

CHAPTER 11

We split up at the front entrance to the mall as Professor Howard left to do his banking and grocery shopping. It was a glorious morning and I couldn't help but cheer up even though I was still tired from working last night at the warehouse. Hanna took me to a bookstore where she picked out a paperback biography of one of her father's favorite musicians for his upcoming birthday.

"How was Hugo last night?" she said as we moved to the mystery section to find something for her to read.

"Restless. He didn't stop pacing once while I was there, and I gave up on waiting for him to fall asleep. I checked with the zoo and the elephants there were the same: fidgety and nervous. The noise they were making was driving the night staff crazy. I'm sure Professor Blenheim must have got some interesting readings last night, because Hugo was definitely in the mood to communicate with somebody."

As we wandered through the fiction sections, I suddenly stopped in my tracks, aware that something I had just heard wasn't right. I tilted my head to one side so I could listen more closely to the music coming from the overhead speakers inside the store.

The song currently playing was one of the usual melodies stores play in their public areas, vaguely familiar but missing depth and feeling. It was a tune, I knew, that theoretically was supposed to make me feel more inclined to spend some of my money, in this case for books. I've never understood the theory of how the process was supposed to work, perhaps because I usually don't have much disposable income to spend anyway, but I assume that it was designed to attack my willpower on some subliminal level of my subconscious.

Still, something about the music was different this time. I made an effort to filter out the general background noises around me and for a fleeting moment I thought I had it all figured out. It was almost as if the music was being modified or distorted somehow, because it seemed to be resonating with me in a thoroughly unpleasant fashion that left me feeling distinctly uncomfortable. It was definitely different than the sound I'd heard earlier in the dean's office, and it was only audible because it was interfering with the background music. Still, I sensed that it was from the same source, and once again I felt like I was being stalked. As I tried to identify exactly what I was hearing, however, the distortion disappeared, and the music sounded normal again.

"Hanna, am I imagining things, or did the music that was playing a few seconds ago sound different in any way to you?"

"What music? Oh, you mean the crap playing in the background?"

"Yes. It's normal now, but there was something strange about it."

"Sorry," she said. "I wouldn't have noticed. I deliberately tune it out whenever I'm around it. Dad says it'll rot your brain if you listen to it, and that humming along with it is a sure sign of impending mental illness. What

I'm hearing now sounds normal to me, which is to say it's bland and mindless. What did you hear?"

"Very difficult to describe, but it was like when that Cher song came out that digitally distorted some of her vocalizations. You're aware that it's different, but you aren't sure why. Know what I mean?"

"Sure. Cher's song was jarring when you first listened to it, because hearing what they did to her voice was so unnatural and the distortion was so unexpected. But like I say, I never noticed anything different about the music that's playing here. Maybe your ears temporarily went wonky on you, or the stereo system the store plays this stuff on is about to burn out. On the other hand, maybe you're just imagining things."

As we left the mall, Hanna spotted a limousine pulling up nearby and grabbed my arm. "Hang on a minute. I want to see who's inside."

The chauffeur slid out of the driver's side, opened the back door, and then stood at attention as four clean-cut young men stepped out onto the sidewalk. They were met by several burly security guards from the mall who were obviously supposed to escort them to the front entrance. A group of young kids materialized out of nowhere and began cheering and shouting, apparently in response to their arrival. The guards had to clear a path through them.

As the celebrities, trailed by the crowd, were about to enter the mall, they walked past a busker who was standing near us. She was in her late teens, neatly dressed and holding a flute, and she smiled expectantly as the four young men approached. The first three young men ignored her and barged through the doors as their security detail shielded them from overenthusiastic fans. The fourth stopped in front of her, took one look at the open flute case at her feet and pulled a penny from his pocket.

As he dropped it ceremoniously into her case, he gave her an evil grin. "Real musicians don't have to panhandle. Why don't you get a job?"

Before she could reply he leapt through the door with the assistance of a guard and joined his three friends. The busker was left with a hurt expression on her face.

"Who was that jerk?" Hanna said as she reached out to comfort the young woman by touching her arm gently.

The busker finally regained her composure. "Can you believe it? I should have hit him with my flute but his security detail probably would have crippled me before I had a chance to hurt him. Didn't you recognize them?"

"Nope," Hanna said. "I take it they were somebody important?"

"Sort of, I guess. They're the latest wannabe boy band. They're making an appearance just inside the doorway at the music store to promote their first CD. It's been featured on the local news for a week now."

"I can't believe that guy was so rude," I said. "I take it you won't be buying their CD?"

"Hardly," she said. "I prefer classical and jazz although I keep an open mind when it comes to different types of music. Boy bands I don't like, however. Never understood why they're so popular."

"We three have something in common then," Hanna said as we introduced ourselves. Her name was Maria.

"How's business?" Hanna asked.

"Well, everything you see inside the case is my seed money," she replied. "That penny he just tossed in is my income for the day so far, and I've got a college education to pay for. Don't get me wrong, I'm not complaining, really. This is a good spot and it's usually much more lucrative. Sometimes I draw a fairly big crowd but this doesn't seem to be one of those days, thanks to the competition inside the music store."

We could hear someone in the mall announce the presence of the boy band over the PA system, which was followed by cheers and enthusiastic screams from the crowds that now filled the area around the music store. Every time the door opened beside us the noise from the boisterous fans inside almost drowned out our conversation.

"Maybe you should think about temporarily moving to a quieter place?" Hanna suggested.

"Can't. Mall security won't permit me to stand anywhere but here. Them's the rules. You know, I might as well take a coffee break anyway since nobody will want to listen to me while they're showboating inside. You guys want to join me?"

"Only if you'll let me buy. I'm going to be a starving university student soon enough myself, but I've got a little cash to spare at the moment," Hanna said.

We headed to the food court, which was already crowded because it was right beside the music store, and grabbed the only empty table. The security guards had set up a cordon around the store so the boy band could prepare for their concert.

"Where's their backup band?" I asked the flutist.

"They're supposed to sing a cappella during their appearance today, although I imagine there'll be some recorded sound track playing quietly in the background to keep them singing in tune. You can see a technician setting up behind them."

"I wonder if they're going to do any lip-synching?" Hanna asked.

"They probably wouldn't dare," Maria said. "In fact, I can guarantee they won't be lip-synching today, even for a few hundred mall-rats, because if you look to your left you'll see news cameras from one of the local TV stations. There've been too many scandals lately. These guys may not be real musicians but you can bet they've been well coached to sing the four or five songs in their tiny repertoire and that'll probably be the highlight of their short-lived careers. Fans are easily bored nowadays, and these guys will be replaced by four fresh faces in a year or two, at which point they'll be back waiting tables or whatever they were doing before they were discovered."

Their harmony was competent but their first song was bland and barely distinguishable from the product of other boy bands. While the young fans seemed enthusiastic, I was not impressed, especially when they began a poorly choreographed dance routine. On a whim I ran my hands over the antennae of the theremin and concentrated on sending the singers the kind of high tone that a tuning fork might produce.

The results were instantaneous. The four of them simultaneously cupped their hands over one ear as if they were imitating Robin Gibb of the

Bee Gees. Each of them began to sing in a different key and within seconds they were forced to end the song well before it was supposed to finish. I stopped playing the disruptive note, but not before a few bystanders seemed to realize that it had originated from my theremin.

The singer who had mocked Maria recovered first and immediately signaled his group to begin the next song in an attempt to recover from their disastrous debut. As they did so I subtly ran my hands over the antennae again, this time in an attempt to trigger equipment being operated by the technician behind the group to produce a discordant noise to distract the band. I was rewarded by a hideous screeching sound from the speakers that all but killed any chance they had of producing coherent music at the moment. As their singing stopped I waved my hand over the theremin one more time and produced an announcement that sounded like it was coming from the mall's PA system, except that the voice resembled a computer speech simulator. "Wet cleanup for a spill beside the music store! Wet cleanup for a spill beside the music store!" The crowd burst into laughter.

I had apparently overplayed my hand, however, because now people around us were pointing in our direction. Their interest in turn inevitably drew the attention of nearby security guards, who took one look at my theremin and immediately escorted the three of us out of the mall. We ended up standing at Maria's spot. The busker, who apparently had no idea what had happened, opened up her case and pulled out her flute.

A burly security guard was assigned to keep us from reentering the mall. When he saw her flute emerge from the case he had a brief conversation over his portable radio and then motioned for her to put it away.

"No way," the busker said. "You can't stop me from playing. I have permission to be here."

"Then you'll have to leave the property," he said.

"You have the right to kick us out of your mall, although I still don't understand why you felt that was necessary, but this is my spot and I don't move for anyone. In fact, now that you've really annoyed me, I intend to accompany their next song on my flute if I can get someone to hold the door open long enough to make myself heard inside. There's a TV news crew covering their concert so I might as well try to get a little free publicity while I'm here."

Before the security guard could reply I ran my hands over the antennae once again, creating a gentle lullaby that I directed at the guard. It worked. The guard seemed to nod off even though he remained standing in front of us with his arms crossed. Within seconds he was snoring away, swaying gently but seemingly locked in an upright position. I had to restrain myself from laughing out loud, and it struck me that I was now reduced to performing cheap parlor tricks with the theremin, fantastic deeds that shouldn't have been possible, but childish, meaningless tricks nonetheless. Playing silly games with the theremin was probably a lot like driving a Ferrari to the store for a quart of milk in that it was a shame not to exploit the full potential of a beautiful piece of machinery. Still, I had to admit it was great fun.

"Must be narcoleptic," Maria said quietly as the sound of the boy band starting up their music once again reached us through the doors. "I think it's time I play something to wake him up."

"Their security team isn't going to be happy if you disrupt their big event," Hanna said.

"I don't care. Besides, I look at it as more of an enhancement than a disruption," the busker said, grinning. "Their singing is still a little off kilter. Perhaps they'll learn something about professionalism as I accompany them with some *real* music."

Hanna obligingly held the door open as the busker positioned her flute so that it was pointed in the band's direction and began playing with a vengeful expression on her face. She was very good, I decided. Although I didn't recognize the tune, I guessed that it must be a type of freeform jazz. She seemed to be enjoying herself as her music drifted inside the mall but I could already see two more huge security guards headed our way. The original guard was still asleep on his feet in front of us.

"Andy, why don't you accompany her on the theremin before these thugs toss us out of here. That'll really annoy the little boys in the band. I'll try to hold security back as long as possible," Hanna said.

I placed the theremin on top of a garbage can on the sidewalk beside her and immediately began waving my hands through the air in an attempt to match her music somehow. I had never before tried to sing with anyone else, let alone accompany another musician, so it felt awkward at first. However, once I grasped the concept of listening to her with one ear while simultaneously concentrating on playing my own music in sync with hers, it soon seemed natural and easy, like tapping my fingers to a song on the radio.

The theremin was almost mimicking her instrument's sound at first, so to me it sounded almost like an echo. Having mastered that skill, I began to experiment a bit and wander away on my own slightly while still linking my music to her basic tune. She had given me a weird look when I started playing but soon smiled when my intent became clear. I could hear the security guards trying to argue their way past Hanna, and when that didn't work they finally just pushed her to one side and positioned themselves in front of us as we played. They had serious looks on their faces and their arms were crossed menacingly over their stomachs in an apparent effort to showcase their muscular shoulders.

"Alright, that's enough," one of them said in a loud, menacing voice. "You've made your point. Now, either you stop playing or we remove you from this doorway forthwith and call the cops. It's your choice."

The busker looked at me, and raised her eyebrows. I just smiled, and neither of us stopped playing. Since it appeared that our impromptu concert was about to be halted anyway, I decided to attempt to incorporate her flute directly into my own efforts and then compliment it with my own music while at the same time increasing the loudness, almost as if we were channeling our performance through an amplifier into speakers. I know nothing about jazz but I tried to guess how a jazz musician would play as part of a group, and after a few awkward moments it seemed to work. The combined effect of

both our efforts through the theremin was electrifying.

The act of accompanying an accomplished musician left me almost breathless with excitement. Even the security guards were affected and the more aggressive guard was forcibly pulled by his companion off to one side where they both listened raptly to our playing. Emboldened by my success, I amped up the sound levels even higher and aimed the music like a gun through the mall doors and in the general direction of the music store.

The effect was incredible. The fans gathered around the music store quickly deserted the boy band and began following the sound of our music back to its source. A huge, appreciative crowd had soon surrounded the two of us as we played. Bystanders began filling her case with bills and change and she nodded her thanks as they lined up, money in hand, to show their appreciation.

She guided me through several variations of the same basic song, each a little more elaborate than the last, and I felt more and more comfortable at improvising various melodies while at the same time following her lead. When we finished the two of us joined hands and bowed to the crowd of bystanders. They rewarded us with an enthusiastic ovation as well as a flood of donations that left her case overflowing with cash and coins. Even the security guard I'd put to sleep finally awoke and joined the other two guards in applauding us. I caught sight of the four members of the boy band, standing near the mall exit, watching us through the glass doors with puzzled expressions on their faces.

Professor Howard joined us, shaking his head in wonderment. "Maria, what are you doing here?"

"Hi Professor! I was kind of hoping I wouldn't run into anyone I knew here, especially you. This is embarrassing."

"It shouldn't be," he replied. "You two were fabulous. I only heard a few minutes of your performance, but I've got to tell you, I can't remember the last time I saw an audience so bowled over. Maria, you just earned yourself a passing grade in my class, for what it's worth."

"Thank you, sir, but I have to give him the credit for that performance. Andy, you may be playing electronic music on that instrument, but it's electronic music with a soul," the busker said. "What the hell is that thing?"

"It's a long story," I said.

"Well, you and your instrument managed to bring out qualities in my playing that I never dreamt I'd be able to produce, and for that I am truly grateful. I don't suppose you'd be able to work this spot with me tomorrow?"

"Sorry, but I've got other things on my plate these days," I said as I remembered my mother lying helplessly in her hospital bed. "Perhaps another time..."

As the busker shoveled our donations into her purse, she smiled in my direction. "I'm here every day, so feel free to drop by anytime. Meanwhile, we should move to a coffee shop so we can split the take. This is great! I've never made this much money before."

"No thanks," I said. "It's your gig, your money. I wouldn't feel right sharing it. Besides, it was fun."

"You sure?" she said.

"Yeah. Thanks anyway."

"We have to head out now, Andy, or we'll be late for our visit," Hanna said as the busker shook hands with me.

"See you in class, Maria," the professor said, smiling.

As we drove away the busker was still standing on her spot with a huge grin on her face as she put her money away and carefully placed her flute inside its case.

"Now that was cool," I said, smiling. "Performing a duet with another musician, and being able to anticipate where she was going with her music, was almost like..."

"Don't even think about going there," Hanna interjected. "She was attractive, yes, but you perform just as well as a solo act, if you get my drift."

"I was actually referring to team sports, but I think I like your analogy better."

I reached between the seats and squeezed her hand as Professor Howard switched on the car radio. The vocals of the song were distorted, just like the mall music, and this time I didn't bother to ask if either of them was hearing the same bizarre sound. It was so off-putting that they'd surely have mentioned it. For me, it was like listening to fingernails being scratched against a blackboard.

What the hell was happening? I was being haunted by discordant ghostly sounds that nobody else could hear. My mood had transitioned from happiness to despair the moment I heard the distorted music on the radio, and I knew violent mood swings like this couldn't be healthy. Was I having some kind of a nervous breakdown?

I lunged over the seat and turned the radio off. Hanna and her father gave each other a concerned look, but I ignored them.

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