the mail near the counter and started sorting through bills and junk mail. Carrie Belle, leaning against the counter, watched with her chin propped in her hands. Madison ignored her.

“You gonna tell me what’s wrong?” said Carrie Belle, after a long moment.

Madison shoved the mail aside, slumped over the counter, and buried her face in her hands. “I hate this place,” she whispered.

“What’s going on?”

“I’m tired. I’m tired of always waiting for something to happen to me.”

A shadow of overwhelming concern drifted across Carrie Belle’s brow, and she put an arm over Madison’s shoulder. “C’mon, Mad. Don’t do this. I’m sorry I upset you.”

Madison sniffed and rubbed her eyes. “You’re a good friend, even if you are a shitty employee.”

Her friend grinned and hugged her tightly. “That’s more like it.”

Madison smiled wanly. “Carrie, don’t you ever want more out of life?”

“No. I’m content with my life. I like it here. I like my boyfriend. I like my job.”

“If you like your job so much you sure as hell don’t act like it.” Madison got up and walked around the counter to the big bay window overlooking Liberty Street. She pulled back the curtains and warm, refreshing sunlight spilled into the shop. “Everything just seems so . . . pointless. I don’t know why I don’t just pack my things and leave.”

An old, heavysset man strolling along Liberty caught her attention. He wore an ill-fitted suit and moved in a lumbering gait. Sunlight gleamed against his hairless scalp. Immediately a chill raced down Madison’s spine, and she folded her arms to suppress a sudden chill.

Behind her, Carrie Belle carried on about something.

“You say something?” asked Madison.

“I said, maybe you should take a vacation. You know, get away for a while.”

“Yeah, right. And leave you in charge of the shop?” Madison snorted, but she was laughing on the inside. Her eyes narrowed as she tried to get a better look at the old man outside. He was one of them—from the orchestra. They were all old, and they always dressed in funeral attire. And there was something else, though she couldn’t put her finger on it, a dreadful feeling whenever she spotted one of them. *Had anyone ever stopped to talk to one of them?* She didn’t think so. The group had been in Holloway for ten years and to her knowledge, no one had ever said more than three words to one of them. “There’s one of those creepy musicians.”

Carrie Belle wormed in beside her and had a look. “Gosh,” she whispered, as if afraid the old man might hear. “Those people are so creepy. I think something’s wrong with them. What if they’re, like, vampires or something? I mean, you never see them doing something normal, like grocery shopping or walking around the mall.”

Madison let the curtains fall back into place. “Don’t try to change the subject.”

“You changed the subject.”

Madison went to the table nearest her and began straightening blouses. “Anyhow, Carrie Belle. Seriously, this isn’t a hotel. If you don’t respect this place, then you’ll just have to find a new place to work. Got it?”

Carrie Belle’s gaze dropped, and she shoved her hands into her pockets. She nodded.

“Yeah. I got it.”

“Good. Now go on and clean up the stockroom.”

After Carrie slipped through the beaded curtain, Madison opened the front door and stepped out onto the porch. With the exception of a few cars, the street was empty. She folded her arms over her chest and rubbed the goosebumps from her arms. Then she flipped the sign in the door so that it read “Yes, We’re Open!”



It was late in the day when the crumpled old pickup rolled into the town square and nosed in beside a parking meter. Cameron tossed his duffel bag and satchel over the side, then climbed over the tailgate.

Bob rolled down the window and gave him a warm smile. “Well, sir, I suppose this is your stop.”

Cameron shook his hand. “I can’t thank you enough, Bob.”

Queenie barked, and the old man laughed and patted her head. “Queenie says to take care of yourself.” Bob put the truck into gear and started to roll away, then added, “Hope you find what you’re looking for.” Then he was gone.

Cameron stretched his back as he surveyed the historic town square. The buildings lining the streets were post-Civil War structures, predominantly Colonial Revival if he had to guess, most of them standing two or three stories tall with brick walls, flat roofs, and wide cornices. Nestled at the center of the square on a large field was the stately courthouse, with columns lining its facade and a white cupola sitting on its roof like a tiny hat.

I think I just discovered the land that time forgot, Cameron thought with a grin. The place had a sleepy, old-fashioned charm about it, with American

flags snapping in the breeze and awnings shading the storefronts. He didn't see a single vagrant sprawled out on the lawn, or trash in the gutters, or bars on the windows. Nor were there liquor stores or pawnshops—at least not on this side of town—to mar the small town ambiance. Holloway seemed to exist in an entirely different world than his West Coast stomping grounds.

Drawing a breath of fresh air, Cameron gathered his things and started down the sidewalk. He looked in all the shop windows, cluttered with displays of camping gear and mannequins, showcasing questionable fashion. A gaunt-faced wooden Indian stood within the inset doorway of Totem Tobacco. The scent of cinnamon and brown sugar billowed from the chimney pipes of Candy's Cookie Corner. There was also a movie rental shop (maybe the last one standing) and an old-timey café with a soda fountain and spin-top stools. Even the streets had names like Main Street and Liberty Avenue.

Setting his bags down, Cameron glanced at his reflection in a dusty used bookstore window. Staring back at him was the face he always saw, a handsome face with dark blue eyes and a strong jaw, going well with his medium build. But he'd started to show signs of his age. There was some silver in his dark hair now, a few lines around his eyes. He looked older than his thirty-six years, but it was nothing a few good night's sleep wouldn't fix.

A sound drew his attention. He looked down at his feet and found his duffel bag lying on its side. His satchel had disappeared. Frowning, he spun around and spotted a long-haired golden retriever standing in the middle of Main Street. The satchel hung by its strap, clenched between the dog's teeth.

"Hey! Hold on, now. Give that back!" He grabbed his duffel bag and charged into Main Street without looking. Tires squealed, and he jumped back onto the sidewalk. A black sedan stopped in the road. The dog growled at the car's grille, the satchel swinging from his jaws. The front flap had fallen open and sheets of paper fluttered from its opening.

Hoping to collect the windblown papers from the middle of the street, Cameron moved into the road again, this time holding his hands out at the woman driving so she would stay still. Crouching, he moved toward the animal. "It's okay, buddy. No one's going to hurt you. Just give me my bag before we both end up as roadkill."

The dog whimpered and lowered his head, preparing to relinquish his prize. Grinning, Cameron reached for his satchel when a horn blared. The dog bolted with the satchel bouncing after him, papers spilling in its wake. Cameron stood up and smiled poisonously at the driver—a pretty young girl with a nose ring. When she saw his disgust, she gave an impatient shrug.

Getting out of the road, Cameron searched for the dog. He spotted him trotting ahead with his head held high and his satchel bouncing after like “Just Married” cans tied to the rear bumper of a newlyweds’ getaway car. Papers scattered in the dog’s wake as he disappeared around a coffee shop. Cameron slapped his forehead. Everything he’d written in the past ten years was in that bag, including his journal.

Collecting papers as he hurried along and swearing under his breath, he followed the dog around the corner. What he’d mistaken for an alley was actually a small road called Bard Street. This narrow two-lane street ran in a steep incline as it moved away from the square. The lane was too quiet, lined with a few vacant shops with boarded windows and padlocks on the doors and several dumpsters. Only one place looked to be in business. It had a blue door and a sign that read Bard Street Tavern. Its single window was dark. A Pabst Blue Ribbon neon sign hung in the window, but it was presently unlit.

Cameron looked up the street, his gaze following along the steep hill until the road evened out again and plunged out of sight. Quiet and brooding, Bard Street seemed cut off from the lifeblood of the rest of the town, like an atrophied limb. He didn’t like it, and there was no sign of the dog. He walked twenty yards and found a sheet of music in a pool of gutter water.

“Ah, goddamn it!” he moaned as he plucked it up and shook the foul water from it. His voice bounced off the tavern walls.

Up the hill a bit, he saw the dog peek from around a dumpster, the satchel swinging lazily from his mouth. The animal froze as he made eye contact with Cameron.

“Come on, boy,” he said, showing his hands. “I’ll buy you a burger. I just want my stuff back.”

The dog dropped his bag and then disappeared up the hill.

Relieved, Cameron trotted over to the satchel and squatted down next to it. Folding back its front flap, he looked inside and found the stack of papers considerably thinner. Then he checked the outer pocket. His journal was still there. *Thank God I didn't lose that!* He sighed and sat on the dirty sidewalk. He was mad enough to chase the dog and give him a good kick. After a moment, he got up and shouldered his satchel, then started back toward the square with both of his bags. But something forced him to stop and turn around. He followed the rising hill with his eyes, wondering about the slope. Strangely compelled, he decided to see for himself. If anything, he'd have a chance at settling his score with the dog.

He walked on, and halfway up the hill, he spotted the rooftop of a massive building looming up ahead. Before he'd seen the entire structure, he knew he'd found his reason for coming to Holloway.

He knew in his gut that he'd found Maestro Bloom's concert hall.

Bard Street dead-ended in a wide plaza where a sign announced: The Calliope Auditorium. Beyond that, there was a massive post-Civil War church with soaring red-brick walls, bigger than the courthouse he'd seen earlier. The church had a steeply pitched gable roof and rows of windows with gothic arches and white hood molding. From its front portico, wide steps spilled down to the plaza.

Cameron scratched the back of his neck. The hall seemed out of place up here, hidden from the rest of the world. Not many small towns could justify the cost and upkeep of such a large auditorium. Moreover, you'd have to fund an impressive orchestra to draw a large enough group of paying visitors to keep the place running. Considering the insularity of the plateau, this didn't seem very likely.

Drawing an unsteady breath, he adjusted the duffel bag on his shoulder and set out across the plaza. Nearing the building, he became aware of a faint hum. The former church buzzed with an electric charge and the feeling grew stronger with every moment. Before reaching the steps, he passed a penny-wish water fountain. His eyes drifted to the parking lot at the right of the building, as big as a football field and empty, save for a single brown Oldsmobile. At least one person was here.

Cameron climbed the steps and found two glass entrance doors in the

shade of the portico. These struck him as severely out of context, like electric windows on an antique car. Nonetheless, he went to them, cupped his hands against the glass, and peered inside, finding only a dark, empty foyer.

With a disappointed sigh, he stepped back and his gaze dropped to the brass door handles. The moment his fingers touched the cool metal, his heart quickened a beat, and a voice in his head told him to forget about it and go home. *No*, he told himself. He'd come this far. At the very least, he would hear what Bloom had to say. He gave the handle a slight tug, and just as he knew it would, the door swung open.

He padded quietly into a lofty foyer with a vaulted ceiling and clean white walls. Thick maroon carpet covered the floors. A ticket counter and a dark concession bar lined the wall to the right. Several baroque-style paintings of angels with harps and trumpets decorated the place. Two large wooden doors, serving as the central entryway into the auditorium, stood on the opposite wall. This was flanked by two staircases that led to the balcony.

"Hello?" Cameron called, as he walked farther inside. Rays of sunlight pierced the upper windows and gave him enough light to see by. When no one answered, he walked across the room, pulled the auditorium doors open, and stepped inside.

The auditorium, despite its current use, still had the look of an old, albeit massive, church. Hardwood floors, rows of oak pews, and stained-glass windows sustained the impression. A number of support columns held aloft the crescent-shaped balcony that spanned nearly as far as the stage, creating a canopy overhead. From what he could see, there were just as many pews up there. The place had a brooding atmosphere, and it smelled . . . old.

He turned his gaze to the wide stage. Lights shined down on aged boards, freshly waxed. Bright red curtains hid the back wall. Only a grand piano occupied the space in front of those curtains.

"Anyone here?" he shouted. The fine acoustics carried his voice easily across the auditorium. He could have whispered a conversation with someone standing on the opposite end of the hall. "The doors were open. I let myself in. Hope no one minds."

He waited for an answer, feeling uneasy about trespassing. Adjusting the weight of his duffel bag on his shoulder, he moved down the main aisle,

passing the pews, feeling the energy of the place. His nerves jittered, the response to his fear of getting himself in trouble, but something else nagged at the back of his mind, making him feel a little sick. *I know this feeling. Like I'm walking alone in a cemetery.*

There was a flight of half-moon steps at center stage. He climbed these to the top and turned to look out at the dark seating area. Once he decided he was still alone, he made his way to the piano, a Bösendorfer concert grand. It was an elegant and regal instrument, but he still couldn't help think it looked like a coffin on display. He glided tentative fingers across its icy keys, and then the urge to sit down and play struck him. *What harm could it do?* If anything, he'd get somebody's attention, and they could lead him to Bloom. He'd been invited here, after all.

He seated himself on the small bench and played a chord to test the quality. Crisp sounds swelled from the piano's open case and drifted like streamers across the auditorium. Throwing caution to the wind, he hunkered over the keys and launched into a rhythm. He explored the piano's tones in a manner similar to someone enjoying the body of his partner for the first time. Soon, a melody revealed itself, shaping and taking form, a bluesy rhythm and soulful melody. The music came effortlessly, as if it existed somewhere outside of him, out there on its own, waiting all this time for someone to pluck it from the ether and drive it note by note into the physical realm.

But then something tickled the base of his skull, and he glanced over his left shoulder.

Toward the back curtains stood a tall black man in a navy blue worker's jumpsuit, his arms folded.

Startled, Cameron nearly leaped from the bench, but his feet got tangled. His arms flailed in an attempt to catch his balance. In seconds, he toppled backward over the bench and landed on his back, smacking his head with a dull thud.

As the lights above him became hazy stars, a dark face with bright eyes and a toothsome grin loomed over him. The face said something, but it sounded to Cameron as if someone had shoved cotton balls into his ears. The face became a shadow, and the theater darkened around him until the lights finally went out.



When Cameron woke, the face loomed over him still, only now it gave a deep, dry chuckle.

“You sure gonna feel that one in the mornin’.”

Cameron, still lying on his back on the stage, reached for the back of his head and touched a lump the size of a golf ball. A rolled-up towel served as a pillow beneath his head. With a groan, he swallowed dryly and muttered, “What happened?”

“Nearly cracked your head open is what happened.”

Cameron blinked again and the fuzzy apparition above him became a slender black man with a high forehead and receding hairline. There were patches of gray in his hair, and his skin was a soft brown. His eyes were calming, and wrinkles fanned out from their corners. Cameron guessed he was in his mid-fifties. A patch on his left breast pocket revealed him as the head janitor.

“You took one nasty spill over that piano bench,” said the janitor in a slow, smoky voice. “Only seen that one other time before. Nineteen-seventy-six, I think it was. Man named Terence Willy. Got so drunk he fell off the stool in the middle of his act. I nearly broke a rib laughin’.”

With one eye pinched shut and his head drumming, Cameron said, “Not so funny from this end.”

The janitor offered his hand and helped Cameron into a sitting position.

“My name’s Washington Hob—Hob to my friends.” The man pointed over to a cart of cleaning supplies near the far wall. “I’m the janitor here. Now, as I recall, I’m supposed to be here. It’s my job. But you, on the other hand . . . well, sir. I don’t recall seein’ your face around here.”

“Cameron Blake.” He held his hand out and Hob shook it.

“Well, Mr. Blake. You ‘bout gave me a heart attack. For a second there, I thought you was a ghost.”

“The feeling’s mutual. Call me Cameron, by the way.”

“Where’d you pick up that song, anyhow?”

Wincing against the steady thud in his head, Cameron shrugged. What had he been playing? He couldn’t remember. “Don’t really know, Hob. Just

sort of came out.” Slowly, he picked himself up. Once on his feet, he nearly lost balance.

Hob grabbed his arm. “Whoa, now. Let’s get you over to that piano bench.” He flipped the bench over on its feet and helped Cameron sit down. “You gonna make it?”

Bent over, arms hanging between his knees, head drooping, Cameron muttered, “Think so.”

“I’m no doctor, but I know a few things about gettin’ knocked upside the head. Sometimes you get a headache, sometimes a concussion, and sometimes you get a hemorrhage. Then you’re in serious trouble.”

Cameron gave him a crooked grin. “I think I’m okay. You didn’t by chance get the tags of the truck that hit me?”

Hob chuckled. “So, Cameron Blake, what sort of business do you have with the Calliope?”

“I’m looking for a guy named Bloom.”

“You mean Maestro Bloom. What d’ya want with him?”

“Not entirely sure about that. I met him a few months ago. He asked me to head this way.”

“I see. Well, you missed him.” Hob’s gaze hardened. “He’ll be back tomorrow mornin’. Anyhow, I got to get back to work, seein’ as you done scuffed up my floor.”

Cameron nodded. The Calliope became a massive merry-go-round, spinning in dizzying circles around him. He braced himself against the piano and waited for the nausea to pass.

“Hey, listen,” said Hob, clutching his shoulder and helping him balance as he sat down. “Maybe I should give you a ride.”

“Thanks, Hob. But I think I can manage.”

“Like hell. You got a hotel room?”

“Not yet.”

“The Cherry Tree’s just off the square. Nothing fancy. But it’s close.”

Wincing against his throbbing head, Cameron offered a weak smile and nodded. “As long as it’s got a bed, I’m sold on the idea.”

Hob dropped Cameron off in front of the hotel. It was only a block or so from the square and tucked in between a number of squat brick buildings,

home to attorneys' offices, bail bondsmen, and even a pawnshop. Inside the small lobby, Cameron checked in with an old woman named Darlene, who had silver curls and large glasses. She never once removed the cigarette from her mouth.

As Hob had promised, Cameron's room wasn't much, just small and drab, with a fuzzy brown carpet and dingy white walls. A queen-sized bed with a hunter green blanket sat near the wall, opposite a chintzy dresser. He stuck his head into the bathroom. Nothing special there either, besides a toilet, a single shower with water stains, and a sink. He returned to the main room and opened a window, hoping to air out the musty odor. He leaned his head outside and looked up the street. He had a good view of the neighboring rooftops all the way to the courthouse's cupola. Not the best room he'd ever stayed in, but not the worst either.

Leaving the window open, he ducked back inside, plopped down on the corner of his bed and worked off his shoes. He found the remote to the old television that hung on a wall bracket, turned it on, and flipped listlessly through the channels. Nothing but soap operas and *M*A*S*H* reruns.

Soon a sleepy fog crept over him and his eyes grew heavy. He lay back on the stiff bed and threw an arm over his eyes to shield them from the sunlight coming in through the window. Just before he drifted off, his thoughts returned to the Calliope.

Slipping gently beneath the surface of consciousness, another part of him slipped mentally into the backseat of the family Toyota. Dad was driving. Mom lying back in the passenger seat. At the other end of the backseat, his brother slept. The car's tires hummed hypnotically. His mother turned and touched his knee. *God has a purpose for you.*

Then the tires shrieked and darkness swallowed him up.

For a long while, he swam in this nothingness, until a star exploded before him, a burst of brilliant light whose fringes swayed and billowed like tufts of seaweed in a slow current. *Empyreal*, he thought. *The stuff of heaven.*

The light began to sing, a glassy, whirring sound, natural and flowing, a whale song with no discernible pattern or theme.

Wake up, he told himself. *You have to remember this. Get it down on paper.*

He woke with a start, sat on the edge of the bed, and retrieved his leather journal from his satchel. Turning on the little lamp beside his bed, he clenched a pen between his fingers and pressed its tip against the empty page.

Chapter 4

It was a pretty afternoon, with a cloudless sky and a pleasant wind that whipped and rushed about before disappearing just as suddenly. Leaving Carrie to man the shop, Madison strolled up to the Blue Cow on the square and bought a scoop of Rocky Road on a waffle cone. She had cramps and felt moody, and this was good medicine. It melted and dribbled while she walked along the shops, glancing curiously at each window.

She didn't feel like going back to the Closet. Only a few customers had come in that morning, and Carrie was incapable of shutting up. On any other day, this wouldn't matter, and on most days she liked listening to Carrie. But today, she needed quiet, she needed to think. She felt just sort of inside herself, and she didn't mind the feeling so much. It drew out the essences of things; it cast the world about her in different hues. While she finished off her ice cream, she stopped to ponder the shape of an oak tree on the corner of Cherry Tree. When she crossed the street and stepped onto the courthouse lawn, she slipped off her sandals and explored the cool grass with her toes.

Near the western side of the courthouse, she found an empty park bench in the shade of an ash tree and sat with one leg curled beneath her. The wind whispered in the leaves.

Just recently she'd started hating this place, like coming back had been the biggest mistake of her life.

Seven years had passed since she'd returned to Holloway. Before then, she'd been living in Annapolis, in a small apartment that overlooked the

Chesapeake Bay. She'd enjoyed her life there, from her work as a consultant for a small-time decorator, to her friends and favorite hangouts. Her boyfriend Ben Lewis, an officer and instructor at the Naval Academy, had seemed a promising catch at first, until things had gotten weird between them. Once they'd broken off their engagement, her life had started a downward spiral. Julie Freeland's wedding had been the final straw. A glorious white wedding on the shores of the Chesapeake Bay; everyone was so happy . . . except Madison. The wedding had merely emphasized how terribly alone she felt.

The news about her mother had come just a week later. Patty Taylor had been diagnosed with cancer. Madison had caught a flight home the next day. Returning to Holloway had awoken something in her that had long been asleep. She was scared, and sad, and maybe for those reasons she'd allowed Holloway to bewitch her with nostalgia. Comforted by its small-town charm, she had decided to stay for a while, just until this whole thing blew over.

But then her mother had died and Madison's illusions about the town had vanished. After putting her mother in the ground, she had wanted nothing to do with Holloway, but by then it was too late. Her father, Ray, needed her more than ever. He'd become an old man overnight, consumed by a smoky gray aura that you couldn't see with your eyes, but you sensed it. The moment she noticed it, she couldn't leave, even when he insisted she go.

So she'd stuck around, and she and Dad had tried their best to keep smiling, to make it through the day. It had been a particularly rainy season, as if an outward manifestation of their sadness. What broke them free of their depression was the "For Sale" sign out front of a small shop.

It had been late October, with the leaves changing, the air chilly. Madison had gone strolling to the square when she spotted the small shop. For nearly half an hour, she'd stood there on the sidewalk, gazing at the small clapboard house, imagining its possibilities. She'd always dreamed of running her own clothing store, a place where local designers contributed their creations—where clothes and art came together. Of course, she didn't have the money for something like that, and she eventually convinced herself that it was a silly idea and went on with her business.

But the thought stuck in her mind. Later that evening, as she and her dad sat at the kitchen table eating spaghetti and meatballs, she'd mentioned the shop for sale. "It's silly, of course," she'd told him, playing with her food more than eating it, "but, I don't know. It just sort of made me happy."

Her father had laid a firm hand over her own, and she'd looked up to find her father positively glowing. In moments, that all-consuming gray mist had evaporated, as if burned off by the sun. "No, it's not a silly idea, Mad. Not silly at all."

"Thanks, Dad. Still. I couldn't afford it."

"Maybe not. But I could help. Patty always insisted we max out our life insurance. I can't tell you how many times we fought over that." Smiling sadly, he'd dropped his gaze and shaken his head. "It's almost like she knew." He'd blinked, as if remembering himself, then looked at her with watery eyes. "Anyways, we could use the money—"

"No, Dad." She'd nearly jumped out of her chair. The thought of funding a silly dream with money from her mother's death had seemed somehow wrong. "I can't. I just can't."

But she could. And she had. They'd signed the note together and used the insurance claim as a down payment. Her father had done most of the work, figuring out the financial nuts and bolts. The project had given him purpose, and he'd seemed ten years younger. Never once had she told him the truth. Never had she said, *Daddy, it was just a silly thought. I didn't really want to open a shop.* Never had she said, *Daddy, I'm worried this thing might trap me in Holloway, and I don't want that to happen.*

She'd never said any of those things, and how could she? This was good for him. She couldn't take that away.

So she'd let him run with it. They'd gotten closer in those few months than they had in the past decade. The house had needed lots of work. The plumbing was old and clunky; the electrical wiring was a fire hazard. So they'd torn out walls and trimmed the floors and so on. They'd done that every day of the week except for Sunday, which Ray reserved for church and fishing with Police Chief Dunlap. After six months, they'd transformed the small shop into a little lavender dream come true. The project had been like therapy. They'd celebrated the grand opening together. Nearly the whole

town had shown up, and Madison had gotten a taste of her father's joy. *Yes, she'd told herself, it just might work.*

They'd done okay at first. They'd made enough to pay the bills and keep the shelves stocked.

Then one Sunday morning she'd gone to catch her dad before church. She'd found him sitting in his favorite Lazy Boy recliner, dressed in gray sweats, his face gone the powdery gray of dried clay. Eyes like glassy marbles. Sometime the night before, probably while watching David Letterman on TV, an artery at the base of Ray Taylor's brain had ruptured, killing him instantly. No one had seen it coming, and his death, so mind-numbingly sudden, had knocked Madison for a loop. After that, the shop just sort of seemed like a concrete block chained to her ankle, dragging her beneath the surface. No matter how furiously she treaded the waters, she just kept sinking. Stuck, alone, and broke—Holloway had fooled her, reneged on its promises.

Someone strode past her bench. Snapped out of her daydream, she watched him go. He was in his mid-thirties and handsome, with dark hair and a square jaw, good build, tall enough. He was in jeans and a white t-shirt, and by the looks of the duffel bag on his back, he was either coming or going. She'd never seen him before, but she found him oddly familiar. Oddly irresistible too. As she watched him go, a sudden sadness rolled over her, momentarily ripping her from her own self-indulgence. She straightened her back and swept the hair from her eyes as she watched him disappear down Cherry Avenue.

She walked back to her shop, thinking about the handsome stranger, wondering who he was and where he was heading. The moment she stepped inside, Carrie hurried past her, on her way to do something, when she stopped suddenly and turned to look at her with a mischievous grin. "Um-hum," said Carrie. "I know that smile. You met someone just now, didn't you?"

Madison looked at her in open-mouthed exasperation. Giggling, she said, "I don't know what you're talking about. I didn't meet anybody. Why are you always in my business?"

Carrie shrugged. "Well, you looked like the cat that ate the canary. Anyhow, as you're in such a good mood, I'm going to ask you for a favor: I need off early tomorrow night. I got a big date."

With a scoff of disbelief, Madison walked past her without saying anything else.



Charlie Witt shuffled out of the Piano Showcase with a grin on his face and his head swimming. He always felt like this after playing for hours on end. He felt slaked and relaxed. He even enjoyed the dull ache in his fingers and the pang at the small of his back from slumping on the stool. Seventeen and pimple-faced, he'd been habitually passed over by the girls and so he hadn't scored yet. But he'd seen enough movies to compare how he felt right now to those moments after sex: weak in the knees, satiated to the bone, sleepy, and craving a cigarette.

After school, at least twice a week, he came to the Showcase, a large shop on the end of the new Frontier Mall on Canonsburg Street. The owner, Edward Holt, gave him free rein of his floor displays, which included a dozen glossy upright, electric, and baby grand pianos. Mr. Holt told Charlie that he did this for two reasons. First, as a music lover, he enjoyed listening to Charlie practice. He also liked to challenge Charlie, who could play just about anything that Mr. Holt threw at him. Then there was the other reason—business. Mr. Holt pointed out that Charlie drew customers every time he sat at one of the models. Sometimes Charlie even agreed to demonstrate for a floundering customer. He'd helped close the deal on three different occasions.

"It's called bartering," Mr. Holt said one day, while gently polishing a piano with a piece of fine cloth. "I let you play my instruments; you help me sell them. This way we both get something out of it."

Charlie unchained his bike from a street lamp and dashed off across the open parking lot. He hopped a ditch and then cut across a busy two-lane highway. Here were more small shops and a restaurant called Toots that served beer and buffalo wings to guys who rode Harleys and drove old pickup trucks. He'd just circled around the back of the building when he noticed a dog crawling into a tipped over trash can. He skidded to a stop, jabbed two fingers between his lips, and whistled.

After a startle, a shaggy golden retriever scrambled out from the trash can and looked at him, panting.

“Sam!” Charlie shouted. “There you are you, you mangy asshole.”

Sam twisted his head left and right before he recognized the boy. Then he came bounding down the alley with his tongue flapping. Charlie hopped off his bike and let it fall on its side as he dropped into a squat and ruffled Sam’s neck fur.

“I thought you were gone for good.” Charlie shook his head and grinned as Sam licked at his face and nearly knocked him down. When Sam’s tongue slapped across his mouth, Charlie shoved him back with a disgusted laugh. “Okay, okay. Enough of that.”

For a moment the boy just shook his head and gave his dog a pitying but worried look. It wasn’t the first time Sam had found a way out of the fenced-in backyard and run off. Usually he hung around the neighborhood, but this time he’d stayed gone nearly a week. Charlie had just about given up looking.

Sam put a paw on Charlie’s leg, and the boy nodded. “Yeah, okay. Let’s get you home.”

He got up, dusted the dirt from his pants, then retrieved his bike. He didn’t bother riding it because Sam would probably run off. Instead, he walked alongside it.

They’d gotten to the end of the alley when something struck him hard against the back of his head, sending his glasses launching from his face. He staggered, dazed. The blow surprised him more than it hurt. He let his bike fall to the ground and spun around in time to see a football go bouncing off at odd angles until it dropped into the ditch. Further up the road three kids howled with laughter. Charlie recognized them immediately: Bobby Horton, Tim Lemone, and Jack Killen.

“Aw, shit!” Bobby shouted, clutching the bulk of his fat belly and laughing so hard he could hardly walk. “Did you see that? I nailed the faggot! Right in the fucking head!”

Blood thudded in Charlie’s ears as blind rage overcame him. He should run, but the football had scared him, and all he wanted to do was hit somebody. Next to him, Sam huffed and panted. The dumb dog failed to sense any danger.

“Oh, look at ‘em,” Tim shouted. “I think you pissed him off.”

“Leave me alone!” Charlie shouted. It was the wrong thing to say. Never in anyone’s history had that command done anything but worsen the situation.

“Leave me alone!” Jack Kilborn echoed, pitching his voice high like a woman’s, balling his hands together and tucking them beneath his chin. “Leave me alone!”

“What are you gonna do, faggot?” shouted Bobby. “You gonna take us all on?”

The adrenaline responsible for jolting Charlie’s system into fight rather than flight suddenly flagged, leaving him standing alone, defenseless and afraid. As the boys moved toward him, he scooped up his bike and ran several strides before he threw a leg over the seat and started to glide. He pumped the pedals a few times as he glanced over his shoulder to make sure Sam followed. But Sam stood where he’d left him, looking confoundedly at Charlie with something like a grin on his face.

“Goddamn it, Sam!” Charlie shouted. “Come on!” He saw Jack Kilborn, a wiry kid with a blond crew cut, sneaking up with a large flat rock raised above his head. “No, don’t!”

Charlie braked hard and the rear tire fishtailed, spinning the bike around so he faced the others.

But it was too late. Jack threw the rock. Sam didn’t see it coming. The rock struck the dog’s rear, and Sam yelped and scampered back with his tail tucked between his hind legs, whimpering.

Charlie hurried over to his dog and dropped down beside him. When he saw blood in Sam’s fur, Charlie snarled at the boys. Jack looked fidgety, his face burning crimson, obviously surprised by the success of his hit. Bobby and Tim cackled with laughter.

“You goddamn assholes!” Charlie shouted. He stood up and balled his hands into fists. “I swear to God I’m gonna kill you.”

Whap! Once again someone hit him with the football. This time it smashed into Charlie’s face. His nose snapped, and fire flashed across his brow and cheeks as his glasses toppled off. A violent surge of pain barreled through his nervous system and he clamped his hands over his face. He

dropped hard onto the ground and felt the jolt of impact race all the way up his spine, slamming into his brain. His ears rang as he felt around in the dirt for his glasses. After a moment of searching, he found them. A crack now split the left lens in two. Over the thudding and rushing of blood in his ears, he heard peals of laughter from the boys.

Sam licked at his cheek, and Charlie shoved him aside and wiped the tears from his eyes. Undaunted, Sam came back.

“Come on, Sam,” he said and picked himself up.

He stood his bike upright, then threw a leg over the seat and rode off. A few yards down the road, he looked behind him. Sam hurried after him, but his back leg gave him some serious trouble. He soon fell behind by several yards. Another ten feet and the golden retriever stopped altogether.

But not Charlie. He kept going.

“Sorry, Sam,” he muttered as he turned his eyes to the road ahead. He lowered his head and pumped the pedals until the tires sang beneath him. He never looked back.

If he had, he would have seen Sam just standing there, watching, whimpering.



Cameron had been in no hurry to get back to the Calliope, but somehow he'd squandered half the day. It was already two o'clock as he stood at the front steps of the old gothic church. Hands in his jeans pockets and his satchel over one shoulder, he closed his eyes and tried to convince himself to go inside.

This is what you want. Time to put this thing to rest.

Feeling small in the shadow of the Calliope, he climbed the steps and tried the front door. It opened with an easy tug on the handle. He stepped into a dark foyer and heard music echoing throughout the building. He followed the sound to the central auditorium doors. He pressed them open and stepped inside.

An intensely dramatic music—he soon recognized it as Rachmaninoff's Symphony No. 3—crashed over him as he entered the warmly lit auditorium. He glanced at the rows of pews and red velvet curtains before

turning his attention to the wooden stage, where an orchestra of maybe fifty musicians had gathered. Though the pews were empty, the musicians were dressed in formal attire, as if for an evening performance, and the lights glinted off their instruments as they charged into frantic rifts. A conductor stood before them, arms swinging as the musicians followed his lead.

Clearly this was the man who had approached Cameron at SilverReel Studios. Cameron drifted down the main aisle toward the stage, but stopped when he noticed something strange about the musicians. They were all so old. Brittle creatures with sallow faces and wispy-white hair. Faces composed of paper-thin flesh pulled taut over angular bones. They weren't just old. They were ancient.

Just then a man rose from his seat in the front row. He was old, bald except for wings of white hair above his ears. Light gleamed from his black-framed glasses as he stared at Cameron. The music created a dramatic soundscape. When the old man started forward, Cameron took a backward step and considered running away. But then the music stopped in mid-phrase, and Cameron looked up to find the conductor watching him from the edge of the stage.

"Ah, there you are," said Bloom, his deep voice rolling easily across the quiet auditorium. "So good of you to come . . ." he paused for emphasis, "Mr. Blake."

Cameron opened his mouth to speak when the old man put a hand on his shoulder. Startled, he looked around into a hard, craggy face, drawing in close.

"Are you him?" asked the old man, curling his lips away from his teeth in a scowling grin. "Are you the composer?"

Already climbing down the steps of the stage, Bloom interjected. "Mr. Kalek, please refrain from making our guest feel . . . uncomfortable."

Both Kalek and Cameron turned as the conductor marched up the main aisle toward them.

When he drew near, he offered a hand to Cameron and said, "I wish I had known you were coming today. I've been awaiting your arrival since you called me."

“I didn’t know myself until the last minute.” Meeting the man’s gaze, Cameron felt something akin to a chill. He’d forgotten the intensity of those eyes, like a dark aura.

“Anyhow,” Bloom said, gesturing with one hand at the auditorium about them. “Welcome to the Calliope.”

Shuffling around in a circle, Cameron took a moment to look about the expansive hall, taking in its antiquated architecture, the pews, the balcony, the red curtains that draped the walls. He froze when his eyes fell again to the stage and the old musicians, all of them watching with quiet intent, like rats hiding in the shadows.

“This place has quite a history,” Bloom said behind him. “It began as a church, during the last half of the nineteenth century. In the early fifties, the Calliope became a music venue for country western singers.”

“That’s very interesting,” Cameron said flatly.

Bloom nodded slowly. “There’s more. Indeed, we have a lot to talk about. For now, why don’t we talk in my office?”

“Yeah,” Cameron said and cleared his throat. “Terrific.”

“Excellent. Please, follow me.”

To Cameron’s dismay, the door to Bloom’s office was somewhere at the back of the building. This meant they had to mount the steps and pass through the orchestra, beneath the scrutiny of countless rheumy eyes and shriveled faces. Nonetheless, Cameron followed Bloom and Kalek onto the stage and into the gaggle of old timers. As they marched quietly along, a smell nearly stopped him in mid-stride. *Oh geez*, he realized, *I can smell them*. A sour smell. Utterly revolting. Forcing himself to continue, he held his breath until he passed through the tall door at the back of the stage.

Here, beyond the auditorium, were long, bright corridors with white walls and polished linoleum floors. The hallways reminded him of hospitals, or morgues, and Cameron kept close to his two silent guides. After a few turns, they arrived at a large office, warmly lit, with elegant furniture, thick burgundy carpeting, and oak wall panels. The walls were lined with leather-bound books, old oil paintings of orchestras, and various portraits. The scent of cigar tobacco lingered in the air. Across the room on the eastern wall was a large picture frame window; its brocade curtains were drawn and only a

sliver of light entered beneath their trim. A large mahogany desk sat in the center of the room, its surface neat and tidy. Two leather armchairs faced it.

“Please, have a seat,” said Bloom. He walked to the wet bar in the far corner, where he went about fixing drinks.

Easing into one of the armchairs, Cameron put his satchel in his lap and folded his arms over it. Kalek, meanwhile, took the armchair next to him.

“You’ve already met my personal assistant,” Bloom said from the bar. “Mr. Kalek handles most of my financial provisions and so on.”

The old man nodded at him, and Cameron forced a welcoming grin. The guy made him nervous with his intense, uncertain gaze.

“You know,” said Kalek, “you and I have a great deal in common. Both of us have heard the Astral Music.”

“No kidding?” was all Cameron could say before Bloom placed a glass of bourbon in his hand. The ice clinked as Cameron downed half of it, then sucked at his teeth as the alcohol coursed down his throat. Feeling better already, he sank back in his chair. “Sounds like a fine orchestra you got back there,” he said, hoping to break the ice before wading into stranger territory. “But, if you don’t mind my asking, why are they all so, well, old?”

Bloom glided around to the back of his desk and eased into a leather wingchair. “They may be old, Mr. Blake, but those are some of the finest musicians in the world.” He gazed at Cameron with half-lidded eyes, quietly measuring him. “But we will talk about them later. For now, I want to hear why you decided to come to Holloway.”

Cameron looked at him blankly. “You know why I came.”

“Yes. But do you?”

Cameron shrugged. “The money helps. A hundred grand is a nice incentive.” It wasn’t the real answer. The money didn’t mean that much to him; he had plenty. But he was determined to play his cards close to his chest for now. It didn’t hurt to remind Bloom of their initial agreement.

“Yes, of course,” the conductor said, with a knowing grin. “I’ll be sure to deposit the money into your account this very evening, just as soon as you give Mr. Kalek the proper information. You can call your bank first thing in the morning.”

“Don’t worry. I will.” Cameron hoped his face didn’t express the gut-clenching anxiety he felt. Accepting that money meant locking into an unwritten contract with something he didn’t yet completely understand.

“But surely Mr. Blake didn’t come to Holloway just for the money,” Kalek offered, his tone somewhat mocking.

“Of course not,” the maestro answered, as he leaned back in his chair. His gray eyes studied Cameron over laced fingers. “So tell us the real reason then. What really brought you here?”

“You said you could help me compose the Astral Music. So I came to see how serious you are.” Cameron shot Kalek a glance. “And let’s just say, when I find a hundred grand in my bank account tomorrow, I’ll know you guys are serious.”

The maestro spread his hands and gave a consenting smile. “Point taken.”

“Now, for starters,” Cameron went on, “You seem to know a lot about Astral Music. What can you tell me that I don’t already know?”

Bloom gave him a knowing smile. “We will get to that. But first you must answer a few of my own questions. I want you to start at the beginning. When did you first hear the Astral Music?”

Cameron swirled his drink, rattling ice at the bottom, then finished it off. In a thin voice, he said, “I was a kid. Six years old. I was in a car accident.” He swallowed. His throat was already dry as he stared blankly at the far wall, picturing the scene in his head. “Doctors say I died. Exactly four minutes—about as long as you can go before you damage the brain. That’s when I first heard it.”

“What did it sound like?” asked Bloom, his voice strained and eager.

Cameron met his gaze. “Well, it’s hard to describe. It wasn’t exactly music. I didn’t hear it with my ears. It had a distant, floaty sound and a slow rhythm, something between a whale song and wind chimes. Other than that . . .” he said with a shrug, “it only makes sense in dreams.”

“Fascinating,” said Bloom, eyes gleaming.

“You are very fortunate to have heard this,” Kalek added.

“Fortunate?” Cameron gave a derisive snort. “I lost my whole family in that wreck. Hardly what I’d call fortunate.”

The old man looked embarrassed. “I only meant—”

“Thank you, Mr. Kalek,” Bloom interrupted, then looked at Cameron. “Over the years you’ve attempted to retrieve the experience. Tell me about that.”

Cameron scratched the back of his head, feeling a little embarrassed and reluctant to go on. It sounded crazy, and worse, these guys seemed to just eat it up, without any pause or hesitation. With a deep breath, he said, “I forgot the whole experience for several years. It came back to me around the time I hit puberty. And again while in college. A professor suggested I write it down. So I tried, and I kept trying for the next ten years. I guess you could say it became an obsession.”

His gaze dropped to the floor as a memory surfaced of Amber standing in the doorway to their bedroom, wearing a silk nightgown, her dark hair gathered at her shoulders. She’d had a few too many drinks. Her eyes were glassy, a look of complete detachment. *“I’m leaving, Cam. I can’t take this anymore. You’re scaring me. All you talk about is this goddamn music. I really think you need help.”* Clearing his throat, he looked down into his empty tumbler, wishing he had another drink. “I never did manage to get it down on paper.”

“Most everyone who has attempted this has shared the same problem,” said Bloom. “The memory of the experience has a tendency to dissolve once it reaches the light of reason.”

“But the dreams inspired other works,” said Cameron, “like ‘Hear After,’ so I suppose it wasn’t a complete loss. But then when my wife left me, things just started falling apart and so I quit trying. I couldn’t do it anymore. I thought that I was going crazy. So I went and found work with the television studio.”

“And you did that out of spite,” Bloom offered.

Cameron shrugged. “I guess I did. SilverReel wanted nothing but garbage. Melodramas with a simple melody. So that’s what I gave them. It felt wrong from the beginning. But it also felt good, like I’d liberated myself. Like I was getting back at God.” He scowled. “The dreams went away after that.”

Bloom stood, circled around to the front of his desk, and propped himself against its edge with his arms crossed over his chest. His eyes bored into Cameron’s with a kind of evangelical fervor. “Since I was a young man, I’ve

been interested in this phenomenon. I've devoted my whole life to pursuing this music that you have trapped in your head."

"So what is it?"

"The music you heard has many names: Music universalis. Shabda. Pythagoras called it the Music of the Spheres, believing that Earth was encapsulated by a number of glass spheres that moved against each other and, as a result, created music. Later on, Johannes Kepler took a more mathematical approach by suggesting that all celestial bodies of the cosmos correlate to harmonic, and thus musical, arrangements. A wide array of theories. But these philosophers all seem to arrive at one conclusion: the Cosmos is a kind of living symphony, a musical entity whose anatomy is composed of rhythm and vibration, melody and harmony, and at times, Discord. Every particle, every life, every galaxy is but a note in a great and divine symphony. This is what the ancient philosophers called Armonia. The Harmony of the Spheres."

Cameron blinked. That this music had a name made it all the more real for him. The word "Armonia" had an eerie sound to it, and it sent chill bumps rippling down his arms. Still, he sifted through Bloom's words like a man searching for seashells on a shore of rubble: weighing, considering, and ultimately discarding the lot of them. He said thoughtfully, "I think you forgot another theory, the one that argues that the 'Astral Music' is essentially a neurological mishap caused by head trauma—a kind of temporary cross-circuiting of sensory input. Maybe even a by-product of the brain shutting down."

"Oh, I don't believe that. And neither do you." Bloom looked at him soberly for a long, quiet moment. "You see, I believe there is something much deeper going on here. I believe the Astral Music reveals much more about the nature of reality than we at first realize."

"How so?"

"I think there are times when we get a glimpse of the true nature of reality. This is usually the result of a traumatic event, say a near-death experience. The intensity of this experience can cause a temporary distortion of perceived reality. Sometimes, in this moment of cognitive collapse, the person sees the universe for what it truly is: an illusion. What's more is that the essence of this

illusion is vibration—a constant flux and flow of energy, moving in endless ripples, of waves and troughs, and ultimately, providing information for the senses of its observers. In other words, reality is a vibratory illusion. So then a person like you comes along with the insight to encode those vibrations into sound. At that moment something very special happens: a complete manipulation of the illusion.”

Cameron’s eyes narrowed and he shifted in his seat. He’d spent years investigating the Astral Music. But the stack of books he’d read all seemed to somehow miss the mark. Bloom, however, was starting to make sense, in a strange way. He could almost see where this was going.

“Among all those who have perceived the Astral Music, no one has come so close to recording the experience,” Bloom continued. “But what you did with ‘Hear After’ reveals a special talent. I recognized it right away. It disappointed me to learn that you only tried this once. In my mind, that experience of yours was a veritable gold mine. You could have continued to exploit it. You could have written a thousand inspired symphonies. But you stopped. Which brings us back to why you came to Holloway.”

Cameron wanted to hear more. He needed it. “Go on.”

“You came because you believe that I can show you how to tap Armonia again.”

A quiet pause filled the moments as Bloom and Cameron stared at each other without blinking.

“Well? Can you?” Cameron asked.

Bloom smiled. “I think it is time to show you a secret.”

They left the office and followed the white corridors deeper into the Calliope until they arrived at a freight elevator with a metal lattice gate pulled across its opening. Kalek hurried forward and shoved the gate back. Scuffed-up planks of wood were bolted to the inside walls and floor of the elevator cab. A naked lightbulb hung from the ceiling. After the three men had stepped inside, Kalek drew the gate noisily closed and jabbed a button on the wall. A motor whirred somewhere as the elevator jittered and lowered them down into the earth until the air smelled dank. They came to a sudden stop. The doors scraped open and Kalek stepped out. Bloom motioned to Cameron, and he followed headlong into impregnable darkness.

Even in the pitch dark, Cameron knew that the basement was enormous. Following the loud clunk of a breaker switch, a twenty-foot wide ring of sapphire lights shone from the high ceiling.

Beneath them, sprawled in a wide formation across the chamber floor, was an army of strange creatures with black chitinous exoskeletons. The creatures came in all shapes and sizes, with spindly limbs and serpentine necks. They scuttled on their bellies and lashed their tails. Their bodies writhed with a palsy, while they hissed and mewed like wild animals.

“Jesus Christ, what are they?” Cameron whispered, his heart hammering in his chest.

But it was only an illusion. Nothing really moved. He’d mistaken motion for the flow captured in their form. These were musical instruments, fashioned from a bizarre vision, an art project dreamed up by H.R. Giger. They had casings of polished black metal, some with long serpentine necks. Others bore silver wires across their spines. They were formed into sleek shapes, with long, smooth curves and twisted designs. Some stood upright like men with broad shoulders and grotesquely elongated necks. Others lay on velvet-covered display plates. As for the arrangement, the instruments formed a wide circle maybe thirty feet in diameter with a wide clearing at the center. Cameron suspected the arrangement was deliberate; the instruments would stay in this circle when an orchestra decided to play them.

Wanting a better look, Cameron moved ahead into the chamber. The floor was made of a reflective black marble. His footfalls echoed into the far reaches of the basement as he walked. Bloom followed closely. They stopped just short of the ring of instruments.

“I’ve never seen anything like this,” said Cameron, giving a bewildered shake of his head. “What are they?”

“Musical instruments, of course,” Bloom explained. “They are called the Archetypes. There are fifty of them in the collection.”

The ensemble included every type of instrument. Strings and woodwinds, brass and percussions—all grouped in sections. Cameron doubted if a single one carried a clean note. How could they, when the makers had forged them

from the same shiny black metal? Obviously design had taken priority over functionality. “Where did you get these?”

“It wasn’t easy. They are ancient relics. They’ve been kept secret by different orders throughout the centuries . . . I own them now,” Bloom added, as if this explained everything.

They followed along the curve of instruments, finding each shape stranger than the one before it. Some looked like spiders, some like bundles of gnarled bone. Most of the time Cameron glimpsed familiar shapes underneath, but all of them were distorted in one way or another. Some were so odd that he couldn’t place them. The flute section looked like a nest of large metal spiders, with spindly legs hooking out from central shafts. The clarinets were sleek black spears with stingers, and the oboes looked like great loops of fossilized serpents. Tubas were curled up dragons, and farther along were the violins and the smaller violas and violoncellos. These had long black necks stretched from the casings like hardened taffy. Beyond were squadrons of upright basses with demon-faced scrolls.

Cameron could only scratch his head over some instruments that looked like mutated conch shells and alien insects.

“Some say the ancient Greeks made them,” said Bloom. “The Pythagoreans or Orphites, perhaps. But no one knows for sure.”

Another step brought them face to face with a snarling creature. Cameron jerked back and nearly tripped at the sight, but it was only a piano. It spread before him, a large concert grand. Mounted over middle-C was the misshapen skull of something long dead, with big holes for eyes, narrow slits for a nose cavity, its grin lined with pointy teeth. Rather than the typical footprint design, this piano was shaped like a giant prehistoric bat that had been steamrolled, coated in lacquer, then mounted on four legs. A knobby spinal cord began at the base of the skull and traveled down the length of the piano’s large case, partitioning the lid into two parts. Thin shoots of bone, like flattened ribs, sprouted from either side of the spine and fanned toward the far edges. Looking at the thing made Cameron’s skin crawl, and he kept his distance, in case it decided to chomp off his arm.

“Christ, that’s one ugly piece of work there,” he growled, absent-mindedly clutching his chest.

“This one has a name,” said Bloom. “It is called the Dragon.” He gave Cameron another few moments, then started off again.

Cameron hurried after him and quickly fell in step. “What are they for?”

“No one knows for sure,” said Bloom, moving onward. “But there are theories.”

“Like what?”

Bloom stopped and pivoted around to face him. “That man could use these instruments to commune with God, if he had the necessary music.”

Cameron snorted. “That sounds pretty farfetched, don’t you think?”

Bloom didn’t answer. Instead he continued on. Cameron followed him to a narrow pass that cut through the band of instruments and led them to the middle of the formation, a round clearing formed by the wall of instruments. The black marble tile and the size and shape of the clearing reminded him of an outdoor ice-skating rink he’d once seen. A podium sat at the center of the clearing. It was black and shaped like a three-tiered wedding cake, five feet across at its base and three at its top. From here the conductor would be able to command his orchestra at 360 degrees. An overhead lamp shone a direct beam down onto it, emphasizing its importance.

“You don’t believe that, do you?” Cameron asked.

Over his shoulder, Bloom said, “I believe the instruments have powers that we don’t yet understand.”

They cut across the clearing. When they neared the opposite wall of instruments, Cameron saw a large circular object, standing at least ten feet high, with a green tarpaulin draped over it. It gave the impression of the world’s biggest framed mirror.

“What the hell is that?” Cameron whispered.

With his hands behind his back, Bloom proceeded to the draped object. He stopped and folded his arms over his chest. “That is a very special instrument. It’s a sort of harp—an Aeolian wind harp, actually.”

“I’ve seen a wind harp,” said Cameron, remembering when his dorm roommate, Chris, had brought one to their room. Little more than a hollow

wooden box about three feet wide and strung with harp strings, Chris had kept it in the window for a few days until someone nearly knocked it off. “Only, the one I saw wasn’t so big. It plays by the wind.”

“That’s right. The wind blows across its strings to produce music.” Bloom gazed up at the thing and said in a quiet voice, “Unfortunately, I’ve never taken it outside, and so I don’t even know if it works. If you stay long enough, I promise to show it to you.”

The thing gave Cameron the creeps. Keeping his distance from it, he stopped and scratched the back of his head. “Why exactly did you bring me down here?”

Bloom faced him. “These instruments were created for one reason: to play the Astral Music. I worked very hard to acquire them. I also have a willing orchestra. The only thing I need now is the music. And that’s where you come in. I asked you to come to Holloway because I need the Astral Music. That memory of Armonia is still trapped inside of you. I can help you get it out. If you let me.”

Cameron gave a wry smile. “You know how crazy all this sounds?”

Bloom gave him an amused grin as he moved closer, putting the wind harp at his back. “Maybe it is. But aren’t you the least bit curious about all this?”

“I wouldn’t be here if I wasn’t.”

“Good. Then I think it’s obvious. You want to uncover the truth just as much as I do. If that’s the case, then you must trust me. You must let go of your beliefs—of what you think you know of reality. Ultimately, you must be willing to explore uncharted territory.”

With his hands on his hips, Cameron turned and let his gaze sweep across the circle of instruments, taking it all in as he drew in the stale air and let it out in a single exhalation. “I don’t know about this, Bloom. Seems a little farfetched. Talk like this could land us both in a padded cell.”

“Oh, come on, Mr. Blake,” said Bloom, stepping up beside him. “Where’s your sense of adventure?”

“I left it upstairs. And I’m heading back there right now.” Cameron started across the clearing.

Bloom didn’t try to stop him.

When he reached the band of instruments, he moved carefully, not wanting to knock one over or cut himself on a sharp edge. As he approached the elevator, Kalek shot him a curious look, then searched for Bloom, who trailed not too far behind.

“You told me that you lost your inspiration,” Bloom called after him. “You told me you’d do anything to get it back. Now I’m showing you the way. Give yourself to this orchestra, and I will show you the root of inspiration.”

Cameron stepped into the elevator, looked at Kalek, and said flatly, “Take me up.”

Chapter 5

Cameron felt a tremendous relief as he stepped outside to face the sun-blached plaza. His eyes were slow to adjust to the light, so he took the steps carefully. At the bottom step, he turned, looked up, glad to be done with the brooding concert hall. Bloom had nearly dragged him into a dark fantasy, a fantasy that mirrored his own, only exaggerated, drawn out to its insane conclusion. Had he wasted his time coming here? The answer was no. Meeting Bloom and seeing those dark instruments with their nightmarish casings had forced Cameron to face the facts. He'd been chasing a delusion. This was where it must end. Maybe now he could finally move on.

Amber, you were right, he thought. She had hated him for this. She hadn't believed in his pursuit of mystical music. She'd thought that it was a sign of madness. Now he knew she was right. *Why didn't I listen to you? It was crazy, and you knew it.*

He turned his back on the building and started across the plaza, passing the penny fountain on his way to the entrance of Bard Street. He felt mentally exhausted and wanted nothing more than to return to his hotel room and lie down with the AC blasting. *I'll go and sleep this off and then I'll get the hell out of town and put all this behind me.*

With the plaza behind him, he followed Bard Street's downward slope but stopped when he reached the row of dumpsters on his left. He went to the nearest one and threw its lid back, scrunching his face when he caught a whiff of its rotten odor. A noisy cloud of flies buzzed about his head.

I can end this insanity, he thought, sliding his satchel from his shoulder.

He held it over the opened dumpster, but paused. *I can start over. Today. No more of this bullshit.* Still, his fist retained a firm hold on the strap. Could he throw all this away—handfuls of original compositions, stuff he could sell to SilverReel? His music journal? Did he even have the strength to let it go?

The answer was yes.

He let the satchel drop. It struck the bottom of the bin with a heavy thud. Slamming the lid shut, he backed away from the dumpster. A voice far back in his mind shouted, *Don't do this. Don't do this!*

He walked away, telling himself that what he'd done was necessary. With his hands shoved into his pockets, he let his feet carry him down the hill, passing the dark, vacant buildings, fixing his eyes on the end of Bard Street, fifty yards down the hill, where it opened into the square—and reality.

Just then he heard the purr of an engine. He turned as a black limousine left the Calliope's plaza and glided down the road.

Shit. Cameron turned his back on the car and continued toward the square. Only a few moments passed before the car rolled up next to him on his left. A rear window lowered, and Bloom's aged but handsome face appeared, framed in darkness.

"I don't understand this," said Bloom. "You yourself confessed your passion—your need—for the Astral Music. You can't walk away from us now. This is your chance to conclude the story that began with the death of your family."

Cameron stopped, allowing the car to roll on without him for several feet before braking. With his hands in his pockets, he stood watching the car as smoke billowed from its exhaust. Bloom was right. This had to end. But it didn't have to end like this. He'd already taken that first step by throwing away his music.

The car whined as it glided back. Moments later, Bloom was looking at him from inside the open window. "Perhaps a demonstration is in order," he said.

"A demonstration?"

"How else can I convince you? The Astral Music is real. My instruments . . . they are also real. If you let me, I will show you."

Cameron didn't answer right away. Bloom, retreating from the window, took this as unspoken consent. The door opened with a click.

From within, the conductor said, "Get inside, Cameron. Trust me."



Stage lights shone down on a darkly dressed trio of musicians. Pale-faced and somber, the three men stood motionless, waiting as they cradled shiny black instruments, bizarre versions of the clarinet, flute, and oboe.

In the Calliope's auditorium, seated several rows back from the stage, Cameron folded his arms over his chest, feeling uneasy but curious. After all, he'd come all this way, and leaving without so much as a demonstration would be foolish. At least, that's what he kept telling himself.

"What music are they going to perform?" he whispered.

Beside him, Bloom said, "In addition to my unique instruments, I also have a small collection of rare compositions. Astral Music. As I said before, you are not the first to hear, or to compose. What you must understand about the Astral Music is this: no two pieces are ever alike. The experience is completely subjective, and so the artist's rendition is essentially impressionistic. That means the music is as much the artist as it is the influence."

Black instruments shimmered as music—though not in any normal sense of the word—flooded the concert hall, impossibly quiet, expanding into a resonate soundscape. Warbled and slurred, the music echoed with whale songs, howling winds, wind chimes, and ocean waves. One moment Cameron heard the strangely human touch of chanting monks, the next, the drone of machinery. Unlike anything he'd ever heard. At least, unlike anything he'd heard while awake.

Sinking back in his chair, his mouth hanging ajar, he felt himself slipping into a waking dream. Behind closed eyelids, he witnessed a cosmic lightshow, plumes of liquid light, collapsing stars, the birth of planets.

I know this sound, he thought. *This is real. This is Astral Music. Jesus Christ, what have I gotten myself into?*



Behind the Calliope, Simon, wearing a dirty black suit, hunkered over the

leather satchel on the grass before him. Half an hour ago, he'd followed Maestro Bloom's guest out of the Calliope, watched him throw the satchel into the dumpster, then fetched it out when the man had gone away.

He licked his lips and fumbled with the buckle until the strap came loose. His heart quickened. Before delving further, he raised his head and sniffed the air, scanning the grassy area, making sure no one had followed him. Aside from a few AC units whirring, he had the place all to himself.

For several years, he'd come here to this narrow patch of land, a private place beyond the back parking lot, overgrown with weeds and tall grass, flanked by trees. He needed places like these. According to Maestro Bloom, Simon drew too much attention to himself. He was large and clumsy, with a hairless head, deep-set eyes, and crooked teeth. Then there was his deformity. He'd been born without ears, but not without the ability to hear.

Maestro Bloom insisted Simon keep to himself—always—so Simon came here where no one could see, and sometimes he did things. Killed animals. Played with himself. Beneath the AC units he kept a box of skin magazines, a pocketknife, and a box of matches. His private place. No one knew about it. Not even Maestro Bloom.

Satisfied that he had his privacy, he looked inside the satchel. He grunted his disappointment when he found nothing but papers. He withdrew a handful. Handwritten music. Nothing special. Then he turned the bag over and shook it until all the papers inside fell out. Nothing but garbage. No wonder Maestro's guest had thrown it out.

He paused when he noticed an outer pocket. His fingers found the zipper and snagged it open. There was something inside. A small journal with a leather cover. He drew it out and flipped it open. His eyes became narrow slits. He recognized this music, the strange and wonderful phrases. Astral Music. Maestro Bloom had a bunch of it, but Simon hadn't seen it in a long time. And he knew why. The maestro kept it hidden because it was dangerous. At least, it was if you played it with one of the Archetypes.

A sudden guffaw escaped his throat. It sounded like a loon taking flight and it echoed into the woods behind the Calliope.

Something wet and sandpaper-rough slid across his cheek. Simon threw

his hands over his face. His sluggish mind had a lightning quick thought. *He came for his music! He came to kill me! Punish me for taking it!*

But it wasn't Bloom's guest. He moved his hands. It was a shaggy golden retriever. It panted, a stupid grin on its face, its fur dirty and matted with blood. Simon had seen the dog around town, sniffing the trash bins, searching for food. It hadn't found much to eat. Its ribs were showing.

Simon got onto his knees and fetched the butter biscuit from his front pocket. The thing was mostly crumbs now. He'd discovered it in the same dumpsters where he'd found the satchel. Bloom kept him plenty fed, but he liked searching the trash nonetheless.

He held the biscuit out. The dog hesitated, licked its chops, then eased forward, careful at first, and then snagged the treat from Simon's hand. The biscuit disappeared in two chomps. Simon watched. He considered snapping the animal's neck, but then the dog surprised him by licking his face.

He shoved it away, but the animal came back, licking, desperate to thank him. The need to kill or maim went away. Instead, a laugh gurgled up from Simon's chest. Slowly, he ruffled the fur beneath the dog's chin. He heard the jingling of metal and read the dog tags.

Sam.



In his hotel room, Cameron woke from a deep sleep. It took several minutes before he remembered where he was. He recalled the private performance of a trio of musicians with alien instruments—music that had worked into his brain with almost hallucinogenic influence. The rest was blurry. He lay in bed for a moment, then got up.

An hour later he stood in the dark before the Bard Street Tavern. A neon-blue Pabst Blue Ribbon sign buzzed in its window. He climbed the low steps to the door that had been painted blue a hundred years ago, now chipped and showing wood.

He went inside and found a dark, narrow barroom, with brick walls, hardwood flooring, and ventilation ducting running along the ceiling. Across the room, a group of burly men in blue jean jackets with cut-off sleeves played a game of pool. Judging from their work boots, Cameron figured most of

them worked at the nearby paper mill. Johnny Cash's "Ring of Fire" droned from the jukebox as Cameron made his way to the bar.

He found a stool among a row of men drinking quietly by themselves. An older man sat hunkered over the bar, a green John Deere baseball cap shoved down on his brown hair, yellow-tinted glasses hiding his eyes. He glanced indifferently at Cameron. No one said much around the bar. Just a group of men, sitting over their beers, like the loneliest people in America. Cameron felt right at home.

The bartender came over, wiping the table before him with a dirty dishrag. He had a long face with a thin nose and scraggly hair kept tied back in a long ponytail. Several of his front teeth were missing. "Get ya something?"

"Black and tan."

When the beer came, Cameron took a sip and turned on his stool. His gaze drifted to the far end of the room, which was cloaked in shadow. Letting his eyes adjust, he noticed a stage that ran along the back wall. Someone was sitting up there in the dark, a hulking figure with beefy shoulders, perched on a stool. The tip of a cigarette burned like an evil red eye and then faded.

Behind him, the bartender said, "You want another?"

Cameron blinked. He'd finished off his beer without realizing it. He turned and waved the bartender closer, then stifled a cringe at the smell of the guy's breath. "Who's that on stage?"

The bartender placed his elbows on the bar, his leathery face crinkled into a grin that deepened the lines around his eyes. "His name's Simon. Comes in and plays every once in a while. Sometimes he plays; sometimes he jus' sits there. I don't pay him, so I don't make him do one or the other. Still, I hope he plays tonight. He puts on one hell of a show."

There was something strange in the man's tone, but before Cameron could press him further, the man named Simon climbed down from the stage. The barroom fell silent. Almost everyone made an effort to avert their eyes, except Cameron, who spun around on his stool and watched. Simon weighed close to two hundred pounds, was bald, and had a thick neck. He slouched his shoulders and lumbered like a Neanderthal, and each footstep made a heavy thud. A nearby light revealed his chalky-white face, aged and creased,

with drooping cheeks and slanted eyes. He had no ears, only holes where his ears should be. He stopped at the door and looked over his shoulder.

For one shuddering moment their eyes met. Cameron felt a sudden sense of dread, a kind of psychic impression, as if he were staring into the eyes of a monster. The feeling lingered long after Simon shouldered the door open and disappeared into the dark.

“Shame he didn’t play tonight,” the man in the John Deere hat said evenly beside him. He kept on staring straight ahead and drinking his beer, speaking to no one in particular. “Sure would like to have seen that.”



“Hey, Bent, did you hear something?” Chief Dale Dunlap asked his partner, as he slowed his police cruiser to a crawl.

He had just turned onto Bard Street, a dead-end road that no one used much. Old buildings, nearly all of them abandoned, watched the road with vacant faces, with windows like empty eyes and doorways like yawning mouths. Only Bard Street Tavern, squeezed between two vacant buildings, still managed to keep itself going. A blue neon sign blinked in its window and a weatherworn awning formed an umbrella over its rickety front porch. Music filtered out from the bar’s front door, but the chief felt certain he’d heard something else entirely.

Rolling past the bar, Dunlap thrust his head out the opened window and listened as warm air rushed against his face. He heard nothing but the rumble of his engine, echoing against the brick walls. After a moment he eased back inside and shook his head. “Sounded like a . . .”

Sounded like a scream, he’d almost said, but such a thing seemed careless to blurt out. Besides, he’d been jumping at shadows all night.

Sergeant Aaron Bentley, “Bent” to all his friends, sat forward, snapped off the radio, and listened, looking like an idiot in the green glow of the dashboard lights with his mouth hanging open. Both officers listened intently.

At fifty-six years old, Dale Dunlap still considered himself in good health and strong as a mule. Standing just over six feet tall, with broad shoulders and hands the size of cement blocks, people tended to trust his authority. But just lately he’d begun to feel his age, especially in the mornings when he’d

find an old, weathered face staring back at him from the bathroom mirror. Moments like these also tested his age. He'd stopped trusting himself.

After a moment, Bentley shook his head. "I don't hear nothin', Chief. Probably just somebody . . ."

Dunlap held up a hand as he heard the sound again. Bentley flinched and sat back with a sour face. Holding his breath, the chief once again poked his head outside, listening. The cruiser topped the hill and entered the plaza where the Calliope's hulking silhouette expanded across the horizon. The chief braked and put the car into park, and both officers listened.

Dunlap had once considered the Calliope just about the greatest place on earth, back in the early fifties when country music singers performed a country music much different from present-day standards. It was almost too long ago to remember. For decades, the concert hall had slowly fallen into disrepair, a dive where anyone with a guitar could sing.

A ghostly squeal broke the silence—the sound of a pig getting its throat cut. Dunlap and Bentley both bristled, their eyes bulging.

"What the fuck is that?" Dunlap whispered. He leaned over the steering wheel to get a better look at the music hall. Several lights illuminated the top landing, causing the glass front doors to shine. A dark figure was standing on the top step. It was nothing but a silhouette, standing still, but Dunlap felt eyes boring into his skull.

"You know what that is?" said Bentley. "That's a violin."

Dunlap nodded, squinting to get a better look. "You see him up there? What's he doing?"

"I think someone decided to make a little music," Bentley offered.

Dunlap looked at him. Bentley stared back, both of them sensing something out of place. It was irrational that someone would stand up there in the middle of the night and serenade an empty plaza. A warm breeze wafted through the open windows, smelling of the river only a quarter mile beyond the concert hall.

For years, Holloway's legislation had squabbled over the concert hall's fate, beginning when Hal Barrett, the previous owner, had died in his sleep. Barrett had left the building to Fairfax County as a gesture of goodwill toward his hometown. But the blessing had quickly become a curse. Right

away, some big questions had arisen. On one hand, a group had petitioned to put the Calliope on the state registry for historical conservation. This meant that the county would ultimately take full responsibility for the building's maintenance and upkeep. An opposing group had argued that such a feat would only burden taxpayers with restoration fees. It was in the county's best interest, they'd pointed out, to allow investors to purchase the building and keep it running. They'd finally settled on the latter. The Calliope went on the market. A decade passed, and she'd sat on the county's property books, draining the town's budget.

Then one day Leonin Bloom showed up. He'd bought the Calliope and thrown around enough money to send heads spinning. It was another year before Dunlap had met Leonin Bloom at a fundraiser, hosted by Mayor Finny and other big players within the community. Dunlap still remembered his first impression of the man. Cultured. Handsome. Intense. Like a politician. Maybe that's why the mayor had admired him so much. Maybe that was also why Dunlap had felt an intuitive disliking toward him. The one time he had done a little background investigating, he'd gotten a call from the mayor, instructing him to "mind his own goddamn business."

After that, Dunlap stayed away. After all, the bastard wasn't doing anything illegal; at least, nothing that he could see. Over the years, Bloom and his musicians had become more and more reclusive until no one ever saw them anymore. They'd inspired spooky stories, and a myth shrouded the entire group now.

And now the place was alive again.

"You know something?" Bentley said in a cracked voice, his face looking boyish in the dash lights. "That son of a bitch is giving me the goddamn creeps."

A chill suddenly scurried down Dunlap's back. He nodded, grabbed the gear shift, and jerked it into reverse. "Yeah," he muttered, jamming his foot to the gas pedal and sending the cruiser darting backwards in a tight curve. Shifted around and peering out the back window, Dunlap swung the cruiser around so that it faced the exit. He looked over at Bentley and tried to sound calm. "How 'bout we get the fuck out of here?"

Chapter 6

Cameron woke the next morning haunted by regret. His journal. He'd spent years filling its pages with otherworldly music, glimpses of dreams and death, only to throw it away just to indulge a single irrational impulse.

What was I thinking? My journal. My work. Those pages were filled with Astral Music. Rare. Powerful. And I just threw it away.

The thought ruined his breakfast at Dooley's, a little diner on the square. Afterwards, he walked directly to Bard Street, intent on retrieving his satchel, but when he reached the dumpsters, they were already emptied. He went inside the nearest shop to inquire.

He didn't like the answer he got.

The pain of loss followed him all the way to the Calliope, but once he stepped inside, he forgot all about it.

"Just tell me one thing," said Cameron, as he stood before the maestro's desk, leaning forward with his hands braced against the edge so he could look directly into the conductor's eyes. "What happens if we actually do this?"

Bloom sat back in his chair with both elbows resting on his desktop and the fingers of each hand laced together. He regarded Cameron thoughtfully for a moment. "I can't say for sure, Cameron. But isn't doing something for the sake of curiosity enough?"

"No. Not good enough." Cameron straightened and ran a hand over his jaw, where a five o'clock shadow was forming. "All my life this thing has

haunted me. I've had this feeling, like I was supposed to hear that music so I could write it down. Then you show me the Archetypes. You say you know how to make it happen. But you still haven't told me why."

Bloom's eyes burned brightly. "To be honest, I don't have a reason for you. Why does man need to know anything? Why explore the stars or question the nature of existence? We do these things because we must. You and I have everything needed to solve a very old mystery. What is the Music of the Spheres? Who knows what the answer will yield? Maybe nothing at all. Or maybe it will reveal something extraordinary—an explanation of what we are and where we come from. Maybe even the nature of God."

Sighing, Cameron all but collapsed into the armchair behind him. He leaned forward and braced himself for the commitment he was about to make. Even though he'd convinced himself earlier that day this was the right thing to do, he suddenly felt wrong about it.

"Okay. To hell with it," he said. "I'm in."

"I am glad to hear that, Mr. Blake."

"It's Cameron," he said. "When do we do this thing?"

"I admire your enthusiasm. But I must warn you. We have a long road ahead of us. One does not tap the memories of the soul without certain preparations."

"What sort of preparations?"

"Attuning. You must first achieve a state of psychological and spiritual preparedness before you can compose Armonia. Not an easy task, I assure you. I have something that will help. But this will not happen overnight."

Cameron's shoulders sagged. He hadn't intended on staying in Holloway more than a few weeks. This only gave him more time to change his mind. "Shit, Bloom. I don't have all the time in the world. I've got a life. Bills to pay. How long are we talking about?"

"That all depends on you." Bloom spread his hands. "You must respect the gravity of our endeavor. We are attempting to mimic the rhythms, impulses, and vibrations of the universe. This won't be easy. But I do believe the rewards will be beyond anything we can imagine."

Cameron considered this quietly.

“Together you and I can achieve great things. But first you have to trust me.”

“So when do we start?”

Bloom leaned back with his hands on his desk. “I promised you that I would help you tap your creative potential. That is precisely what we must do first. So tomorrow evening, you will join me for your first session. Call it a training exercise. As I already mentioned, I have something that will help you.”

“What is it?”

Bloom smiled and whispered, “Inspiration.”



Mr. Tom Farrell, Bernie High’s music director, grinned eagerly when Charlie stepped into his small, book-cluttered office. An old man in a suit was sitting in a plastic chair to his left.

“Come on inside, Charlie,” said Mr. Farrell from behind his desk. His smile vanished the moment he saw the boy’s bruised face. “You hurt yourself?”

“Fell off my bike,” Charlie said. Same excuse all day. He didn’t feel like explaining how some assholes had thrown a football at him.

Mr. Farrell looked like he wanted to say more but then dismissed it. Instead, he waved a pudgy hand at the old man. “This is Mr. Kalek. He’s the administrator with the Holloway Orchestra.”

Charlie swallowed the lump in his throat. Until this moment, he’d thought that maybe someone had found out what he did with his free time in the toilet stalls during lunch period. He didn’t know why he’d been summoned. But at least he knew it wasn’t because of that.

“Nice to meet you, sir,” he said to the old man.

“Sit down, Charlie,” said Mr. Farrell. He was a beefy man with a pink face, and his flabby chin shook like Jell-O when he spoke. “We want to talk to you about something.”

Charlie scuffled over to the chair and sat down. He put his hands in his lap and dropped his gaze to the floor. Adults made him nervous.

“Mr. Kalek, here,” said Mr. Farrell, “came today on behalf of the Holloway Chamber Orchestra. Apparently, you’ve got their attention.”

“That’s right,” Kalek added with a grin. He sat with his bony knees together and his briefcase in his lap. “Mr. Bloom has taken a great deal of interest in your skills as a pianist, and he wants you to consider coming to the Calliope and auditioning for a seat in the orchestra.”

Before Charlie could so much as breathe, Mr. Farrell sat forward and said, “As you know, Charlie, this is a great honor. Until now, the Holloway Orchestra has kept its doors completely shut to outside musicians.”

“Mr. Bloom has a strict philosophy when it comes to his orchestra,” said Kalek. “He doesn’t usually allow others into the group. But he’s making an exception. And he has his eye on you.”

“Why me?” said Charlie, meeting his gaze. He was sure Kalek had a few wires crossed.

“Why, because, well, because . . .” Kalek looked stumped for words. He looked over at Mr. Farrell for help.

“Because you are the best pianist this school has to offer,” said Mr. Farrell. “And we are all very proud of you. I stand firmly behind you on this. So does the entire music department.”

“Eh, Charlie,” Kalek interrupted, “perhaps I could convince you to meet with Mr. Bloom. He will explain more to you. Here is my card.” He handed a crisp business card to him. “I hope you will come by and talk to him. Today after school, if possible.”

“Today?” said Charlie. His voice cracked with surprise.

“Why not?” Mr. Farrell asked. “Something more pressing, Charlie?” He laughed as if in on some joke.

“No,” said Charlie. “I guess not.”



It was nearly sundown when the taxi nosed its way into the open front gates of Orpheum Manor. Cameron, sitting in the backseat with his face pressed against the dirty window, gazed at the mansion sprawled across the hilltop like some mossy-stoned English country house. Its gray rock walls, interspersed with beams of red timber, rose up like shelves of broken earth. Its shingled peaks broke the canopy of the surrounding oaks and ash. The

place cast an inky black shadow across the lawn, and the windows scattered across its facade were all dark and curtained.

As the taxi followed the driveway, Cameron noticed several more properties on the estate beyond the manor. The first two were wooden-framed guest houses, both modest in size and nondescript. Then he saw the soaring rooftop of a third structure, this one twice the size of the front mansion.

“What in the hell is that?” Cameron muttered.

“Oh, that? That’s the old Beachum Sanitarium,” said the driver, who until now had been content with driving in silence.

Cameron glanced at the rearview mirror at his driver. The guy must have been in his early fifties, but there was something undeniably childish about him. He wore a boonie hat pulled down to his ears, its strap dangling beneath his chin. He had a round, friendly face, with skin the color and texture of a crumpled paper bag, probably from having worked a lifetime out in the sun. He wore a threadbare Hawaiian shirt, and Cameron guessed, Bermuda shorts to match. “I didn’t catch your name,” said Cameron.

The man looked over his shoulder and smiled amiably. “Name’s Buzz.”

“All right, Buzz. What else do you know about this place?”

The man shrugged. “Aw, heck, just about everything, I s’pose. My mom used to tell me stories about it. Some doctor and his wife—she was a nurse—built the sanitarium after the Civil War. They wanted to rehabilitate wounded soldiers. Only problem was the tuberculosis outbreak. Killed a bunch of people, and they had to shut it down after that.”

The driveway swung right and Cameron got a better look at the sanitarium, about a football field away. The massive, dilapidated structure looked like something out of a nightmare, a hulking building of brick walls and narrow windows. Its roof gave way to gables and dormers, where chimneys and stovepipes sprouted like blackened weeds. A covered porch, enclosed by busted railings, ran the length of its face, partially concealed by bushes and fir trees, giving it a brooding, haunted atmosphere, almost watchful.

The driveway ended in a cul-de-sac before the mansion, and Cameron lost sight of the sanitarium. He reached over Buzz’s shoulder and slapped a twenty dollar bill into the man’s hand. “Will that do?”

“Oh, that’s more ’n enough.” Buzz smiled and tucked the twenty into his shirt pocket, then plucked a card from it and handed it to Cameron. “Here’s my number in case you need us. Me and my brother Kevin own the business together. Ain’t a time of day one of us can’t be persuaded to give you a ride. If I can’t, Kevin will do it.”

Cameron promised he would, got out, and watched as Buzz sputtered away down the long driveway. An uneasy feeling came over him, as if someone was watching him from one of the windows. Just as he drew a calming breath, the front doors of the mansion swung open, and Kalek stepped outside.

“Mr. Blake, we thought something had happened,” said the old man. “I sent one of our limos to your hotel to pick you up, but you were already gone.”

“You know, I avoid riding in limos,” said Cameron as he tromped up the steps. “They make me feel like an asshole.” He smiled playfully, but Kalek didn’t seem amused.

“Please come inside.” The old man turned on his heels and marched inside, leaving Cameron to stare after him with a faltering grin.

Cranky old bastard, he thought as he stepped inside. He stopped just inside the foyer, mouth gaping as he turned in a circle and took in the high ceiling, tall windows, and staircases that reared up to the next floor. The mansion seemed even bigger inside. There were a number of servants drifting about, but they paid him no attention.

They moved deeper into the house, working their way along the western wing until arriving at a tall oak door. Kalek tapped on it twice and swung it open.

They entered into a dimly lit study, a large room carpeted with Persian rugs and furnished with Victorian chairs, tables, and cabinets made of black walnut, bog oak, and rosewood. Then there was the clutter: a rich array of art and collector’s pieces, a suit of armor, a marble statue of a Greek goddess, oil paintings on easels, which shared the walls with bookshelves. And finally, a piano.

Among the treasures, Bloom, overdressed as usual, sat at a round table at the center of the room. He didn’t bother getting up.

“Mr. Blake,” he said, raising up from his chair. He smiled and motioned to an empty chair. “So good of you to come. Please have a seat.”

Kalek nodded, and Cameron moved ahead, glancing about him as he took a seat at the table. His eyes fell to a polished wooden box beneath Bloom's folded hands. The box looked like a humidor. A small stack of paper and a pen lay next to the box.

"Quite a setup you have here," said Cameron.

"As you already know, I am a passionate collector."

Cameron wondered, *How the hell does he pay for all this?*

"I hope you are enjoying your stay in Holloway so far?"

"It's fine. But I'm ready to get to work."

"Yes, of course," said Bloom. "I assure you, we all are. And today is our first step in that direction. Somewhere inside of you is the memory of Armonia. All we have to do is find it and bring it to the surface."

"So how do we do it?"

"We must first exorcise the demons," said Bloom, smiling mischievously.

"Sounds painful," Cameron said, trying to keep things light. It didn't work. His gaze fell to where Bloom laid his hands over the wooden box.

"For many years, I have been searching for a Tone Poet, that is, someone like you who has touched Armonia, the vibratory center of all things, and whose astral body, as a result, resonates with those divine vibrations."

Cameron blinked. The *Music Makers* article had also referred to him as a tone poet, in an entirely different capacity, of course. He put his hands up. "Slow down. Astral body?"

"Put aside your beliefs and consider this. Every person has a soul, or astral body, which in turn resonates with its own vibratory pitch. Think of this as your own personal energy field."

"I got it. I think. So you're saying that my . . . soul . . . resonated at a certain frequency when I came into contact with . . ."

"Armonia. Yes." Bloom held up a finger. "But a problem presents itself. The astral body cannot hold that resonate vibration for long. Over time, the experience wanes, becomes buried beneath discordant impressions. This is certainly the case with you."

Cameron snorted. "That's an understatement."

"Yes. Your soul is plagued with Discord, and this creates interference.

The astral body cannot remember its resonant state at the moment it came into contact with Armonia until you have harmonic balance.”

Cameron nodded. “So what do we do?”

“We compose Nocturnes.”

With a cold grin, Bloom spun the wooden box around and opened its lid. Lying across a crumbled bed of midnight blue velvet was a tuning fork, seven inches long, made from a bronze-like alloy. Two delicately sculpted snakes with fine scales and rubies for eyes were curled about its two prongs.

“The Tongue,” said Bloom. “A unique instrument. Most tuning forks produce tones by which a musician tunes his instrument. This fork, however, produces a tone by which the musician tunes himself. This is called Attuning.”

Swallowing around a dry throat, Cameron studied Bloom’s face, while alarms rang in his head. *Attuning? God, this is crazy.*

“You see,” Bloom went on, “certain sounds, properly chosen, can actually heal the astral body. Each session with the fork will bring you closer to inner harmony. And once you have Attuned, you will never be the same again. You will know how to hear the universe, and when you can do that, you will hear the music of God.”

Cameron chewed the inside of his cheek. The fork looked ominous in the candlelight, somehow pagan. He could almost hear it ringing, but that must have been his imagination. “How long will this take?”

“Who can say? Seven sessions at least—one session for each chakra. But it may take more than that. Ultimately, it will rely on you.”

Chakras. Cameron knew a little about those. Imaginary energy points. New Age hocus-pocus. He decided not to press the subject further for now.

The maestro plucked the fork from the velvet and held it between his thumb and forefinger, allowing the light to glint off its edges. Cameron’s eyes went to it.

Kalek got up from his chair and went to the windows and began drawing the curtains. One by one, the windows were draped, and the room became darker and darker, until Cameron could hardly see the man sitting across from him. Soon, Kalek returned, struck a match, and lit a candle at the center of the table.

“Gentlemen, I apologize,” said the old man, looking from the maestro to

Cameron with jittery eyes, “but I must be going. I will be nearby if you need me.” He crossed the room and then back-stepped through the French doors while drawing them shut. Before disappearing altogether, he said, “Good luck, Mr. Blake.” Then he was gone, leaving Cameron and Bloom alone at the table.

Cameron cleared his throat. Kalek’s hurried exit gave him an uneasy feeling. All about the room, the candles sputtered and danced.

“Please, take this now.” Bloom handed him the fork.

The instrument was much heavier than he’d anticipated. He held it by the stem, allowing the candlelight to gleam against its intricate metalwork. The serpents coiled about its prongs seemed animate. He felt the buzz of electricity work its way down his arm. “So how does it work?”

The maestro sat back in his chair with his arms crossed over his chest. “Once you strike the fork against a solid surface, it will begin ringing. In turn, it will force your astral body to sympathize with its peculiar tone. When this happens, the Attuning process will begin.” Bloom leaned forward, his eyes wide with excitement. “By its very nature, the Tongue has certain . . . consequences. As the soul begins to harmonize, it will reject Discord as something . . . abject. Once this Discord reaches the light of consciousness, it will have a sound, and it must be written down. Write it down and be free of it.”

The fork emanated strong pulses down Cameron’s arm. He laid his left hand flat on the stack of blank music sheets.

“So let’s begin, shall we?” Bloom’s brow darkened and he said, “Tap the fork.” When Cameron hesitated, the man leaned forward, bared his teeth, and hissed, “Tap it!”

Swallowing the lump in his throat, Cameron closed his eyes. He ignored the rabid instinct to put the fork down. He’d come too far to turn away now. If there was any truth in all this, he’d find out soon enough. He held his breath and struck the tuning fork against the edge of the oak table.

A sudden metallic skirl, like microphone feedback, rang from the small instrument. He nearly dropped the fork as several more tones rang impossibly at once. The sound filled him with something dark and corrupt.

The buzzing of houseflies. Screams of pain and anger. Sorrowful sobs. A terrific ache thrummed in his head, causing his teeth to rattle in their sockets. Blood spilled from his ears and nose. Pressure swelled at the base of his skull, threatening to crack it open.

Cameron clenched his teeth, groaned. He dropped the fork and it clattered to the table. *Oh God, help me!* Then another thought: *This is why Kalek left in a hurry. So he wouldn't have to hear this.*

A cold darkness spilled into the room, snuffing out the candle flame, and throttling him with a bout of rabid depression. Fantasies of suicide raced through his mind. He imagined slitting his wrists with a rusted razor blade. He saw himself hanging from a rope, his feet kicking beneath him.

"Your soul wants to resonate with the fork," said a far-away voice. "Let it!"

Cameron felt his thoughts dissolve. He was only a small boy, alone and frightened, and sitting on a bench before a massive black piano. He looked down at the piano keys. He didn't know this piano, and he was too short for the stool. Catching his breath, he looked around the antiquated room. Shafts of moonlight angled in through tall windows and painted blue rectangles across a marble floor. There were paintings on the walls and bookshelves lined with dusty books. A dark fireplace yawned open like the mouth of a corpse. How had he gotten here? Where were his mom and dad? In his growing confusion, he felt the touch of eyes on the back of his neck. Oh God, he was scared. Mom and Dad and Brent—they were all gone, weren't they? They'd died and left him alone.

Wood creaked. Standing on the back of the piano was a small boy with thick blond hair. It was Brent, his older brother. He knew that without having to look. But he looked anyway. Brent wore the same shorts and t-shirt that he died in. Blood was still splashed down his front.

"Go on and play something, Cam," said Brent. He sounded mad. He had every right to be. "That's what you're supposed to do, isn't it? Well, isn't it?"

Cameron's eyes widened with a sudden flash of inspiration. Music would make the nightmare go away.

He closed his eyes and began playing. The music came easily, a sad, aching melody, somehow familiar, somehow connected to his body. Playing

it was like lancing the poison from an old wound. He gave himself freely to it, and with every note, he felt the release of ancient pressures in his chest.

This is me. These are my bones. My pain is music.

Icy cold fingers touched the back of his neck. Cameron snapped his head around to find his mother standing next to him, wearing her burial dress, her head grotesquely swollen, the way she'd looked while lying in her coffin.

She whispered, "You remember the song, don't you, Cam?"

Panic gripped him. "No, I don't remember it, Mom! I can't remember!"

Brent, still standing atop the piano, spoke up, "But you have to remember."

"I didn't do it, Brent. It wasn't my fault. I didn't want you to die!"

Just then the wood cracked like thin ice beneath Brent's feet, and he dropped into a splintered hole on the back of the piano. As Cameron watched, the hole filled with blood that sloshed over the edges and ran in rivulets along the top of the piano.

Cameron sobbed—it was an old pain, one he'd kept bottled up for a long, long time. Again, a hand touched his arm, but this time it was Bloom who shook him and then pressed a pen into his hand. They were both seated at the table. He hadn't moved at all.

"That's it, Cameron," Bloom whispered urgently. "There is your inspiration. Now write, damn you. Write!"

Cameron blinked, disoriented, sluggish. His eyes raced to the piano, over by the window. But how?

"Do as I say," Bloom hissed.

Cameron looked down at the blank music sheets scattered before him. He suddenly realized that he didn't want to compose. The idea frightened him. He shook his head and stifled tears. "No. I can't. Please, don't make me."

"Do you want this nightmare to end? Then write the fucking thing down!"

It seemed wrong. Those dark feelings had no place in the real world, even if only in the form of music. Still, the sound was rattling around in Cameron's head, and he had a feeling that it would just go on and on if he didn't obey Bloom.

Finally, Cameron set the fork on the table, picked up his pen and a handful of paper, and started writing.



Gold capped the treetops as the sun plunged beneath the horizon. Thunderheads the size of blue whales rolled in, as if they'd been waiting for the sun to go down before starting any trouble. Hob could smell the coming rain in the air. It was nice.

He rocked somberly in his rocking chair on his front porch, which he'd built himself the summer before last. His Gibson guitar rested quietly in his lap. As a steady breeze rushed at him, bringing with it the smell of pine, he walked his fingers along the fretboard, playing a lick that expressed the bittersweet passage of the sun. The small Guerrilla amplifier at his side threw the rusty sounds across his yard.

In the dying light, Boots Bailey's heavy silhouette came strutting across Hob's weedy lot. Boots wore his familiar khaki pants and cotton shirt, rolled up to the elbows. He was heavy-set, with an ashy face and graying hair. He carried his guitar with one hand and a bottle of Jack Daniels in his other.

Son of a bitch remembered to bring the juice this time, thought Hob as his fingers skittered up the fretboard. Wednesday night jam sessions had become an unspoken tradition for the two since Clara had passed away in the summer of 2007. Boots would come over, and the two would play out on the front porch every Wednesday night. But both of them were getting on in their years, and recently they seemed to cancel more sessions due to health complications. Either it was Boots's hemorrhoids burning him up so he couldn't sit still or Hob's arthritis drawing up his fingers. It was a sad and sobering realization. They were getting old.

Sometimes they hardly said a word to each other and just played. Boots didn't bother with saying hello when he thudded up the creaky porch steps and settled into the chair next to Hob. Boots didn't have to ask him if he wanted a drink. That was understood. Boots splashed three fingers of Jack into the glasses that Hob had set out for them. Hob kept a bottle in the cabinet beneath the sink for the few occasions that Boots forgot his. With a glassy clatter, they made a silent toast and drank. Then Hob returned to the lick he'd been fooling with, and Boots joined in neatly with his impeccable

ear. For a while, the corner of West Cheatham Street and Moonlight Drive echoed with their somber and gritty sound.

When an hour or so passed, Hob leaned his guitar against the wall behind him and gazed pensively out at the old houses across the street of the lower-end neighborhood. At one time it'd been all right, but now most of the homes had fallen into disrepair. Ronny Wood, his neighbor across the street, hadn't cleaned his yard or mowed the grass in several months. There was an old jalopy sitting on blocks in the corner of the lot, with weeds grown all around it.

But Hob wasn't thinking about the state of the neighborhood or about calling up Ronny about neglect. Instead, his mind returned to that strange fellow he'd met at the Calliope. Cameron Blake.

"Know what tomorrow is?" Hob asked in a rusty voice.

Boots shrugged. His chocolate-colored skin sank him easily into the shadows, while his thick-rimmed glasses reflected the glowing tip of Hob's cigarette. "August seven, I s'pose."

"That's right. August seven. The day Clara left this earth, God rest her soul."

Boots set his guitar down. "That so?" He shook his head and tut-tutted sympathetically.

Hob shook his head. "All these years gone by an' I still ain't got over her."

"Well, Clara was a good woman," Boots said, as if that explained it all. And in a way, it did.

Drawing from his cigarette, Hob winced as a curl of smoke burned at his eyes.

"You believe in ghosts?"

Boots' eyes widened in surprise. "Say what?"

"I was scrubbin' floors at the Calliope when I heard music from the auditorium. Wasn't nobody supposed to be in there, so I went to check it out. The closer I got, the more familiar it sounded. I thought to myself, 'No, I'm just makin' shit up.' So I stopped and listened, and you know what I heard?"

"Not a clue."

"Somebody was playin' one of Clara's songs. 'The Color Blues'—you remember the one?"

“Well, sure I do,” Boots said with a nod. “Played it right here on this porch a thousand times.”

Hob nodded and rubbed the goosebumps from his arms. “Clara wrote that song. Hell, we sort of wrote it together. She sang it nearly every show.”

During the last ten years of Clara’s life, before cancer had turned her belly into one big tumor, Clara and Hob had traveled as a small band. They played two or three shows a week, on the road from Charleston to Atlanta and sometimes all the way out to Austin. Clara had a smoky voice, and she felt every note. Hob played the guitar. Sometimes he sang too. Stephano “Biz” Wheaton played the keys.

“At first I thought it was a ghost. You know how that place can be. Then I just figured it was somebody who knows me and wanted to mess with my head some. Even thought it might be you. So I crept over to the stage door and cracked it open a bit, so I could get a better look. Well, this cat . . .” Hob shook his head, “I ain’t never seen him before. A white boy. He didn’t know I was there, neither. I scared him shitless. Guy jumped so hard he fell off the bench and busted the shit out of his head.”

“Damn!” Boots said, cackling and slapping his knee.

“He did too,” Hob went on. “Damn near cracked his skull open. Thought he was gonna have a concussion.”

The two laughed at this for another moment before Hob became somber again and looked at Boots’s white eyes, now seeming to float in the dusky dark. “But when I asked him where he’d learned the song, he just looked at me like I was crazy. Said he couldn’t remember what he was playin’.”

Far away, thunder rolled, a muffled sound, ominous, but somehow comforting. They both turned their heads, gazing out at the darkening sky. It had gone a bruised color, with yellow around the edges.

Boots sighed and shoved his glasses up the ridge of his nose with a finger.

“You know, I bet that fella heard it at one of Clara’s shows. You guys got around back in the day.”

Hob shook his head quietly. “Man, I don’t think so.” He looked at Boots. “You know what I think?”

His friend said nothing for a long moment, but his eyes were wide and alert. “Oh, I suppose you gonna say somethin’ like it was her.”

“You damn right. It was her, Boots.” Hob gazed out at the starless sky. “She’s tryin’ to tell me somethin’.”

Boots quietly drew from his cigarette. “You start talkin’ like that and before long you gonna start believin’ it. That old girl’s been gone a long time.”

“Don’t matter. I know what I heard.” Hob splashed some more whiskey into his glass and gulped it down with a grimace, then said it again, this time to himself. “I know what I heard.”



“Fat whore? Fat whore?” Carrie Belle muttered to herself as she hurried down the dark sidewalk, head bent against the rain that fell in gray sheets. She stayed close to the shops; every now and then she caught a break beneath an awning, but it was too late to stay dry. The storm had come fast and hard. Puddles had already started forming on the sidewalks, reflecting the glow from the streetlamps. Caught without an umbrella, she now found herself completely soaked, with mascara running down her cheeks and her hair matted to her face.

But she didn’t care. She was beyond caring about anything. At least she didn’t have to hide her tears. The rain took care of that.

She said it once more, just to test and measure the sound of those two words—just to relive the sting of embarrassment. She couldn’t believe that he’d called her that. He knew how sensitive she was about her weight.

I hate him, she thought. *I’ve never hated anyone so much in my life*. She considered going back and spitting in his face. She should have done that the first time and saved her drink.

The rain came down harder. There was nothing left to do but trudge onward and get to Karma Koffee as fast as she could. That’s where she’d find her friends, people who loved her, who would never call her such awful insults.

The rain had started two hours earlier, around the time Carrie Belle and Jon had sat down for dinner at the Lemon Tree, the nicest restaurant on the square. This had been Jon’s treat, a special date, and it had started out so

nicely, with candlelight and soft music. But then they'd moved on to drinks—vodka martinis. These came and went quickly. Both of them got fairly sloshed after their third. She'd been comfortably buzzed when Jon leaned forward, touched her hand, and asked something he'd never asked before.

“So tell me, how many guys have you been with?”

Carrie Belle had nearly choked on her drink. She'd blushed, refused to talk about it, but after he pushed and prodded, she relented. “Eight guys,” she'd said, although that wasn't exactly true. There might have been a few more. But it all sort of depended on what you what you counted as sex and what you counted as just old-fashioned fooling around.

The conversation had been fun at first, sort of sexy, too, and Jon kept pressing her, smiling all the while. He wanted to know who she'd slept with and when, about the crazier places she'd done it. She even confessed to the time she and Roger Doolittle had gotten it on behind the bleachers during a Bernie High football game. She'd never told that to anyone.

The whole time she talked, Jon had acted like it was no big deal, like it didn't bother him at all, and she'd felt sort of liberated with talking about it. She should have seen the trap he so carefully set. The more she divulged about her sex life, the redder his face got. Then came an unpleasant gleam in his eyes and an edge to his voice. Of the eight boys she'd been with, she'd only told him the names of seven. Then she'd gone and mentioned Cooter, something of which she was not very proud. The conversation soured.

“Cooter Scruggs?” Jon had nearly come out of his chair. “You let that piece of shit fuck you? Gaw-damn!”

He said that last word with such disgust that she'd felt like crying.

For a moment she just sat there, stunned, her mouth hanging open, as if he'd just slapped her in the face. She knew Cooter's reputation. He treated girls like pigs. She'd heard all sorts of stories about blowjobs in the boys' restrooms. She figured Cooter told stories about her too. But what did she care?

“I can't believe you fucked him,” Jon said it loud enough for the old couple sitting at the neighboring table to hear and cast them nasty looks.

Carrie Belle reacted without thinking. Suddenly the rest of her martini went right into his face. Everyone turned around then, a hundred eyes, gaping

with something between shock and amusement. She'd been so humiliated, and it must have been the embarrassment that pushed Jon over the edge, causing him to stand up, knock his chair over, and shout, "You're nothin' but a fat whore!"

Everyone in the restaurant heard him. There were gasps and even a few giggles. Carrie Belle had burst into tears and went running out of the restaurant. She'd never been so humiliated in all her life.

The sky rumbled and she wiped her face. The night had gotten even darker, and now she was wet and cold. "I guess it's over then," she sobbed. They couldn't get back together, if only as a matter of principle. When lightning flashed, she looked to her right, just beyond the coffee shop. Bard Street. She saw a neon light buzzing in a window. A drink sounded better than coffee.

She splashed over to the mouth of the narrow road, where rain spilled in rivulets from the cornices of the old buildings. Bard Street was dark, with only that single light buzzing away. She knew the place. The Bard Street Tavern. She'd never been there before, but it was obviously open.

She stomped up the rickety front steps. At the door she hesitated, but then heard music, and laughter too. She shoved the door open and went inside.

Everyone looked at her when she closed the door behind her. It was quiet and dark. Cigarette smoke gathered around the dim ceiling lights. A few men sat at the bar along the far wall. Three men stood docilely at the pool table. There weren't any women around, but this didn't bother her much as she shook off the rain and crossed the creaky wooden floor toward the bar.

She sat at a corner barstool and began rummaging through her purse until she found a crumpled pack of cigarettes. After stuffing one between her lips, she tried lighting it, but her hand shook so violently that she couldn't get the flame to its tip.

Finally, a fist reached out from the other side of the bar, and a small flame leaped from it. Carrie Belle looked up and met the bartender's watery eyes, and then leaned forward until fire glowed from the tip of her Marlboro.

"Thanks," she said thinly, exhaling a cloud of smoke. Nervously, she

scanned the place. They were all still looking at her. It scared her. They seemed somehow expectant. “Can I get a Crown and Coke?” she asked quietly.

The bartender planted both hands on the bar and regarded her with a cold gaze. His face was dry and wrinkled. A rubber band kept his long greasy hair out of his face.

“Please?” she added bitterly.

He turned away. She blew a cloud of smoke and became suddenly aware of the prying eyes of several men. She threw a quick glance over her shoulder.

Someone at the pool table struck a chair with his stick and shouted, “Cocksucker!” His opponent responded with a wild cackle.

The bartender returned with her drink and slid it to her. She frowned at it: it was a shot of whiskey and not the drink she’d ordered. But before she could say anything, the man leaned forward, lips drawn into a sneer. “Drink up and get the fuck outta here.”

Carrie met his cold stare. She felt suddenly vulnerable. “W—why? Did I do something wrong?”

Just then a light came on at the far end of the barroom. She spun around on the stool for a look, but her purse spilled from her lap. Bottles of makeup rolled across the floor.

“Goddamn it!” she hissed and dropped down from the stool. Squatting, she scooped up her things—lipstick, eye shadow, tissues. A tube of lip gloss had rolled beneath the bar, and she reached for it when a sharp, high-pitched squeal cut through the room’s silence.

She turned and looked across the barroom where an overhead light shined down on a small stage where a man sat perched on a stool. A drab gray suit hung loosely from his meaty frame. Not a single hair sprouted from the dome of his head. He was old, but his face had a plump, almost childish look to it. Carrie Belle wondered if he had some sort of mental impairment, like Down syndrome. Even stranger was his instrument. He held it like a violin, with one end tucked beneath his flabby chin, and the opposite end pointing away from him. But she’d never seen a violin like this. The thing looked like it was sculpted from black glass, with a grotesquely stretched neck that tapered into a curlicue at its end.

Carrie Belle swallowed nervously. She wanted to leave, but something kept her from following her gut instincts. Maybe it was the alcohol;

maybe it was her fight with Jon. Whatever the reason, she climbed back onto her barstool, scooped up her shot, and downed it with one swallow. The whiskey boiled in her stomach and made her ears ring. She felt better already.

The musician played a kind of squeal that reminded her of the mood-setting music in a horror movie. The sound rose like a bottle rocket and hung there in the air, startling her and forcing her to look at him. Sitting alone like an ogre, his apish frame too big for his stool, the musician swayed as he sawed at the strings with his bow. He conjured a slow melody that reminded Carrie Belle of someone crying. She was so moved by the music, she caught herself tearing up.

He called me a fat whore, she thought. *I can't believe he called me that.*

Brushing the tears from her eyes, she looked for the bartender, hoping to ask for another drink. She found him standing at the far end of the bar, watching her. She didn't like the way he stared. Refusing to let him scare her off, she raised her empty glass and shook it. When he came over with her drink, she drank it down in one swallow.

For a moment, the world went away, and there was only Carrie Belle and the musician. She felt a sudden empathy for the man; felt sorry for him and disgusted with herself for thinking that he looked ugly. She'd failed to see his inner beauty. That was her problem—she chose the men in her life based on their looks, instead of their hearts.

I'll never make that mistake again, she thought.

The music comforted her, warmed her bones. She thought how ironic it was to find such sweet music in a such a dive.

A sob escaped her throat. She bit her lips, feeling embarrassed, fighting like hell to keep from breaking down. Not here. Not with all these men watching her. They would think she was weak. And fat. And a whore.

The bartender returned with another shot of whiskey, and she drank it without taking her eyes from the man on stage. Her head was spinning now.

"Wanna dance?" someone whispered in her ear, his breath reeking of sour beer and cigarettes. She turned and faced a tall man in his early forties with a sallow, angular face of hard ridges. He had ratty brown hair swept back from his brow, and hands that looked like slabs of rock.

“You want to dance to this?” she asked mockingly, snorting a laugh. “It’s not exactly disco.”

As she spoke, the music grew more sluggish, unnaturally sluggish, oozing like liquid rubber. The room tilted and she swooned on her stool. Catching herself, she shook her head and forced her eyes open.

“It’ll dance,” said the man.

She got a better look at him, jaundiced eyes, crooked yellow teeth. With her head swimming, the man’s face came in and out of focus. He was almost handsome. With a little shrug she threw her arms up and said, “Fine then. Let’s dance!”

She all but fell into the man’s arms, and he scooped her up and spun her around, until both of them stumbled into the clearing before the stage. She closed her eyes as the room spun about them. Round and round they went as the strange music grew louder. The idea of dancing to this music struck her as absolutely hilarious. She threw her head back and laughed as the music slowed and slurred. In her delirium, she found herself ravishingly turned on. She bit her tongue and leaned forward to kiss her stranger.

He pressed his lips against hers, then slipped his tongue inside her mouth. “That’s it, bitch,” he whispered, grinning. “Let’s dance.”

The music lurched and then sank even lower, and Carrie imagined the music as a kind of tar, gooey, sticky. It made her giggle uncontrollably. But then her dance partner whirled her around in one direction, and then the other. They were dancing, she supposed, although it felt more like she was riding on the Tilt-A-Whirl. When her partner buried his face into her breasts, she threw her head back and moaned. Only vaguely did she realize that the others in the bar had formed a circle around them. The lights from the stage glistened on their sweaty brows. Their eyes were dark and hard and hungry.

Let them watch, she thought. She wanted them to watch, and just for fun, she jerked off her blouse and threw it over her head.

The men roared a cheer.

From miles away, she felt her partner bite into the nipple of her left breast. Then he hefted her up, and she wrapped her legs around his thighs. He held her aloft, giving her a kind of bird’s eye view of the entire bar. A man standing nearby dropped his jeans around his ankles and clutched his dick in one gnarled hand. He gave it a few violent pumps as she watched. The

guy next to him did the same. But then their faces melted into a collective blur as her stranger spun her around again. She could smell the men around her—not just their cheap cologne and cigarette breath, but something more, something almost animal.

The music melted into a smear of notes and the lights followed suit, becoming soft and gooey, dissolving into colored streaks. The song rose to a warbling, womanish scream, and suddenly the world tipped, and Carrie Belle found herself on her back, lying on the stage floor. Though the back of her head cracked angrily against the wooden platform, she giggled uncontrollably. Either the alcohol or the music had made her numb. She felt like she'd jammed a finger into a plug socket and tapped into a kind of electric euphoria. The buzz coursed through every limb, and each strum from the musician's violin increased the sensation.

She rolled her head back and looked up until she found the violinist sitting on his stool above her. She got a good look at his face. He didn't have any ears. Frowning, she tried to roll onto her belly, wanting a better look. But she couldn't move. Her stranger had crawled on top of her, pinning her down. He was fumbling anxiously with his belt, while spittle formed at the corners of his mouth.

Nothing seemed to make sense. Everything had taken on a strange consistency, like melted plastic. Her exposed breast flopped and jiggled, and she wondered when she had taken her shirt off. It was all a dream. It had to be. She was quite sure.

"Hey!" she shouted when she felt the man's hands reach under her skirt. Her voice sounded miles away. "What are you doing?"

She felt the fabric of her panties give as the stranger tore them free. The room kept spinning as he laid his entire weight on top of her. His breath was hot and heavy against her throat. While denied of good looks, her stranger made up for it in being immensely endowed. With a heavy grunt, he rammed his full length inside her.

She cried out. The whole thing was just a dream—it had to be a dream. Simple and reassuring music folded about her and her lover, like a fairytale song, and when she groaned, her voice wafted above her, rising above the stage where it became entangled with the music and harmonized with it.

Pleasure swept over her. Why not? It was only a dream. Splinters from

the stage floor bit into her buttocks and legs, but the tiny pinpoint of pain only drove her into deeper ecstasy. She ran her hands beneath her stranger's shirt and dragged her nails down along his spine, carving trenches into his flesh. He howled and rammed harder and harder.

She closed her eyes. Her body lurched with each thrust. She bent her head close to his ear and whispered, "I feel like I'm being fucked by God." When she opened her eyes, she found his face hovering close with a rapt expression, eyes rolled back, showing only white.

Something drew her attention to the far corner of the stage where the shadows stirred. Frowning, she squinted and strained her eyes. A small figure was squatting in the shadows, crouching, naked. No, not a man at all. The thing was perched on four long, tawny legs. It had black, leathery skin and eyes that glowed like burning coals. A dog, maybe . . .

It moved closer. It had a face. No, it had her face.

She gasped. "Oh my God!"

She lifted her head. Her lover had vanished. The bar was empty, at least, from what she could tell.

Except him. The violinist was still sitting on his stool behind her, playing his strange, terrible music. She felt warm fluid between her thighs and looked down at herself. Her skirt was stained with blood, and pools of it spread out from either side of her. She screamed again, unleashing a raw and ragged sound that harmonized with the sounds of the violin. She screamed until her voice cracked and her throat sprayed small flecks of blood and spittle.

The music played on, long into the night, long after Carrie's screams had faded and the rain had moved westward.



Boots had gone home long ago, but Hob stayed on the porch with his guitar, watching the sun go down, playing melodies that made him think of Clara's thin, youthful face. The portrait shimmered in his mind like a reflection on the surface of a pond. His fingers eked out his heartache in the form of melodic rifts.

"Seems like a lifetime ago," he said with a sad grin. He took a swig from the bottle of Jack, and the whiskey stoked the fire in his chest. He set the bottle

aside and then strummed a few chords from his guitar out of desperation, as if catharsis could lance the ache in his heart. His fingers walked along the fingerboard as he hummed, exploring a few melodies and chasing a few into the corner. Like a magician he wove his aching heart into a bluesy melody, shaping it with delicate and experienced fingers. He went on playing until his fingers ached and there was nothing left inside.

He set his guitar aside and turned on the small radio that he kept on the coffee table. It hissed and bellowed raw and grainy classics from the past. That's exactly where he belonged—in the past. He couldn't escape it, nor did he want to. He thought about going inside and crawling into bed, but even as he thought this, he drifted toward sleep, his head bobbing, until his chin came to rest on his chest.

Only an hour or two passed before something woke him. His neck stiff, his mouth tasting horrible, he sat up in his chair and blinked. The radio hissed like a frightened alley cat. Its tiny screen glowed a somber green. He wasn't exactly sure what had woken him. He'd been dreaming about Clara, but the contents of that dream dissipated.

Smacking his lips and trying to get the taste of battery acid out of his mouth, he started to rise from the rocking chair when the radio began changing stations all by itself. White noise became snippets of music as the dial ran through a number of stations, from old country melodies to rhythmic rock tunes. This ended when the radio alighted on a final station playing Billie Holiday's "Autumn in New York," Clara's favorite song.

Hob bolted upright, his heart pounding, his skin crawling. A soft, powdery scent suddenly pervaded the small porch, a mixture of honeysuckle and peppermint. He knew the scent well. From the night of their first kiss, Hob would bury his face in the crook of Clara's neck and draw in her scent, as if he could just breathe her into his soul. When she had told him that she didn't wear perfume—in those days she wouldn't have had the money to buy it—Hob refused to believe her. It was her natural scent, the biological product of sweat glands and pheromones and his own imagination.

Now the scent was so strong that tears rushed to his eyes. He searched the dark, feeling her presence, a kind of warm familiarity. The feeling became so strong that he stood and asked softly, "Clara, baby? Is that you?"

The moment he spoke, the radio lost its hold on the rogue airwaves and fell into static hiss. He reached over to jerk its cord from the wall when the static formed a single word.

"Hhhhhob?"

He jerked his hand back from the radio and stumbled over his own feet. His eyes were wide and his heart racing dangerously.

"Hhhhhob, you hear me, Hhhhhob?" It was only a static whisper, but Hob knew the voice just the same, hearing it as clearly as a voice through the telephone. It was Clara.

He held his breath, his eyes gaping.

"It's time, Hob. You know what you gotta do."

Chills scurried down his spine. "Holy Jesus," he whispered, trembling. "That you, Clara?" he asked, feeling ridiculous the moment the words left his lips.

"You have to do it," said the hissing voice. *"You have to burn it down."*

Hob waited breathlessly for more, but the radio slipped comfortably into its groove of static, and after a while he lowered himself back into his chair. He waited another hour, hoping for another message from Clara. While the voice had given him a jolt, sleep eventually found its way back, and eventually he passed out in his chair.



Friday, just after six o'clock in the evening, Madison locked up the shop and put the closed sign in the window. She stood in front of the phone, debating, and after a moment, she picked it up and dialed Carrie's cell. It went immediately to voicemail. Madison hung up.

She knows it's me, thought Madison. *She didn't come in today because she's suffering from a hangover and now she's ignoring me. There's nothing to worry about.*

She slammed the phone down on the counter and walked to the window. There was some sunlight left. A kid went zooming down the road on his bike.

"Well, you better have a good story," said Madison to her absent employee. "If not, I swear to God I'll fire you this time."

But she wasn't mad. Her anger had become concern sometime after five

in the evening, after she'd exhausted the different reasons why she should fire her friend. She didn't want to fire her anymore. Now she was just plain worried.

Debussy's "Claire de Lune" came through the speakers of the small radio on the counter behind her. She turned it up and let the music flood her small shop, as if it could chase away her worry with a pretty melody. It worked for a moment, but then her cat Mozart leaped onto the counter and knocked over a display of beeswax lip balm tins. She nearly screamed.

"Mozart!" she shouted and threw one of the tins at him. It barely missed. "You little shit! Don't forget who feeds you around here."

The cat hopped onto a neighboring display table and began cleaning himself. Madison sighed and began picking up lip balm. The moment she finished, the radio belched a sudden hiss and lost its station.

Frowning, she emptied her hands and went to the radio. She reached a hand toward it and the radio found its station by itself. Debussy had been replaced with another song. She recognized the smooth melody of "Hear After," a song she'd fallen in love with while on a sailboat, drifting across the Chesapeake Bay with a group of friends the day after Julie Freeland's wedding. It had been this bittersweet melody that had launched her into fits of tears. She'd cried like a baby while her friends had tried desperately to cheer her up. That song had pulled the rug from beneath her feet, and she'd made the decision then and there to return home to Holloway. She cringed. Even now it embarrassed her to think about it.

The phone rang. Madison spun around and looked at it. "Well it's about goddamn time!"

She already knew what Carrie would say. She'd piss and moan about how she was so sorry. She'd tell some story about how she'd gotten wasted the night before and how she'd slept through the day. It was always the same.

I should fire her, thought Madison. I'll tell her not to come back. Not tomorrow. Not ever. With a sigh, she jammed the phone against her ear. "Thanks for calling Beethoven's Closet," she said in a flat voice.

"Hello? Madison?" It wasn't Carrie's voice.

"That's me."

"This is Linda Meadows. Carrie Belle's mother."

“Oh. Hello, Mrs. Meadows.” Frowning, Madison sat down on the stool behind the counter. She had a sudden sinking feeling in her gut. It was unusual that Mrs. Meadows would call the shop.

“Madison, I was wondering, have you seen Carrie Belle lately?”

“Well, no, Mrs. Meadows. Not since yesterday.”

“Oh. Okay.” The woman’s voice sank to a sullen pitch.

“You haven’t talked to her?”

“No. She didn’t come home last night.”

The sinking sensation grew stronger, and Madison pressed the phone closer to her ear. “Did you call Jon?”

A silent pause stretched out from the other end. “I talked to him just a while ago. Said they got into a fight and she left him at the restaurant. No one’s seen her since. I’m worried sick.”

Madison tried to think where Carrie Belle would have gone. It wasn’t like her to just disappear. “She must have found some friends last night. I’m sure she’s all right.”

“But she was supposed to work today?”

Madison held her breath. She hesitated. “Yes.”

“Oh, Lord. I hope nothing’s wrong. You think maybe I should call Chief Dunlap?”

“Yes. Maybe. Just to be on the safe side. I’ll make a few phone calls too—see if I can find her.”

“Would you please do that?” Mrs. Meadows asked. “And when you do find her, tell her to call me immediately.”

“I will, Mrs. Meadows.” Madison hung up and stood looking at the receiver for a moment, wondering what Carrie Belle had gotten herself into. With her stomach clenched into a tight knot, she turned and gazed out the window, scanning the busy street, hoping to see Carrie Belle there.

You’re getting yourself all worked up about nothing, she told herself. Just stop it. This doesn’t help. But she couldn’t shut up that little voice in her head that had nothing good to say.

Chapter 7

A cloudless morning sky drew Cameron out to explore the town. The sun gleamed in all the shop windows, and the awnings snapped in the wind. The square was busy with people preparing for a festival of some sort. They scurried up and down ladders, erected booths along the sidewalk, and hung streamers between lamp posts. The tap of hammers filled the air. In the courthouse lawn, a group of shirtless workers, fire department volunteers, hammered away at the skeleton of a bandstand. Banners were strung over the avenues, reminding the citizens to “Come and join in all the fun!” next Saturday morning.

Cameron strolled aimlessly around the square, his hands in his pockets, his belly full from a heavy breakfast at Dooley’s. He felt better this morning. More than a week had passed since he’d experimented with the Tongue, and without a doubt, it had worked a curious effect on him. He felt remarkably serene, present, and in tune with the world around him. He noticed things that usually escaped him—the crisp air, the scent of flowers, the vitality of his own body. He didn’t even mind the elevator music droning from the garden speakers.

Strolling past a newspaper bin, he spotted a tray of freebie newsletters.

Interested in its main story, entitled “History and the Holloway Festival,” he took one and headed over to a bench beneath a shady maple tree. He turned his attention to the paper. The story told about Holloway’s long-standing tradition, since 1955, when Mayor Drysner kicked off the very first festival with the unveiling of General Thomas Holloway’s statue, which now

stood before the courthouse. Since then, the festival had grown in popularity, with each year bigger than the last. People came from all over the South.

The article gave a small history lesson, outlining the events that led up to the battle in Holloway. The story began at the election of Lincoln in 1860, when he raised an army of seventy thousand soldiers to force South Carolina back into the Union. This caused a ripple of tension all across the nation, as most of the southern states—including Tennessee—debated whether they should secede from the Union. Fairfax County on the Cumberland found itself split down the middle. Everyone was forced into taking a side. Meanwhile, the plateau, with its steep escarpment walls and its isolation from the rest of the world, became a no-man's land of robbers, thieves, and murderers. Eventually, most of the Union sympathizers escaped to Kentucky, at this point still a neutral zone, but some stuck around, formed pockets of resistance, and called themselves Unionist Home Guards, who resorted to guerilla warfare. This set the stage for one of the meanest battles in Tennessee.

In September 1862, a Confederate Calvary, led by General Thomas H. Holloway, assigned with ferreting out Home Guard units from the Cumberland, cornered a two-hundred-man faction, led by notorious Unionist Horace Doherty. The two parties formed columns and blasted away at each other for seven hours, while smaller patrols on both sides hid in the hills and took pot shots at the soldiers down below. In the end, General Holloway and his men won the battle, losing only fifty men, while leaving not a single survivor from the Home Guard. Holloway became a war hero; Doherty became a piece of decoration as they hanged him from a tree.

Cameron had just finished reading the newsletter when someone touched his shoulder, making him jump. He spun around and found Hob standing next to him, wearing a porkpie hat and a red vest.

"There you go again," said Hob with a big smile. "You about the jumpiest son of a gun I know?"

Cameron grinned crookedly and rubbed the back of his head. The lump had nearly faded. "What are you up to, Hob?"

"Just killin' time before work. Say, whatcha readin' there?" Hob took the newsletter, flapped it open, then scanned a few paragraphs before he scoffed

and rolled his eyes. "I see. Don't go believin' everything you read around here. Folks have a way of dodgin' the truth. Or flat out makin' it up."

Cameron frowned. "About the war?"

"About General Holloway." Hob lowered himself slowly onto the bench, gathered his thoughts, then gazed at the courthouse, where the sun rose just above its cupola, forcing him to squint. "No one ever mentions Mr. Thomas Holloway's foul disposition. He was one twisted son of a bitch. Killed a lot of folks in the name of the Confederacy, when in reality, it was just an excuse to kill a lot of folks."

"Bet that happened a lot back then," Cameron offered.

"Especially up here in the Cumberlandds where no one was lookin'. But the Confederacy did know what sort of man Mr. Holloway was. I suppose it only made sense to use him for their purposes. They slapped rank on his shoulders and then pointed him in a general direction that suited them. Holloway, along with two hundred of the meanest sons of bitches you'd ever want to meet, prowled the plateau and killed most anyone they come upon, woman or child, Blue or Gray. It just didn't matter. They was bloodthirsty."

"Pretty effective though," Cameron interjected, "I mean, at least from a military standpoint. He annihilated a unit as big as his own. Except he kept most of his men."

"Yes, that's true. But it ain't the whole story. What they fail to mention is that the Home Guard ran out of ammo. Holloway and his men had a serious advantage. Maybe fifty Union solders ran for the hills. Got about half a mile, then holed themselves up at a plantation home. But Holloway found them. Ratted them out and forced them to surrender. And that's when the story gets really good."

Cameron coughed into his fist. He became painfully aware of the heat and the heavy breakfast he'd eaten earlier, which was gurgling in his belly.

"But General Holloway didn't take prisoners," Hob went on. "Instead he took those men, hogtied and stripped them, then he and a handful of his soldiers gutted the poor bastards. Spilled their insides out on the ground. Blood was standin' in pools and runnin' in little streams."

"Jesus!" Cameron leaned forward, his elbows against his knees. He gulped down air, worried he might just get sick. "That's really messed up."

“Yeah. Some hero, huh? And here’s the best part. That plantation home—the Old Walker plantation, where all those men were killed—they tore it down and built the Calliope right on top of it.”

“What?”

“That’s a fact. Someone came in and built the Calliope right on top of the battlefield jus’ a few months after they hauled off the bodies that stunk up the place. Blood hadn’t even had a chance to dry when they started buildin’. Of course, she wasn’t a concert hall back then, just a church—a really big one.” Hob noted the exasperated look on Cameron’s face before he folded his arms and then eased back on the bench, obviously satisfied with himself.

Cameron shook his head. This chilled him to the bone, especially in light of what Bloom wanted to do in that place. Even stranger was that Cameron had sensed something off about the Calliope from the start. Usually his first impressions were dead on the money. Did Bloom know about the war crimes committed there? He cleared his throat. “Some place to build a church.”

“Biggest one around. But you know, she’s gone through a lot of changes since then. Back in the fifties, when music went pop, a guy named Schroder came in and rebuilt the place, made it a stage for hillbilly singers. Elvis Presley, Johnny Cash, Jerry Lee Lewis—they all performed there. They packed the house with kids from Atlanta to Louisiana.”

“Unbelievable.” Cameron gazed in the direction of the music hall. Even though the courthouse and a handful of old buildings blocked his view, he could picture the place. “I can’t believe I’ve never heard of the Calliope before now.”

“So I hear you write a little music,” said Hob.

Cameron blinked. “How’d you know that?”

“I Googled your name.” Hob winked at him, got up, and stretched his back.

“You Google everyone you meet?”

“I do when they play the piano like you do. I found a few of your pieces on YouTube. I liked what I heard. Strange but interestin’.”

“Hob, you’re a regular sleuthhound.”

“Who’d have thought, huh? Say, you get bored sometime, you ought to come by my place and jam with me. Easy to find. I live on the end of

Moonlight Drive, about a mile from here. Or better yet, come see me at Bloozy's, down on Lytle Street. I'll get you up on stage."

With a slow nod, Cameron said, "I'll give it some thought."

"You do that." Hob tipped his hat in a kind of salute, then started down the sidewalk, but he spun around with a final thought. "Oh, and you remember what I said about workin' for Bloom. Don't do nothin' foolish."

"Yeah. I got it, Hob. See ya, buddy."



After school, Charlie rode his bike across town to the Calliope, where he found Kalek waiting for him at the front doors. Kalek guided him through the dark foyer and into an even darker auditorium. Charlie had seen the inside of the Calliope only a few times, mostly for Christmas concerts. But he'd never seen it so empty.

They made their way down the center aisle toward the lighted stage. Standing beside a polished black concert grand was a tall man with white hair. He stood with his hands clasped behind his back, watching. He made Charlie nervous.

"Welcome, Charlie," said the man as Charlie followed Kalek up the small flight of stairs to the stage. "Thank you for coming on such short notice. I am Maestro Bloom."

The man considered Charlie's bruises, but rather than asking about them, he thrust his hand out and Charlie shook it. The maestro's hand was cold and his clear blue eyes bored into Charlie, making him feel like a bug under a microscope. "This is my concert hall."

"Pleased to meet you," said Charlie, sounding small and self-conscious.

"I've heard a lot of good things about you, Charlie." Bloom motioned to the piano stool. "Please. Sit down."

Intimidated, Charlie sat down, then cast a quick, hesitant glance at the piano's shiny keys.

"Mr. Kalek told you why I asked you here?"

Charlie cleared his throat and nodded. "He said you were interested in finding a new pianist for your orchestra." He kept his eyes fixed on the stage floor, avoiding Bloom's eyes.

“Something like that.” Bloom drifted slowly around the piano, gliding the tips of his fingers along the instrument’s smooth surface. “The truth is, I’m working on a sort of experiment.” He glanced at Kalek as if sharing some inside joke, then looked back at Charlie. “It’s a special project, and I need someone with your talent to help me.”

Charlie’s brow bunched. He hoped his face didn’t show his disappointment. An experiment? Not consideration for the orchestra? “What sort of project are you talking about?”

Bloom’s eyes practically glowed. “Next Friday evening, I am hosting a private performance. You see, I have investors who want very badly to hear my orchestra perform. This time, I promised them something more for their money.”

Charlie was more confused than ever. He looked from Kalek to Bloom with growing uncertainty. “So what do you want from me?”

“I want you to perform for me and my guests. I have a very special composition. But I’m afraid I can’t show it to you until it’s time.”

“What? I can’t read music like that. I need practice.”

The easy confident grin remained fixed across Bloom’s face. “Don’t worry. You’ll do just fine.”

The idea made Charlie worried, nearly terrified. He turned toward the auditorium’s empty seats. He was good, but not that good. “I just . . . well, it’s not . . .”

“I will pay you a thousand dollars for your time,” Bloom interrupted. He snapped his fingers and Kalek produced an envelope. He handed it to Charlie, who took it and looked inside.

His jaw fell open when he saw the thick stack of bills. He’d never been commissioned for his work. This was a lot of money. With that kind of cash, he could buy himself a new Yamaha keyboard at the Showcase. “Gee, Mr. Bloom, this is great. But I really think I should practice first. So I can do a good job.”

“As I said, it’s not necessary. I trust you.” Bloom put a hand on his shoulder and smiled. “Now, you have to listen carefully. You must promise me that you will not tell anyone about this. Do you understand? If you tell anyone, I will ask for my money back. This is a pact between you and me.”

Hesitating, Charlie shifted his gaze from Bloom to the envelope. He gave a few quick nods. It didn't make any sense whatsoever, but that kind of money made a lot of sense—even if he couldn't rehearse. “Yeah. Okay. I promise.”

“Then it's a deal.” Bloom smiled and shook Charlie's hand, and then he added quietly, “I'll see you next Friday. You may run along now.”

Charlie looked at Kalek, then got up and started slowly across the stage, glancing over his shoulder a few times to make sure they weren't going to jump him. They'd just stuffed a grand into his pocket without getting anything in return? He scurried down the steps, down the main aisle, and hurried excitedly to the exit.



Throughout the morning hours, Madison had stapled “missing person” flyers to nearly every telephone pole in Holloway before going to her shop for lunch. Without an appetite, she sat at the table in the back room and picked at her chicken salad, unenthused. When the bell over the front door chimed, she dumped the remainder of her lunch into the trash and rushed out into the showroom, hoping to find Carrie. Instead, she found her cousin, Charlie Witt, standing in the doorway, his face bruised and puffy. A scabby crack perforated his lips. He looked as though someone had beaten him pretty good.

“Charlie?” she said, pressing a hand to her mouth. “What the hell happened?”

“Ah, Mad, it's nothing.” He shut the door behind him.

“Nothing my ass! Who did this to you?”

He sat down on a stool beside the cash register, and Madison shook her head with a sigh. “Charlie, when are you going to start standing up for yourself?”

With a shrug, he turned his attention to the *Vanity Fair* lying on the counter and started flipping through its pages.

It was always the same with him. Drama just sort of surrounded his life. Poor little Charlie had always been the topic of rumors, beginning when Dory had gotten pregnant with him. She wasn't married at the time and didn't even know who the father was. When Charlie got a little older, everyone noticed

that he seemed a little strange. He'd become intensely shy, and it got so bad by age twelve that Dory took him to a therapist in Nashville, believing that his shyness was some sort of neurosis. But then the therapist had apparently probed too deeply and Dory decided to end it. Madison's mother and a few others were mighty suspicious of Dory's friend, Howard, who came along only a year after Charlie had been born. Everyone was convinced that Howard's drinking and violent disposition had something to do with Charlie's shyness.

"So guess what happened today?" he said, shoving the magazine aside. "I went for an audition."

"An audition?" Madison said with a smile. "For who?"

He tossed the hair out of his eyes and leaned back on the stool. "So get this. Yesterday, this guy by the name of Mr. Kalek comes by the school, looking for a piano player, and guess who Mr. Farrell recommends to him?"

"Hmm," she said playfully. "I can't imagine."

He sniffed. "So today I went and tried out, and they want me."

"Who wants you?" she pressed, wondering if maybe a scout from a prestigious university had taken interest in him.

His chest visibly swelled. "The Holloway Chamber Orchestra."

"What?" she blurted. She folded her arms over her chest, feeling suddenly uncomfortable. "What do they want with you?"

"They want me to play for them." He frowned and drew his shoulders up, assuming a defensive posture. "Mr. Bloom thinks I'm really good."

She didn't like it. The Calliope? "Since when did they start auditioning, anyways?"

He shrugged. "Since never. That's why this is so cool." Sighing, he settled back on his stool. "Besides," he added gloatingly, "he paid me."

"He paid you?"

A flash of regret crossed his face. "Yeah, well, don't go and say anything to anyone. But yeah. He paid me. Thousand bucks just to start."

Madison realized she was scowling and tried to smile. "Well, that's great, I guess. I always knew someone would take an interest in you. But this—I just don't like it. Did you tell your mom and dad about it?"

He frowned. "They wouldn't care, even if I did. Besides, it's none of their business. I graduate in the spring, and then I'm getting the hell out of here."

“Well, you just be careful. Mr. Bloom is a very strange man. And the other musicians in that orchestra—have you seen them? Most of them are old fogies. I would think you’d prefer working with people your own age.”

He shrugged. “People my own age don’t even know I exist.” He rubbed the bruise along his jaw. “Except the ones who want to beat me up.”

A moment of uncomfortable silence passed between them, and Charlie dropped his gaze to the counter, embarrassed, when his eyes fixed on a sheet of paper near the register. “Hey, is that Carrie Belle?”

She looked down at the stack of flyers and nodded. “Carrie’s disappeared. Been gone for almost a week now. I’m surprised you didn’t know. It’s been all over the news.”

“Wow. That sucks.”

“Yeah, it does.” She didn’t like his tone. It was too casual. She handed him a stack of flyers and said, “Here, post these at school, will ya?”

“Me? Oh, no. No thanks.” He hopped off the stool and started toward the door, his face bent into a grimace. “I hope you find her. But I gotta go.”

He opened the door and dashed outside. Madison followed. Hopping onto his bike, Charlie darted up Frontier Street toward the square.

She watched until he disappeared from her sight, and then a shiver came over her. It wasn’t like him not to offer his help. He seemed so withdrawn. *Why in hell does the orchestra want Charlie, anyways? He’s good, but not that good. It feels wrong.*

Everything felt terribly wrong.

Chapter 8

Just after midnight on the eighteenth of August, Marie Williams woke from a nightmare. She reached for George but found his side of the bed empty. *No*, she thought bitterly, her George was gone for the week. Some sort of company training in Richmond. She sighed at this. Just great.

She sat up and folded her arms over her chest. She'd had an awful dream in which she'd been hurrying down a dark alley with cold brick walls and a single streetlamp at its end. But her escape was blocked by a single man, standing at the opening, with a pale face and dark holes for eyes. He carried a musical instrument like she'd never seen before, a twist of metal with sharp edges that extended beyond his head. The sight of him had stopped Marie in mid-step, and she'd prepared to run the opposite way when music came rushing down the alleyway like water through a canal. His song was dark and brooding, and she'd known instinctively what it was: a funeral dirge. Someone was going to die.

Death is coming to you and your son . . .

Marie rubbed her eyes. The dream still had her frightened. She looked to the window, where moonlight made the curtains glow. Maybe someone was outside or a radio was playing somewhere. Maybe she was being ridiculous.

Still, she climbed out of bed, nearly stomping on a bottle of Popov that she'd left on the floor, and staggered over to the window to toss the curtains aside. Outside the flood lamp hanging on the corner of the garage lit up the backyard, where heavy foot traffic had worn away the grass and a few rusty

tools lay scattered in the soft dirt. And then she saw her little boy, Hank. He was standing in front of Baloo's doghouse. He wore his blue Scooby-Doo pajamas and his feet were bare. Something about his posture—the dead-hang of his arms, the rigid angle of his back, the sideways tilt of his head—gave her a sudden chill. He had the look of someone in a deep trance.

God, is he sleepwalking?

A chill crawled down her spine as she hurried out of the bedroom. She moved blindly down the dark hallway. Vague memories of her dream and that nightmarish music turned her anxiety into fear. She rounded the corner and found the back door standing wide open.

She stepped outside. The night was warm and moist, with a few puffs of fog settling in the grass. "Hank?" she hissed at him, not wanting to wake the neighbors. "Hank!" she said again, this time louder.

Hank turned, the floodlight sparkling in his eyes. He wore a dazed expression, with his mouth hanging ajar.

God, she thought with a shudder, *he looks like a zombie*. "You get inside right this minute. You're scaring me."

He raised his right arm and pointed a loose finger behind him at Baloo's doghouse.

"Momma," he said slowly, "you hear it, Momma? It's in Baloo's house."

She stepped off the back porch and into the cool grass. "No, baby, I don't hear anything. Let's go inside and get some sleep, huh?"

She'd reached the bald spot before the garage when a rumbling growl brought her to a stop. Her eyes fixed on the dark rectangular opening to Baloo's home. The sound wasn't Baloo. Baloo was the sweetest dog in the world.

The growling grew louder, like a lawnmower springing to life.

Marie hurried toward Hank with her heart jack-hammering in her throat. *Please, God, oh please, God!*

When Baloo stuck his head out, Marie nearly screamed.

Something had happened to Baloo. The Labrador looked mad. Drool hung in strings from his mouth. He snarled and showed the gums of his teeth, and his eyes burned bright red as pus gathered at the corners. Baloo was fifteen and his black hair had grayed, his limber gait now a clumsy

hobble. Never before had she felt threatened by him. But that all changed as she stared at her dog.

Baloo's gone rabid, she thought. *Oh, Christ, he's sick.*

Only a few yards away now, she scanned the thinning grass, searching for some sort of weapon, a baseball bat, or even a rock. But she saw nothing but weeds.

Baloo lurched. The old dog moved with some newfound agility, fueled by a rabid-like power, and clamped his jaws around Hank's face.

She screamed and charged across the yard. "Baloo! No! Bad dog! Goddamn it, Baloo! Bad dog!"

She drove her body into the dog's bony flank, earning a yelp as she went sprawling face first into the tall weeds. She landed on a bicycle frame and the metal bear-claw pedals scraped the skin from her shins, bringing bright flashes across her vision. She sobbed and looked up. Baloo bared his teeth as he moved over her. She shouted at him and swung her arms, but the family dog lurched forward and sank his teeth into her throat, cutting short her agonized scream.

She heard it then, just before the darkness stole over her and carried her under. She heard the music from her dream, and she realized that Hank had also heard it.

As Baloo tore something from her throat and pulled her forward, Marie thought, *And Baloo heard it too.*



Holloway Police Station was small in size and smaller on manpower. Not including his dispatch girls, Dunlap had a team of fifteen officers. The station catered to three jail cells in the back, but Dunlap usually only locked up drunks. Most of the time, they transported any prisoners to the county jail in Willow Wood, thirty miles away. In extreme cases, such as a murder, they called in the Tennessee Bureau of Investigation or the county police; Dunlap, however, liked to maintain some control over his jurisdiction, which meant that he and Bentley handled most of their own investigations. And so far, he didn't plan on inviting anyone to help him solve Carrie Belle's disappearance.

He kept the station on high alert. This meant long hours and rotating

patrols for all the officers. “No one’s getting a wink of sleep until we find that little girl,” Dunlap had insisted during a mandatory staff meeting on Friday. For the past week, he had personally worked the night shifts, spending most of his time on the road, patrolling the neighborhoods, always with Sergeant Bentley riding shotgun.

Tonight had been the same. Both he and Bent were on the road by sundown, hopped up on coffee as they patrolled the sprawling neighborhoods of Willow Wood and Severn, just south of the square. So far they’d seen nothing but stray dogs and cats. None of the patrols had uncovered any leads. Carrie Belle had disappeared without a trace.

Dunlap sighed as he leaned forward and folded his arms over the steering wheel. The inside of the cruiser smelled like McDonald’s and sweat. “Roll down your window, Bent,” he muttered as he watched the road.

His lights cut a yellow path through the darkness. Thick foliage and ash trees lined the road and formed an arch overhead.

Bent rolled down his window, kicked back in his seat, and stifled a yawn. “If you ask me, Carrie Belle done probably run away. Probably with some boy she just met.” He threw a sidelong glance at Dunlap and added, “You know how it is.”

Dunlap shrugged. “Maybe so. Let’s head over to Stony River Park. Check the place out and then call it a night.”

Bentley sighed. “Whatever you say, boss.”

Pulling a U-turn in the middle of Highway 90, they started back to town. The park was ten miles up the road. Sometimes folks liked to sneak inside after closing hours. It only made sense to bust up the fun once in a while and run the trespassers out, lest he lose control of his entire town. Maybe they’d find something more than kids smoking pot. Maybe they’d find Carrie Belle.

Trees flanked either side of Cutter Avenue. A few dark houses sat away from the road, but there was nothing but crickets and frogs way out here. Up ahead was the entrance to the park, but Dunlap stopped the cruiser before they got there.

He popped his head out the window and listened.

“Whatcha got?” asked Bentley.

A chorus of barking and howling broke the night.

Dunlap ducked back inside, frowning. “Dogs. Maybe coyote too. Something’s upset the whole goddamn canine population.”

Outside, more dogs joined the cacophony. Howls rose into the air like bottle rockets.

Bewildered, Dunlap just shook his head. “What the hell’s going on out there?”

“Probably nothing.”

Dunlap glowered, convinced his deputy had the instincts of a billy goat. He thrust his head out into the warm night air and listened. It sounded like every dog on the plateau was either whining or howling. It was an eerie sound, and it made the hairs on the back of his neck stand up straight.

For some reason, the Calliope came to mind; the man they’d seen playing the violin on the front steps the other night. The Calliope wasn’t far away, just beyond the back of the park, beyond the soldier cemetery.

“Well, I don’t like it,” Dunlap grumbled. He put the cruiser into gear and started slowly along East Cutter. “Something’s not right. You count on that.”

“If you say so.” Bentley leaned back in his seat and closed his eyes.

The radio made a squawk. “Chief?” It was Kelley Lowell, one of their late night dispatchers. “We got a real mess on our hands . . .”

With lights flashing, the cruiser sped down the highway.



Ten minutes later, Dunlap and Bentley arrived at the Colbert place. There were two squad cars and an ambulance parked haphazardly in the backyard. It looked like Christmas back there, with the treetops painted blue and red from the emergency lights. Ernie Fowlers had already arrived and flagged them down the moment their cruiser nosed into the driveway.

Ernie came over to Dunlap’s window and ducked down so he could look inside. “You’re just in time,” he said. His eyes were wide and frightened, his skin pasty white. The man was in his mid-thirties, yet he couldn’t seem to shake off his boyish looks. “They’re loading Floyd into the ambulance right now.”

With a nod, Dale rolled around to the back of the house.

“Christ, what happened?” Bentley whispered.

“Told you, didn’t I?” muttered Dunlap. “Said I had a bad feeling.”

He stopped the car, and he and Bentley got out. Dunlap had shared countless beers back here with Floyd. Now the small screened-in porch looked almost menacing, with its door hanging on its hinges and the screen ripped open like a screaming mouth.

There were a number of men standing by the steps, Sergeant Beaumont included. The coroner, Jim Howdy, was with them. His long face looked tired in the flashing light. Farther out they were loading the gurney with Floyd’s body into the back of the ambulance.

“Chief?” someone called.

He and Bent turned toward the voice, but the flashing emergency lights made it difficult to see.

Beaumont approached them. He hooked a thumb over his shoulder. “I’ve got Donna over there in the back of my cruiser if you wanna talk to her. She seems pretty tame. ‘Course I went ahead and cuffed her.”

Bentley scoffed. “You put cuffs on Donna Colbert?”

Feeling numb and somehow disconnected from reality, Dunlap stepped over to Beaumont’s cruiser. He leaned into the open back window.

Donna’s thin frame looked almost ghostly in the dark backseat. She sat with her back straight, her chin up. Even with her hands cuffed in her lap, she made it a point to retain some of her dignity.

“Donna,” said Dunlap. “Guess I could ask what happened, but you best save it for a lawyer, I suppose.”

“I ain’t sorry, Dale,” she said in a quivering voice. She refused to look at him. “I was just following orders. You wouldn’t understand.”

Frowning, he braced himself against the side of the cruiser. “Donna, who in hell ordered you to kill Floyd?”

“I told you. You wouldn’t understand. Don’t make no difference no how. I killed Floyd. I’m going to jail.” She spoke with the dignified authority of someone who had killed in the name of justice and refused to admit guilt. “So it don’t matter.”

“But it does matter,” Dale said in a low whisper. “It matters to me. Floyd was my friend, for Christ’s sake!”

Now her head turned slowly, and her eyes glowed from the shadows. “If

you must know, God told me to do it. Came through my radio. God sang to me. Told me Floyd was cheating on me and that he had to be killed. So I killed him. And I don't care what you think. It's the truth."

Feeling like the wind had just been knocked out of him, Dunlap moved slowly away from the cruiser and turned to watch his men shuffle about in the light from the porch. Over their voices he heard the thin crackle from the radio just inside the doorway, playing an old country classic, Slim Whitman's "Indian Love Call." The sprightly melody sounded eerie in the still night breeze. He wished someone would cut the thing off.

Christ almighty, he thought. *Floyd's dead and either Donna's lost her mind or the all-night DJ on WSM has been suggesting to his listeners to kill their husbands.*

Someone clapped him on the shoulder and nearly startled the piss out of him. He spun around, hands balled into fists.

Bentley stood there.

"Goddamn it, Bent. You startled me."

Bentley didn't apologize. "Chief. Just got a call from the dispatcher. We got two more dead."

Dunlap felt the blood rush from his face. "Well, who the hell is it this time?"

"Marie Williams," said Bentley, then added, "and her boy, Hank. Some sort of animal attack."

"Animal attack?" Dunlap echoed. Somehow during the night things had just sort of fallen apart, as if they were all living in a snow globe, and somebody had given it a good shaking. "Hell, the Williams place is just down the road, ain't it?"

Bentley nodded slowly. "Sure the hell is, Chief. Just down the road. You believe that? Don't make no sense, does it? Three deaths and practically neighbors."

Chapter 9

In the cul-de-sac of Orpheum Manor, Cameron sent his taxi away and turned to meet Bloom and his welcoming committee of ten men and women. Ignoring the unsettled feeling in his gut, he climbed the steps, nodding and shaking hands, all the while scrutinizing Bloom's friends. These weren't his musicians, or Echoes, as Bloom called them. While Cameron thought the term Echoes fitting for musicians, he wondered how many more people Bloom had working for him behind the scenes.

"Thank you for coming," said Bloom as he led Cameron inside. The troop followed on their heels as they moved along an eastern corridor. "The orchestra is eager to meet you. The arrival of a Tone Poet marks the end of a very long wait."

Cameron listened without saying much while he studied the various pieces of art that decorated the walls. Baroque paintings and marble statues. Glass cases displaying ancient musical relics—all of it museum-worthy. *Where does he get this stuff?* The question haunted him. Not for the first time did it occur to him that Bloom was possibly an international art thief. If so, wouldn't that make Cameron guilty by association?

They approached a set of double doors at the end of the corridor. There was a rumble of voices from the other side. Bloom went for the door handles when Cameron stopped him.

"Listen, you're not expecting me to say anything to them, are you?" Cameron asked nervously.

Bloom gave him a placating smile. "No, of course not. They need nothing

from you. They want only to see the flesh and bone of their artist. They have high hopes for you, Cameron. As I said, your arrival is extremely important to them.”

He threw the doors open and the voices rose to a riotous pitch. They entered an enormous banquet hall where huge crystal chandeliers hung from a vaulted ceiling and velvet curtains hid the tall windows. The entire orchestra was gathered, more than fifty men and women sitting at long banquet tables running parallel to each other. More were seated at the head table running perpendicular on a low platform at the far end of the room.

Upon seeing them, the musicians stood and applauded.

“That’s for you, Cameron,” Bloom said into his ear as they walked along the thick, burgundy carpet.

Cameron brandished a politician’s grin as he moved through the crowd of centenarians, their bodies bent with arthritis, faces gray with sunken eyes and hollowed cheeks. While they clapped and showed their dentures, their rheumy gazes fixed him with joyless scrutiny. *Are you him?* those questioning faces seemed to ask. *Are you the Tone Poet?*

Cameron followed Bloom to the platform, where Kalek received them at the head table, all but gushing with glee as he smiled at Cameron. Though an old man in his own right, Kalek looked young in comparison to the Echoes. He motioned to two vacant chairs placed at the table’s center, and Cameron and Bloom moved around to their seats as the applause continued. Without sitting, the maestro raised a hand to quiet the room, and eventually the Echoes returned to their seats.

“My dear Echoes, thank you all for coming tonight on this joyous occasion,” Bloom called out. The noise faded. “I’m sure many of you already suspect what it is I have to say, and so I won’t waste another moment.” He paused for effect, roamed his eyes about the room, and then waved a hand at Cameron, who stood beside him. “The Tone Poet has come to Holloway!”

More applause. This time Bloom, pivoting to face Cameron, joined them. The ovation continued for several moments as Cameron nodded, waved, and mouthed his thanks. Then came silence.

“Mr. Cameron Blake,” said Bloom, loudly enough so that everyone could

hear as they returned again to their chairs. Cameron sat down as well, feeling his pulse thudding in his ears. “This orchestra is eternally grateful for your decision to join us. We are your humble servants in this . . . *endeavor* . . . to expand the possibilities of music, to reach further than mankind has ever thought possible.” Bloom raised his arms. “This orchestra has sacrificed a great deal over the years. I know this better than anyone. But now is the moment when we must stand together. I’ve heard rumors—talks of leaving the orchestra, of abandoning the project. This sort of talk must end. No one is leaving. We are only a matter of weeks away from performing Armonia. I will not allow one person to disrupt what we have strived so hard to accomplish. Now is not the time for doubt. Now is the time for faith. And patience. So now, let’s eat!”

At a final wave of applause, Bloom took his chair between Cameron and Kalek. It didn’t take long for a low din to arise as the musicians began talking among themselves. Cameron looked down at his empty plate, considering all that Bloom had said. There was still so much he didn’t understand.

A man in a white jacket appeared at his elbow to pour a glass of red wine. At the same time Cameron’s plate arrived, a dish of roast beef and gravy, vegetables, and salad. The scent made his mouth water. He was ravenous.

“Cameron,” said Bloom in a voice meant for everyone at their table, “I want to introduce you to my first chairs, my most valued musicians.”

Bloom began his introductions, pointing out each man and woman at the table, while they each returned with a welcoming nod. Among the group was Erich Lutz, the premier flutist, and Wilhelm Piccard, the first chair clarinet. Oliver Baudelaire was the premier French horn, followed by Michael Auden, the first chair trumpet. A thin, skeletal-faced woman named Anka announced herself as the first violist, and sitting beside her was a dark-eyed Italian named Salvatore, the first oboist. Second to last was Alexander Oppenheim, a square-faced man in silver-rimmed glasses, the premier cellist.

“And finally, there is Simon,” said Bloom, motioning toward the ogre of a man seated at the far end of the table. His tone suggested a certain loathing toward the man. “He’s our most important violinist. Our concertmaster.”

Cameron nearly choked on a mouthful of food. He recognized Simon from the nightclub.

“Simon is a living contradiction. He’s mostly deaf, and yet, he has an impeccable ear. He hears what others cannot.”

Unaware that he’d become the topic of conversation and that nearly everyone at the table had stopped to look at him, Simon continued eating, gorging himself with handfuls of food. Grease dribbled from his chin.

Cameron looked away.

“And there you have it,” said Bloom. “The others are too many for personal introductions, but perhaps you will have an opportunity to meet them all in time.”

Cameron made nods and smiles at the musicians. He turned to his plate and managed several bites of roast beef and carrots before someone interrupted the silence.

“Maestro Bloom, may I trouble you?” The request came from the end of the table. It was Oliver Baudelaire, the French horn. The black-suited figure looked almost comical with his cloud of white hair, his beaklike nose, his deeply creased face. “Many of the musicians are concerned that the Tone Poet will fail like the others. What can you say to appease our doubts about Mr. Blake?”

Cameron frowned and threw a quizzical look at the maestro.

“I understand your concerns,” said Bloom, “and I assure you, Cameron Blake has shown more potential than I ever imagined. He is the Tone Poet we’ve been waiting for. We will perform our Symphony. It is only a matter of time.”

Cameron set his fork down, confused. *There were other Tone Poets?* He looked from Bloom to the musicians, feeling powerless, confused, and worst of all, absolutely clueless.

“But you *have* promised all this before, Bloom,” Baudelaire went on.

“That’s enough, Oliver,” said Bloom, his voice low and direct. “You’ve waited with me this long, dear friend. I ask only for a little longer.”

“But I am tired of waiting!” Baudelaire shouted, his face suddenly an angry red as he slammed his fist against the table. “We are all tired. We want

answers. Why should we trust this new Tone Poet of yours? Look at him. He's just like the others. He'll ruin everything. He'll bring us nothing but Discord."

The hall filled with whispers and sharply drawn breaths. Cameron glanced out at the people sitting at the tables; their candlelit faces drawn in surprise and even fear. At his own table, several musicians attempted to calm Baudelaire, but the old man pressed them away. Having gotten everyone's attention, he seemed almost emboldened to speak his mind.

"Need we remind you of your past failures, Maestro Bloom?" Baudelaire said, showing his teeth. "Need we remind you?" He reached for his wineglass, spilled half of it on the way to his mouth, then muttered as if to himself, "We are victims of your failures."

"Goddamn this!" Salvatore cried out suddenly, smashing his fist against the table, sending silverware flying while tipping over several glasses. "How dare you speak to Maestro Bloom this way?"

"Let him speak!" shouted Anka in a thick Slavic accent. "He has the right to say these things. We cannot endure another failure."

The room unraveled into an uproar. Shouts broke from the tables down below. Several musicians stood to thrust fingers at one another. Someone shattered a plate.

Cameron looked to Bloom, hoping he would end the arguing, but the conductor seemed unaffected. He merely sat back in his chair, eyes burning. His only response was to reach out with one hand, allowing his splayed fingers to hover just above the rim of his wineglass.

"They've forgotten their purpose," Kalek said in a low voice.

The maestro swirled the tips of his first and second fingers around the rim of his wineglass in quick and fluid motions. He did this several times before a silvery tone rang from the crystal, sharp and piercing, growing steadily louder.

"They have little faith," Bloom said. His hand went round and round above his wineglass. The thin whirring sound gathered itself into an angry pitch as snowflake-patterned ripples formed on the surface of his merlot.

Cameron grew uncomfortable. It was quite a trick, but the sound hurt his ears. He shrank back in his seat.

Suddenly a wineglass exploded like a firecracker, dousing the tablecloth with red wine. Cameron, along with several musicians, shielded his face from flying splinters of glass. Another wineglass exploded and then another. All along the table they burst, popping like a string of firecrackers.

Cameron heard a glassy chatter and looked up to find the crystal chandeliers shivering like treetops in an angry storm. “Oh shit!” he whispered, then slinked over the side of his chair, crawled beneath the table, and curled himself up, knees rammed to his chin. He shielded his ears with his hands against the ringing. Moments later the chandeliers exploded with a glassy *boom!* Glass rapped against the tabletop above him like hail.

The ringing stopped. The sudden silence left Cameron disoriented. From the edges of his table, wine flowed like blood from severed arteries.

He carefully crawled out from beneath the table and climbed back into his chair. The room looked like a warzone, with tables covered in glass, plates of food overturned. Red wine soaked the tablecloths.

Bloom remained seated in his chair. He took a sip from his wineglass—the only glass to endure the ordeal without shattering—and then set it down.

“I won’t stand for this feuding any longer!” he called out in a firm voice.

The musicians sat quietly at their tables, watching him with pallid, frightened faces. Shattered glass covered everything. A few faces were actually bloodied from flying crystal fragments.

“Nor will I tolerate dissent. This is my orchestra. *Mine.*” Bloom patted his brow with a handkerchief, tossed it aside, then rose from his chair and brushed off his jacket. He gazed out at his musicians. With a curt nod, he said, “Party’s over.”



“What the hell happened back there?” said Cameron, breaking the silence for the first time since leaving the estate in Bloom’s limousine. The maestro and Kalek both shared the backseat, their backs to the rear window. Kalek looked grayer than usual, his collar spotted with either red wine or blood.

Bloom appeared calm and collected. “It was nothing,” he said with a slight shrug. “A trick.”

Cameron shook his head and shifted in his seat as waves of nausea crashed over him. “No. I don’t buy that. What you did back there—I’ve never seen anything like it. And by the way, you hurt a lot of people.”

“They are *my* people,” said Bloom, perfectly convinced this justified his actions. “Sometimes it is necessary to remind them of that.”

Frustrated, Cameron exhaled loudly and leaned back in his seat, frowning. So much of what they were doing was still a mystery to him. What bothered him most was the growing suspicion that he’d aligned himself with the wrong kind of people. He saw warning signs everywhere. *Bloom’s dangerous. I know that much.* “They said you’ve worked with other Tone Poets in the past.” He watched the maestro’s face, searching his eyes. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

Bloom’s face remained impassive. The last vestiges of sunlight bleeding into the tinted windows warmed his features. “Yes, there were others before you. But they were unable to Attune. You are different. I feel it. That’s why you must trust me.”

But that’s just it, thought Cameron. I don’t trust you.

Buildings outside the windows interrupted the incoming sunlight, causing the cab to darken momentarily. Cameron turned to look outside as the limousine entered the town square. Shops scrolled by on either side as the car swung right onto Main Street. Those old buildings, especially the courthouse with its stately brick walls and white columns, lent to his sense of solidarity, grounding him in reality. He needed that; he needed to feel like part of the normal world again.

A right turn onto a narrow side street brought them to the Cherry Tree Hotel. The limousine rolled to a stop near the sidewalk. Glad to be back, Cameron pitched the door open and climbed out. He pivoted around and found the maestro leaning forward in his seat, visible in the open doorway.

“Can I expect you to come by tomorrow night?” asked Bloom. “I want another session with the fork. You have a long way to go. More Nocturnes to write.”

Sighing his frustrations, Cameron scratched the back of his head. He gazed down the empty road, considering his options. “Yeah, I don’t know, Bloom. I’m not sure what I want to do. I need to think. I’m still not entirely convinced that thing’s not going to give me a brain tumor or something.”

“Your sarcasm worries me, Cameron,” said Bloom, his tone firm and brittle. “I hear it daily from the others. They complain. They fight me every step of the way. I say let them complain. But you, Cameron—I expect more from you. You know better than anyone the magnitude of what we are doing here. This is bigger than you or me. Bigger than the orchestra or this town.”

“Yeah, I know all that.” The desire to compose Astral Music had haunted his entire life, had driven him here to this strange town, had consumed him for decades, which was why he couldn’t walk away from Holloway, not now. And Bloom knew that.

Cameron closed his eyes and drew a deep breath. He could smell fried grease from a nearby restaurant in the air. It reminded him of his uneaten dinner.

“Until you have purged yourself of Discord, there can be no Armonia,” Bloom continued. “There is no other way. You must continue your sessions with the Tongue, no matter the cost.”

Cameron paced a few steps, feeling restless, wanting to kick a dent into the limo’s side panel. Nothing felt right anymore. But he couldn’t walk away so close to a real breakthrough.

“All right, all right,” Cameron said finally. “I’ll be there. But you gave me the creeps back there. No more of that shit, got me?”

“Of course.”

“And no more secrets. I want to know everything.”

“Deal.”

Cameron rubbed his chin. “Okay. Then I’ll be there.”

The limousine rolled away.

With dusk clinging to the horizon, Cameron headed to the square, too restless to return to his hotel room. He couldn’t get the chaos at the banquet out of his mind.

Main Street was quietly alive with people enjoying the warm evening. Couples strolled with their arms around each other. Kids sat on the courthouse steps, poring over books or tossing Frisbees on the courthouse lawn. *Peaceful here*, he thought. Not like the madness with Bloom that was sapping his energy.

He found a corner market open and bought a spiral notebook and pen, then headed out to find a bench where he would sit down and write for a bit. Composing would take his mind off things and help calm his nerves. Bloom had promised his fork would bring inspiration. Time to see if it worked.

His first session with the Tongue had had a curious effect on him. He felt lighter somehow, more relaxed, even in the light of recent events. Throughout the past few days, he'd experienced moments of intense clarity, when he became only his senses, when every touch, scent, taste, sight, or sound became overpowering. He felt it now as he sat on a bench facing the courthouse. It felt like inspiration. He opened the notebook. Creative energy coursed through his body like an electrical current, nerves tingling.

Early in his career, he'd written many of his pieces like this, like audio-hallucinations, music that rolled over him like signals from a rogue radio station. He'd learned to trust these impressions and get them down on paper. The whole process was a little bizarre and maybe romantic. Again, his interview in *Music Makers* came to mind—an interview gathered shortly after he'd won a Grammy for "Hear After."

"It's like catching a signal from outside. When I get the signal, it comes hard and fast—music from outer space, written a long time ago and just floating around out there until I catch wind of it. I write as quickly as I can and then hope to God it's not something that I heard on the radio," he'd told the interviewer.

How long had it been since he'd tapped into those impulses? Too long. Years of ignoring those strange frequencies had eventually silenced that part of his mind. Not that it had mattered much. Television studios wanted melodrama, not spirituality. But today he felt different. Those mystical radio waves were nearby. He needed only to listen. So he closed his eyes and waited.

Chapter 10

In the flagging sunlight, Madison crossed the brick plaza and hugged her flyers close to her chest. She fixed her eyes on the concert hall looming before her. Being this close to the Calliope made her anxious. Aside from the nervous flutters in her stomach, a sense of dread squeezed her chest, making it hard to breathe. She regretted coming here.

It was for Carrie Belle. Madison wanted to cover every base. Besides, her cousin worked for the orchestra now. That was reason enough.

Just two hours before, she had closed up the shop and headed out with a stack of flyers that she'd made herself. A hundred sheets of paper, each with a black and white photo of Carrie Belle's quiet smile with the big bold letters across the top: *Missing. Have you seen me?*

Madison had already posted half of these flyers around the square and tucked some beneath the windshield wipers of parked cars. She didn't follow any sort of preplanned route, and she'd ended up on Bard Street and on to the Calliope.

The hairs on the back of her neck stood, and she stopped, suddenly certain that she was not alone. She looked up at the Calliope's front doors. She saw movement from the corner of her eye and pivoted to the left, where trees fringed the plaza. A shadow loped from the bushes.

Oh God, she thought. A wolf? A rabid coyote . . .

She swung around, flyers clutched to her chest, and headed to Bard Street, not daring to look back at the Calliope, fighting the urge to run. Fear

would only make things worse. She pretended to calm herself, taking a few deep breaths.

The animal loped down the hill and moved in front of her, crouching low, its head thrust out, muscles loaded like springs. It looked sick, with a wasted body, fur dirty and matted except for mangy areas of pink skin.

She stopped. It was a dog and he looked out of his mind.

He showed his large, pointy teeth, growling.

“Oh shit,” she whimpered.

She backed up a step, heart pounding. “Oh God,” she whispered. “Oh God . . .”

Panicked and numb with terror, her words caught in her throat as the dog launched in a snarling whirl of fur and snapping teeth. She screamed and stumbled backwards, flyers spilling from her hands as she instinctively threw her arms over her face.

The attack never came.

She risked a glance. The dog stood before her, its legs splayed in a wide stance. She recognized him as Charlie’s dog.

“Sam?” she said in a tear-choked voice. “Sam, what’s the matter with you?”

The animal’s eyes burned with the wild hatred of something possessed.

With a throaty growl, he lunged at her.



The music did come.

With his eyes still closed, Cameron envisioned the square, the courthouse with its columns and belfry, the tall brick buildings with cornices and big plate-glass windows, the striped awnings and old street lamps. It was the town’s essence that translated into melody; the flavor of history and tradition, tobacco leaves and cornfields, small houses with white picket fences and American flags draped over porches, men in overalls and with big calloused hands.

After nearly an hour, he’d written a considerable piece.

He sat there for a while, resonating in the afterglow of inspiration. The clock over the courthouse read seven-twenty, and the sun showed only a

fiery crescent above the treetops. He focused on the far corner of the square beyond the courthouse to the entrance of Bard Street. He could walk to the Calliope, maybe channel some of its strange energy into inspiration.

He followed the sidewalk to the eastern side of the square to the mouth of Bard Street. The road was as dead as ever. The small tavern, like the worst rotted tooth in a row of cavities, showed no sign of life. The place gave him the creeps. Everything about this road seemed like bad juju. He pushed himself on, keeping to the opposite side of the road as he passed the bar, thinking about Simon, who evidently haunted the place.

He got no farther than the row of dumpsters when he heard the first scream echo down the throat of the street. He stopped. When the scream came again, he broke into a mindless sprint. It wasn't until he'd crested the hill that he felt a sense of alarm for his own well-being, but by then it was too late.

The sun had fallen behind the building, casting a massive shadow across the plaza, transforming it into a plane of dark shapes. Gasping, he scanned the area. Near the fountain a dog crouched over a large bundle, only the bundle moved, and it was a woman. Her long skirt was now hiked up beyond her knees, her blue jean jacket disheveled.

She shouted, sat up, and kicked at the dog. The animal leaped forward, teeth snagging her jacket sleeve as it jerked its head back and forth, whipping her arm about. She screamed again, and the dog snarled wildly.

Cameron charged the dog, delivered a football punt into the animal's ribs, and felt its bones crack. Light with malnutrition, the dog went sprawling. It rolled a few times before it found its feet and ran yelping toward the trees until it disappeared.

Panting, Cameron turned and squatted beside the woman. "You okay? It's gone, I think."

She wiped tears from her cheeks, then put her hands over her face and sobbed openly. "Stupid goddamn dog. I can't believe he attacked me."

"He looked sick."

She slowly dropped her hands to her lap and looked into his eyes.

He meant to say something more, but forgot exactly what. Despite the shadows, he got a good look at her, and she literally struck him dumb with

beauty. Her large, uncertain eyes were fearful, and a slight tremble of her lips didn't detract from her appearance. Her silky brown hair was in a ponytail with an escaped lock hanging over her brow.

"I know he was sick," she said as his gaze dropped over her. "He belongs to my cousin. Or at least he did."

He forced a swallow. He kind of felt bad for kicking the dog so hard. "Did he bite you?"

She drew her fist to her chest and inspected it carefully. Aside from a torn cuff, she'd escaped without much injury. "No. He didn't bite me." With a sigh, she dropped her hand into her lap, then shook her head as tears formed in her eyes. "God, I was so scared. He—Sam—looked like he wanted to kill me."

He sat beside her and put a hand on her shoulder. They sat quietly for about five minutes as she composed herself. Then he picked himself up, clapped the dirt from his jeans, and offered her a hand. "Come on. Let's get out of here. Before he comes back."

Despite his words, he was quite sure Sam wasn't coming back. He pulled her gently to her feet, and for a moment they stood face to face, close enough that he caught the scent of her perfume. He felt a fierce attraction to her, likely a result of the endorphins still pumping in his veins. After a long moment, she dropped her gaze. The moment shattered as she made a frustrated noise.

He looked down at his feet, where colored papers were scattered across the brick.

"Shit." She crouched and gathered her papers up.

He helped rake a number of them into a sloppy stack, then glanced at the top sheet. The black-and-white image of a young woman with a moon-shaped face and a dimpled smile looked up at him.

"Thanks for your help." She all but snatched the flyers from his hands. She stood quickly, holding the papers to her chest, and he rose to face her.

He felt awkward, as if he'd done something wrong. "Cameron Blake," he said, offering his hand again.

She gave him a thoughtful study, then said in a small voice, "Madison Taylor. Thanks for helping me." She shook his hand.

He had the feeling that she wanted to leave. He couldn't blame her.

“Listen. Could I buy you a cup of coffee or something? I know you must be shaken up pretty badly.”

Her eyes searched his face. “No thanks. I think I just need to go home and sleep it off.”

“Right.” He gave a defeated smile. She started to turn when he added, “Could I at least walk you back? Just to make sure you get back safely.”

A smile touched her face and she looked him in the eye. “Yeah. Okay. I’d like that.”

Side by side, they walked down the dark stretch of Bard Street, passing between abandoned storefronts, moving from one cone of light to the next, both of them glancing at the dark windows of the darkened shops. Only two streetlamps, spaced at twenty yards, interrupted the darkness squeezed into the narrow side street. The real shock came when Madison wound her arm around his and walked beside him.

“You don’t mind, do you?” she asked in a trembling voice.

“No. Not at all.” He looked at her. “You okay?”

“Just really rattled. I don’t know why I went to that place,” she said, referring to the Calliope. “I hate it there. And I hate this road. It gives me the creeps. They need to do something with it. Put up more lights for starters.”

He waited a beat, then said, “Is that a friend of yours—the girl in the flyer?”

She nodded. “She works for me. She’s disappeared.”

“Sorry to hear that.” They fell quiet and the silence rolled over them. They could hardly see in front of themselves now. Only a neon sign buzzed in the tavern’s window at the end of the road, but its hazy blue light did little to comfort him. He wished he hadn’t mentioned the flyer.

“I’ve been putting these things up for hours now,” she said, waving the stack of colored papers. “I was just about to call it a night but then I decided to go up to the Calliope. Stupid idea.”

“Pretty strange place, isn’t it?”

“That’s an understatement.”

They reached the lower slope of the road, where the Bard Street Tavern was slotted among the row of historic buildings. Its blue door made it stand

out from the others, matching the blue sign buzzing in its single window. Both of them gave the place a wary look as they passed it, making sure to stay on the opposite side of the road. The blare of country music escaped through its curtained window.

Then they were out of the dark road and in the safety of the square, where the feverish light from the Karma Koffee shop on the corner spilled across the sidewalk. The square was well lit. Garden lamps surrounded the courthouse and shone on its walls, while tiny lights glowed in the pear trees along the sidewalks. Soft jazz purred from hidden outdoor speakers. Cameron breathed a little easier. It felt safer. Even if that was only an illusion. Still, Madison kept a firm grip on his arm, and he pretended not to notice. Following the sidewalk to the left, they met a crisp evening breeze. Their shadows floated like apparitions across the shop windows.

“It’s a nice town,” Cameron said.

“If you don’t mind getting mauled by wild animals.” She dropped her gaze and muttered, “Sorry. I’m usually not this nasty.” When she looked up at him, a little warmth had colored her cheeks. “You don’t live here, do you?”

“Nope.” He almost mentioned that he’d come here to work, but she obviously had bad feelings about the Calliope, and he didn’t feel like explaining himself. “I’m here on a break. I needed the fresh air. That sort of thing.”

She nodded, and after a short pause, she said, “Now I remember. I saw you outside the courthouse a few weeks ago. You were carrying a duffle bag on your back. You looked . . . lost.”

“That was probably me.”

“So, what do you do back home?”

“I write music,” he said, then added, “I guess you could say I’m a composer.”

“No kidding?” She gave him a sidelong gaze. “That’s neat. Have you written anything that I would have heard?”

He shrugged. “Maybe.”

“Like what?”

He cleared his throat, feeling suddenly self-conscious. He always did whenever someone quizzed him about his professional life. "I wrote a piece called 'Hear After.' I published it just before I got into television."

She stopped near the inset door of the Totem Tobacco, where the big, stony-faced wooden chief stood. "No way. You're putting me on, right?"

He shook his head with a hesitant smile. Most people he told this to had never heard the piece, didn't know it by name, or were genuinely surprised. Madison looked almost frightened.

"Can this day get any weirder?" she said more to herself, smiling slightly.

"I take it you know the song?" Even in the dim light he could see that her cheeks were glowing red, her eyes faintly watery.

"If you only knew."

Her look of almost gratitude pleased him. "Thanks. I like hearing that."

"No. Honestly. That song changed my life." Bewildered, she looked him in the eye, as if seeing something there she hadn't noticed before.

He almost flinched at her intensity.

"This is so bizarre," she whispered.

He didn't press her. She took his hand and pulled him after her. They passed several more shops, then turned onto Frontier Street, where a number of shops lined the road.

"That's my shop on the corner," she said, pointing out a small shop, lit by a single porch lamp. "It's not much, but it's mine."

"I like it," he said with an approving smile.

They walked the next two blocks, arm in arm, like old friends. When they reached the gravel driveway, they fell victim to an awkward silence. Cameron didn't quite know how to proceed; he felt almost guilty for wanting to ask Madison for a date as she'd nearly been ripped apart by a wild animal only half an hour earlier.

"I wish we could've met on better terms," he said, turning to face her.

She shied away. "Well, now you know where I work. If you're over this way tomorrow, maybe you could come and say hello. Unfortunately, I only sell women's apparel. But then again . . ." she made a face, "you never know."

“That’s right. I could probably use a new blouse.”

She gave a lopsided grin, but it lasted for only a fleeting moment before her face took on a more somber expression. “Thanks for saving me back there,” she said. Their eyes met for a moment—a very long moment—and Cameron’s stomach did a cartwheel. “I owe you big time.”

Before he could say anything more, she turned and hurried away, leaving him grinning like a fool. He went back up the street toward the square with his hands in his pockets, deep in thought, her perfume lingering about him.

Chapter 11

The fork's ringing burrowed into Cameron's ears, something alive and powerful. The pitch lowered, sinking to an abysmal drone, sucking the light from the study, and an inky darkness swallowed up the room, including Maestro Bloom who sat on the opposite side of the table.

A vision unfolded. He glimpsed the vast hall of some ancient gothic cathedral, with soaring stone walls and pointed archways and windows. Noisy with the steady tapping of hammers, it smelled of blood and musty air. Ribbons of entrails stretched overhead and festooned the walls. By the light of candles mounted on iron stands, twenty men dressed in brown robes worked at several stations scattered throughout the hall. Some of the workers used crude hammers to beat metal into strange forms. Others worked on a kind of loom, where one man sat on a chair that moved back and forth on runners while he fed tissue into large wheels that spun and wove it into string.

Cameron knew this had happened a long time ago, in a foreign country, in an abbey high in the mountains. A group of men had been touched by divine inspiration, and they'd built the Archetypes to communicate with God.

Just as suddenly as it came, the vision went away, and he found himself, naked and alone, in a dark room with polished stone floors. Frightened, he crouched and wrapped his arms around his knees, shielding himself from the cold that lapped against his skin. He noticed something clenched tightly in one fist and opened his hand. He was holding the tuning fork. It glowed dimly, sending warm vibrations pulsing down his arm.

Something whispered in the darkness.

He caught his breath and held the fork over his head, using its somber blue glow to drive back the shadows. Underfoot was shimmering black stone, and things moved beyond the light, crouching shapes that scuttled back and forth in palsied movements.

He stepped forward for a better look, and all but one of the creatures scurried away. The remaining creature faced him, the light shimmering against its black, hairless form. The size of an average dog, it squatted like a man, but moved on all fours. Its shiny skin was pulled taut over the bones of spindly appendages and knobby joints, making the creature resemble the instruments beneath the Calliope, as if somehow sharing the same origin.

The demon raised its head and hissed. Cameron nearly fell over himself. It had black pits for eyes and a great maw lined with jagged teeth. The face was flat, with bands of crisscrossed scar tissue for a nose, glistening with mucus. More of them gathered to either side of the creature, hissing and snapping their teeth like rattlesnakes.

“Stay back!” Cameron shouted, waving the fork in wide arcs. It continued to glow and vibrate. He felt its weight, but he no longer heard its low ringing. Either it had stopped or his ears had grown accustomed.

Wet feet slapped on the marble and one of the creatures penetrated the blue light of the fork. Crawling on all fours, it resembled the others, except that its head was disproportionate to the rest of its body. The face was that of a whey-faced boy of about ten years with thick blond hair and soft cheeks. The eyes gleamed like black marbles, regarding Cameron as he shuffled back in horror. He knew the face.

“Oh, God, Brent,” he whispered. “What’d they do to you?”

The thing that looked like Brent scuttled closer, moving in fluid, catlike motions. Its ribs pressed against its flanks, covered with a froglike skin that swelled and contracted with each raspy breath. It stopped, crouched, and thrust its head forward. Its mouth dropped open, lips curling back as it loosed an ear-shattering scream. Cameron was forced to stagger back, his hands covering his ears. This did nothing to dilute the shriek, like a thousand fingernails ripping across a chalkboard. He rammed his fingers into his

ears and clamped his teeth shut, groaning to endure the assault, but it soon overcame him. He dropped to his knees, crying out.

As the creature screamed, its jaws dislocated and widened to python-like proportions. Brent's face split open at the sides, beneath the jawbone, revealing oily black skin underneath. The lips curled back from tooth and gum until the bone showed.

"Stop it!" Cameron shouted. "Fucking stop it!"

But the creature had no intention of stopping. When he thought the sound would drive him insane, Cameron noticed something peculiar about the caterwauling. It was no monotone, single-noted scream rising and falling in pitch, but a whole chorus. The demon was singing to him—atonal and discordant—but a song nonetheless. And it was a familiar song.

The nightmare dissolved. Sitting at the table, with Bloom across from him, Cameron still held the fork with his thumb and forefinger. It continued giving off its hellish pitch. The music, however, continued to ring in his ear.

"Quick! I need something to write with!"

Bloom leaned across the table and touched a stack of paper and a pen, already prepared.

Letting the fork fall to the table, Cameron picked up the pen and started to write. His hand moved the pen and strange shapes sprang across the blank page like magic. Circles enclosed circles. Strange symbols filled the gaps. Words of an unknown language appeared in the corners. The music came without a single thought, as if he were channeling the whole thing. Every line, straight as an arrow, every circle, perfect.

He felt a certain tension release itself as he wrote. He almost laughed. He'd kept the pain so long, allowing it to resonate, that those dark and pervasive vibrations had rooted themselves in his sound aura. As he encoded those discordant vibrations into strange symbols, the energy loosed its hold over him, breaking its grip.

He finished the work in an hour and shoved the papers aside, not wanting to look at them any longer, as if in doing so he might become sick with it again. He was exhausted and soaked in sweat, with his shirt stuck to his back.

Bloom took the music and examined it quietly. “Discord. Look at this. Beautiful.”

Sagging in his chair, Cameron leaned forward against the table, feeling wasted, overcome with bitter guilt. “I want that burned,” he muttered through gnashed teeth. “Makes me sick to look at it.”

“Don’t be foolish. Why would we do a thing like that?” Bloom attempted an appeasing smile, but it came off as patronizing. “Astral Music is special, even the discordant works. You’ll see when we perform it tomorrow night.”

Cameron blinked out of his daze. “What are you talking about? Tomorrow night? What gives you the right?”

The maestro rose from his chair. “This piece is more important than you can possibly imagine. You must trust me. Everything will make sense in time.”

“Where are you going? You still owe me an explanation. I want to know about the other Tone Poets.”

“That will have to wait. You need rest, and I have things I must tend to.”

“I want answers!” Cameron slammed the table with his fist, causing the tuning fork to jump. The room seemed to tilt on its side. Exhaustion was setting in. He could hardly keep his eyes open.

Bloom had already turned away. He paused at the door, his back to the room, his head cocked slightly. “I admire your courage. It was not easy, what you did this evening. But now it’s time to heal. I’ll tell my driver to take you back to your hotel. Tomorrow at sundown—meet me at the Calliope. I will show you something extraordinary. It will change everything.”

Cameron sighed, leaned back in his chair, and rubbed his eyes with his hands, too tired to argue anymore.



A worn dirt path followed a wide creek through lush forest, teeming with life and color. Moss carpeted the rocks, and lichens crusted the soaring cliffs rising up on either side of them. As he followed behind Madison at a strong pace, Cameron’s mind eventually fell silent. The hike was doing wonders for his nerves. He couldn’t remember feeling so relaxed and in tune with the world around him. The smell of earth, pine, and river water made his head

spin. The music of birdsongs lightened his spirit. It was the perfect day for a picnic.

“So when did you say you were going back home?” Madison asked, glancing over a shoulder at him, her tone deceptively indifferent.

“Not sure yet.” He bit his lip. “I guess as long as it takes.”

“To do what?”

“I don’t know. Find a little direction, I suppose. I’m reconsidering my career.”

“You work in television, right?”

Cameron sucked down air as they climbed a hill. “Yeah. For the past six years. Nighttime dramas. That sort of thing. But I don’t think I’ll be doing that anymore.”

“No?” She stopped and turned to face him. “Why not? Sounds like a pretty good gig to me. I bet it pays pretty good too.” She stopped herself, blushed, and added, “I don’t know why I said that.”

“Don’t get me wrong; the money’s fine,” he said. “But it’s not about money for me. Not anymore.”

“Then what’s it about?”

He shrugged. “I always thought I’d do something more important with my life.”

Wiping the sweat from her brow, Madison nodded, then started on her way again. “I know exactly what you mean.” They walked for a mile or so until they reached the waterfall. Just as she’d promised, the place was breathtaking. The water plummeted from a thirty-foot drop in a deafening roar, crashing into a green pond, surrounded on all sides by thick foliage and sun-dappled rocks. The rocky banks were all aglow with splashes of green moss.

Taking off her backpack, Madison edged up to the pond and crouched down on a flat rock. She pulled off her sneakers and socks.

“So tell me something,” she said, looking up at him. “Why did you really come to Holloway? And don’t tell me you came just for the fresh air.”

An embarrassed smile touched the corners of his mouth. He’d dodged this same question the night he’d first met her. He’d hoped to keep his real reasons a secret, at least for a while. “Well, that wasn’t a complete fib. I mean, I do need the air.”

“Keep going.”

Cameron scratched the back of his head, hiding his discomfort. “Well, I came to compose for the Holloway Orchestra.”

Her eyes widened. She rose to her feet. “Really,” she said flatly.

He looked away. “I’m working with Maestro Bloom. He approached me with a deal that I just couldn’t pass up.”

Madison gave a smile that wasn’t really a smile at all. “He’s got you, too, huh? Geez, that guy’s busy.”

“What do you mean?”

She shrugged. “My cousin told me the same thing. Said they offered him a job.”

A sudden rush of blood reddened Cameron’s face, and he turned his head away, hoping his alarm didn’t show. “Well, Bloom’s certainly ambitious,” he said dismissively, hoping she wouldn’t probe any further.

She didn’t. Instead, she waded into the water. A ways out, she called over her shoulder, “You comin’?”

Cameron looked at the clear pond. The morning’s sultry heat had reduced him to a sweaty mess. Gnats and other unfortunate insects were stuck to his throat. His sweat-soaked shirt clung to his chest. A dip in the pond sounded like heaven.

As he started to take off his shoes, Madison splashed farther out, until the water reached her thighs. She made a *brrr* sound and folded her arms over her chest. “It’s a little cold.”

Carefully balancing on pointy rocks, he fumbled his way into the water, finding it colder than she’d let on. “Cold, my ass, This is freezing!”

She giggled. “Come on. It’s not that bad!”

As he drew closer, she motioned for him to follow, and they waded toward the waterfall. After a few steps, he reached for her hand. She gave it, smiled at him, then dropped her eyes. Cameron felt his heart tremble.

They marched on. Ten yards ahead, the waterfall met the pond in a thunderous mist that billowed and swirled. A river-scented gust of wind tossed their hair into their faces. For a moment, they fell silent. Then he felt her eyes on him. The roaring water fell mute, and only his pulse drummed in

his ears as he turned and drew her close. He leaned forward, slowly, giving her a moment to retreat if she wanted. She didn't resist.

Soft and gentle at first, their kiss seemed to draw energy from the falls. Cameron wrapped his arms around her waist, pressing himself firmly against her. Every atom in his body seemed to accelerate, collide, and fuse with hers.

When the kiss ended, they turned and watched the waterfall, and neither said a word.



Kalek and several others met Cameron at the Calliope's front doors at sundown. Kalek felt less of a shepherd to this flock; in a former time, he'd been their preacher. Then, when Bloom was born from the tuba, these previous church members took their direction from him instead. They, like Kalek, had continued to follow this extraordinary man who had tapped into an otherworldly realm. They, too, were also old, some slightly crippled in limb, but just as eager to follow and obey.

Except for a few overhead lights, the foyer remained cloaked in darkness. Off to either side of the wide lobby were more musicians, all watching with quiet anticipation. Kalek grinned as he guided Cameron quietly down the thick carpet toward the central auditorium doors. The warm lights and careful silence evoked a strange, almost church-like sense of reverence.

Kalek looked over at him. "Maestro Bloom is quite taken by you. He believes you are vastly talented."

"I don't think it's my talent he wants," said Cameron. Whatever it was he'd written in that discordant trance had nothing to do with talent, not as he knew it. "What I did last night, did that have anything to do with art?"

"Oh, I certainly believe so. It's not easy facing our demons. But you did it. And you captured that expression on paper. Isn't that the definition of art?"

Cameron shrugged. "If you say so."

They pressed through the swinging doors and into the auditorium. The seating area was dark, but the stage glowed with a soft illumination, and they moved down the aisle toward it. Onstage, several men were wrestling with a large black piano.

Bloom stood nearby, watching and directing. "Move it nearer the edge."

Cameron knew the hideous instrument. They'd brought it out from the Calliope's basement. One of Bloom's Archetypes. The Dragon.

Maestro Bloom looked down as they approached. "Oh, good!" he called. "Join me, would you, Cameron? Our guest will be arriving soon."

"What guest?" Cameron called back.

Bloom ignored him, returning his attention to the piano.

Cameron frowned, but Kalek nudged him gently along. They mounted the steps to the left of the stage.

"I know you have questions," Bloom said as they crossed to him, not even looking at them. "But I encourage you to keep those questions in abeyance for now. Mr. Kalek, I want you to wait outside for Mr. Witt. He'll be here shortly. Bring him here the moment he arrives."

"Yes, of course." Kalek descended the steps and headed back the way they'd just come.

"Mr. Witt?" said Cameron.

The maestro ignored him and raised a hand and shouted to his men, "That's fine there! Leave it and get out of my sight!"

The men backed away, and Cameron got a closer look at the Dragon. The thing looked like the fossil of some nightmare creature, with the contour of its back following the impressions of an intricate skeletal structure and a spinal cord that stretched across its length. The polished black skull mounted over middle-C leered straight ahead with a mouthful of knives.

"I suppose this has something to do with the music I wrote last night?" Cameron's voice quivered with uncertainty.

Bloom placed a hand on his shoulder and led him away from the instrument. "Yes, it does. The Astral Music you wrote last night will usher in our newest member to this orchestra."

"Another musician? He's coming here? Tonight?"

"That's right. He's an extraordinary talent, a master pianist. His arrival will make this orchestra complete."

They stopped at the edge of the stage and Cameron faced him. "I don't understand. What does Astral Music have to do with anything?"

Bloom raised a hand. "Again, I must ask you to wait. You will have your

answers soon.” He nodded toward the dark seating area. “The Calliope seems restless these days. I think she’s starting to waken.”

A cool draft wafted over them, strong enough to flutter their hair. A shiver raced down Cameron’s spine and he hugged himself.

Bloom threw him an amused grin. “Oh, don’t let the place unnerve you. There’s nothing to be afraid of here. Nothing but drafts and settling boards.”

A thought occurred to Cameron. *The Calliope . . . she’s as haunted as they come. A hotspot for spiritual activity.*

The central auditorium doors flew open and Kalek strode in with a tall, gangly teenager at his side.

“Please tell me that’s not our new pianist,” Cameron moaned. “Christ’s sake, Bloom. He’s just a kid!”

Kalek led his guest onto the stage. The boy looked nervously about as he cleared the top step. He had a narrow, weasel-like face, with a pair of horn-rimmed glasses balanced on the ridge of a long nose. Blossoms of acne marred his cheeks, and his long hair had a greasy sheen.

Probably still a virgin, thought Cameron. Probably shitting his pants too.

Bloom stepped forward and shook the kid’s hand. “Charlie. Thank you for coming.”

Charlie got his first look at the Dragon and paled. “What is that?” he asked in a shaky whisper.

“Only a piano, Charlie.” Bloom spoke carefully, not wanting to frighten the boy. “No matter how lifelike it seems.” He turned and quickly beckoned Cameron over to them. “Charlie, I want you to meet our renowned composer. This is Cameron Blake. He wrote the piece that you will perform for us this evening.”

Cameron shook the kid’s clammy hand. Charlie’s brow relaxed some when Cameron looked into his eyes, sensing something there that made him feel safer. This only increased Cameron’s guilt over the matter.

Bloom’s footfalls echoed heavily as he walked briskly to the piano, then turned to face them. He rested one hand on the piano’s back. “Will someone please get the lights?” he said, barely throwing his voice.

Suddenly the stage went dark, as if the world had vanished beneath their feet. A cone of light sliced through the darkness at an angle and fell on the Dragon. The polished black material that covered its frame looked wet and fleshy, and the skull watched them with a malicious grin, its eye sockets filled with shadows. The Dragon seemed to spring to life.

“Come over here, boy,” Bloom said. “I assure you, it won’t bite.”

Reluctantly, Charlie stepped forward, his eyes fixed on that snarling demon skull, arms hanging loosely at his sides. Bloom motioned for him to take a seat on the bench. Charlie hesitated.

Cameron couldn’t blame him.

“The Dragon is a special instrument,” Bloom said in a cool, instructive tone. “There is only one of these in the entire world. It is capable of producing sounds that no other instrument can produce.”

Charlie scratched the back of his neck, obviously deep in thought, then reluctantly lowered himself onto the bench.

The aged, haggard faces of several musicians appeared toward the rear of the piano, just outside the cone of light.

Cameron, growing more uneasy by the moment, also moved in closer. *The kid wasn’t old enough . . . for what?* he asked himself. They weren’t exactly breaking any laws here. Still, it felt wrong.

“Beautiful, isn’t she?” Bloom said to the boy, as he placed a sheet of crumpled paper on a bracket above and behind the mounted skull.

Charlie stared at it, his brow drawn in worry. “I don’t know what this is,” he said, slowly shaking his head. “This doesn’t make any sense to me.”

Cameron moved in for a closer look. He wanted to see it for himself as he remembered little of the tuning fork–induced nightmare, or the work he’d produced under its spell. There had been some hellish semblance of music in that dream and writing it down proved the only way to wake up from it. Any hopes he had of remembering that night died the moment he peered over Charlie’s shoulder.

He recognized the cryptic notation only because he’d seen similar works in his dream journal. All of it drawn by a hand much more delicate than

his own, meaning nothing to him, as if he'd channeled the whole thing by automatic handwriting.

Bloom propped himself against the piano and grinned at Cameron, then turned his eyes to the boy. "The notation will undoubtedly seem strange to you, but if you let go—if you give yourself over to the music—you will find that you can read this just as easily as you would a page from a book."

Cameron felt that the words were also aimed at him. "What are you talking about, Bloom?" he asked scathingly. "You can't expect him to play that."

Impatience shimmered in Bloom's eyes as he fixed a threatening gaze on Cameron. "On the contrary, anyone with the slightest musical ability can play it."

"So why did you choose me?" Charlie wondered in a petulant tone.

Bloom looked at the kid and the intensity left his face. "I chose you for a number of reasons. First, you are the best pianist in this godforsaken town. Second, and most importantly, because I knew that I could count on you. I've had my eye on you for a long time. I see how the other boys treat you. They don't understand you. They don't understand your talent. But after tonight, things are going to change, Charlie."

Charlie's voice seemed small for his size. "How?"

"Once you play that music before you," said Bloom, "you will never hear music the same way again. The music will lead you to a spiritual awakening."

Cameron threw his hands up. "What the hell are you talking about, Bloom? You're filling this kid's head with bullshit." He clutched Charlie's shoulder and looked him in the eyes. "Listen, man, you don't have to do this. Christ, I don't even know what we're doing here."

Behind his thick spectacles, Charlie's eyes grew wide with uncertainty. His mouth moved as if he wanted to say something but couldn't get his tongue to work.

"That's right, Charlie," Bloom said in a voice loud enough to echo out into the auditorium. "Go home. Back to your pathetic life. To parents who hate you. Peers who don't respect you. I see the bruises on your face . . ."

The kid's head snapped around to meet the maestro's gaze. Cameron recognized the desperation in the boy's movements, the way he looked back and forth between the men, like a drowning victim groping for a line.

Bloom let his words sink in for a moment before he continued. "Or you can stay and take part in something important. Something special. Something that has never been done."

"You don't have to do this," Cameron interjected, but he knew Bloom had won the kid over. He could tell by the way Charlie drew himself up, fortified.

"It will change me?" Charlie's question sounded more like a plea.

Grinning coldly, Bloom glanced at Cameron, then said, "Most definitely."

There was a long pause. Then the kid nodded and said, "Tell me what to do."

Nothing happened for a long time.

Sitting quietly at the piano, Charlie waited with his back slouched, his fingers touching the keys, eyes fixed on the music, as if waiting for it to suddenly make sense—exactly as Bloom had told him.

Cameron paced the stage with his hands on his hips, a bitter smile slashed across his face, his mind racing. *This is ridiculous. Irresponsible. We're fucking with this kid's head. What am I doing here?* Finally he spun around and looked at Bloom. "I can't do this. We need to stop. Right now."

A piercing note cut across him. Mouth still open, his eyes went to Charlie, who looked over his shoulder at them, his face holding an uncertain smile.

"I think . . . I think I got it," he said.

Bloom nodded. "Okay, then, Charlie. Let's have it."

The kid returned his gaze to the keyboard and adjusted his glasses. His posture crumbled, his back bent like a question mark, and then he played a chord. The piano produced a strange sound, not entirely unnatural, at least not at first. But there was a subtle undertone, felt more than heard. As Charlie's hands started to tear up and down the keyboard, a frantic melody tried to take shape. But the piece was unpredictable and at times convoluted, resisting any attempt Cameron's mind made to grab hold of it and make sense out of it.

Even so, the music was eerily familiar.

At that moment a thought sprang to mind. It was Madison's voice: *My cousin told me the same thing. Said they offered him a job.*

"Oh God," Cameron whispered.

The piano began to open up, like a blossoming flower, as each of the two planks forming its lid raised slowly by the hinges at the outer edges. Parting at the dividing spine that ran down the piano's back, the planks swung upward like sections of a drawbridge. Inside were syrupy cobwebs that clung to the underside of each plank, falling in viscous ribbons down into the piano's inner workings.

Cameron's stomach tightened as his panic mounted. He could hardly breathe. But if Charlie shared his terror, he didn't show it. The kid continued to rip his hands across the keys, hammering out the alien music, seemingly oblivious to the piano's unfolding.

"Stop!" Cameron shouted. "Charlie! For Christ's sake, stop!"

But Charlie didn't stop. He was a puppet on strings. When he threw his head back and screamed, Cameron rushed forward to help, but one of Bloom's men grabbed his arm and held him in place. He tried breaking free, but the maestro moved in front of him and shook his head.

"Don't interfere, Cameron," he said, his voice barely competing with the horrid sounds coming from the piano. "This must be done."

Scowling, Cameron wrenched his arm free and stepped past the maestro. No one tried to stop him. By now, the piano's lids had opened as far as they would go, each raised at an angle like spreading wings. Curious, he looked down into the instrument's casing, expecting to see the typical arrangement of felt hammers, strings, and sound boards. Instead, he gazed into what seemed like an eviscerated corpse with its ribcage cracked and forced open. A thin translucent film covered what looked like a framework of bones, assembled in a kind of captain's wheel design, with each bony spoke radiating outward from a central hub. In the gaps were what appeared to be human organs, ligaments, and ropes of entrails. Silver strings were threaded throughout the entire affair, spanning from one side of the frame to the other.

"What the fuck is going on?" Cameron shouted.

The music stopped suddenly. Several wires snapped free with violent

pinging sounds. Cameron threw his hands up to shield his face and staggered back until he was out of the radius of whiplashing strings.

Charlie just sat there, his head rolled back, gawking, until one of the breaking wires whipped him across the face and sent his glasses flying off. He merely pressed a hand to his cheek to stop the blood and watched.

A moan echoed across the stage.

Hands still raised to ward off snapping wires, Cameron moved closer until he could see down into the opened back of the instrument, beneath the sheet of translucent membrane, and the inner mechanics of human bones, ligaments, and wire. Two hands pushed their way through the parts until the palms pressed against the membrane. The film stretched like rubber, the fingers tearing through and ripping open a large hole. Suddenly the bloody face of a man appeared, eyes round and wide with panic. The mouth opened and a wild, hellish scream bellowed out.

Paralyzed with horror, Cameron staggered and dropped to his knees, still watching.

Two arms reached up from within the piano, hands gripping either side of the frame. A man hoisted himself up to his waist, face turned toward the ceiling. Naked and covered in viscera and placenta and all the birth stuff of the universe, the man's pale chest hitched with each pull of breath.

"Welcome back, old friend," said Bloom, standing with his arms crossed, his expression unflustered.

The man in the piano continued gasping for breath, his back arched, the muscles in his arms rigid, hands tight on the edges of the frame. Shoulder-length hair, black and blood soaked, framed his narrow face.

"I fulfilled my promise," Bloom went on. "Now you must fulfill your end of the bargain."

Cameron climbed to his feet and staggered toward the stage's edge, bewildered and unable to break his gaze from the man standing halfway out of the piano. When he glanced beneath the instrument, expecting to see the man's legs protruding from the underbelly of the case, he saw only empty space. *Like a goddamn magic trick*, he thought. *An optical illusion. At least the kid seems all right.*

Charlie sat slumped on the piano bench, his arms hanging between

his knees. A thin gash broke the skin of his face from cheek bone to chin, bleeding freely; otherwise, he looked fine, if somewhat dumbfounded.

“My God, Bloom,” Cameron gasped, shaking his head but unable to look away from the piano. “What did we do? Why didn’t you warn me?” His voice grew steadily higher in repulsion and fear as he reached the edge of the stage.

“This is the pianist we’ve been waiting for, Cameron,” said Bloom, his voice calm and soothing. “He’s been gone a long time. But you’ve brought him back. Now this orchestra is complete.”

The blood-covered man drew a wheezy breath, threw his head back as he spread wide his long, sinewy arms, and gave a triumphant howl.

This broke Cameron’s trance. His feet nearly slipped beneath him as he spun around and leaped from the stage into the seating area, his stomach heaving. He didn’t look back as he bolted up the far aisle, nor did anyone try to stop him as he plowed through the swinging doors into the lobby.



It was raining by the time Cameron finished packing and returned to the square with his duffel bag on his back. Unable to find a taxi, he walked east along Main Street. The rain fell in cold sheets, forcing him into a stoop, with his head bent against the downpour. A mile or so out, he plunged into a soupy darkness. Shops gave way to small homes, spread out in widening intervals amid thick woods along the road.

A set of headlights, blurred by the rain, appeared on the road behind him. He turned and thumbed for a ride. The car slowed as it approached, then came to a stop beside him. It was a Bentley stretch limousine. With an angry shake of the head, Cameron turned and walked away.

The Bentley followed. When the back door opened with a muffled click, he stopped and looked. The interior remained dark, and for a heart-stopping moment, Cameron half expected the blood-covered face of the resurrected musician to appear.

But the face that eventually appeared belonged to Maestro Bloom.

“Cameron, please get in,” he said carefully, almost fatherly.

Cameron only stood in the rain, contemplating. He threw a final, longing glance down the highway, considering the few short miles to the next town.

But he couldn't leave; not after seeing so much. Not with so many questions chasing around in his head. His gaze turned to the open car door, knowing already what he would do. With a sigh, he tossed his duffel bag inside and then followed.

Shivering, he settled into the leather seat and pulled his door shut. The limo rolled back onto the street. Bloom said nothing, staring straight ahead.

Cameron was first to break the silence. "What the hell happened back there?"

"A miracle," Bloom said simply.

"You could have at least warned me."

"And what would you have said?" Bloom asked in a flat, casual tone. "If I told you that we were going to bring a man back from the other side, would you have believed me?"

Clenching his teeth, Cameron shifted around in his seat so that he could look Bloom in the eye. "Who the fuck is he?"

"His name is Christofori. At one time he served as pianist for my orchestra. He was my most valued musician. Then one night he slit his throat and took his own life. But I knew a secret. Though he destroyed his body, some part of him lived on, trapped in a prison of Discord, a perpetual nightmare. And so when tonight our young Mr. Witt performed the Nocturne, Christofori heard it, and he came running like a hungry dog to the clanging dinner bell. The moment he emerged, his soul remembered the frequency of its former physical mass, and he once again became whole."

Cameron sat back, feeling deflated. He stared out the window at the dark buildings gliding past and wondered how long he would allow Bloom to guide him into the dark unknown. *Jesus Christ, what have I gotten myself into?*

"There are things that I must tell you about the orchestra," said Bloom quietly, "things that I could not tell you before. But now you've seen; now you understand the power behind the music. And now you are ready to learn more."

By now they were back at the town square, heading toward Cameron's hotel. He shrank into his seat, suddenly exhausted, and too tired to resist. Too tired to leave.

The world had begun to unravel, and nothing would ever be the same.