

CHAPTER 5

"I'm not sure this is such a good idea. You know, there could be a perfectly good reason why mom didn't want me to see what's in this room, and maybe we should respect her wishes."

"Don't be stupid. Just show me where this glowing light you're talking about is coming from."

Desperately casting about for any excuse to avoid exploring the source of the green light, I stood beside a battered rocking chair and examined the little portable stereo sitting on a shelf beside it. I placed the earphones on my head, switched it on and was surprised to hear some Buddy Holly music.

"Well, this is a little strange. Mom would never let me listen to music in the house and I always assumed it was just one of her bizarre eccentricities. It never occurred to me that she might be sneaking up here to listen to her own music even though I wasn't allowed to."

"Whatever. Where's this light? Can you still see it?"

I reluctantly nudged her toward the source of the mysterious green glow. I moved a pile of old electrical cords and a small electric clock with a built-in pendulum off to one side so we could determine where it was coming from. It was an object about the size of a toaster but brown in color, cube-shaped with a stubby, straight antenna sticking out of the top and a round antenna on one end. A dial face on the front was the source of the greenish glow, and there was some indecipherable printing beside it that looked like hieroglyphics but was probably a brand name in some foreign language. At first glance it seemed innocuous enough, and some of the anxiety I'd been experiencing melted away.

"This'll be where the green light I saw through the wall is coming from. You still can't hear it?"

She leaned over and put her ear up against it. "Nope. You must have pretty good hearing because it's not making any noise that I can detect."

"Strange."

"Maybe your mother left it on the last time she was up here. You've never seen this thing before?" Hanna asked as she picked it up off the shelf.

"Never. What do you think it is? An old radio?"

"I don't think so. The fact that it has more than one antenna is the giveaway. I think it's some kind of theremin."

"A what?"

"You remember that old Beach Boys song where the chorus sounded like it was from a sci-fi movie? I think it was called 'Good Vibrations' or something. Anyway, that bizarre, wavering sound effect they used throughout the song was produced with a theremin."

"I recall the song, but I've never heard of a theremin. How does it work?"

"My dad showed me pictures of one once as he was prepping for one of his music classes," she said as she examined it carefully. "If I remember correctly, you play a theremin by moving your hands though the air past the

two antennas. I think it has something to do with electromagnetic fields, or some kind of electrical energy. All of which is pretty impressive, considering the fact that it was invented back in the twenties or thirties. This thing looks to be in great shape, whatever it is, and I bet it qualifies as an antique even if it wasn't made in America."

"Worth anything, do you think?"

"If it's really as old as it looks, it might be worth some serious money if you decide you want to sell it."

"You bet I do. Let me take a closer look at it, will you?"

She handed it to me, and as I touched it the front lit up as the green glow brightened noticeably and changed to a brilliant greenish hue I'd never seen before. The object was amazingly light, considering its size, and the texture of the case made it feel almost like a velvet jewelry box. The music became less intrusive now, and actually quite pleasant to listen to. I felt a little ridiculous for being so afraid of it just because it was originating from inside this unusual object rather than playing inside my mind as my earworm always had, at least until its short journey to Hugo yesterday.

"It's playing some kind of music and it doesn't sound anything like that weird chorus from the Beach Boy's song."

She looked perplexed. "Sorry, I still can't hear a thing."

The music was accompanied by a chorus of greenish colors in the shape of miniature whirlwinds, emanating from the dial face in perfect synchronization with the earworm's tune. The effect was unlike anything I'd ever seen before as a result of my synesthesia, and I was momentarily awestruck by its beauty.

"Hanna, I take it you still can't see the green glow of the dial face. Can you see any other colors?"

"Is that what you were talking about earlier? I still can't hear or see anything out of the ordinary."

"Well, I guess that confirms it's a variation of my synesthesia that I don't encounter very often, you know, colors experienced as music instead of the other way around."

Of course I realized that the explanation had to be more complicated than that, but it seemed like an excellent way to keep Hanna from doubting my sanity. Moments later the music stopped although there was still a dim green glow from the area of the dial face.

"Andy, it's going to be a long day for you, and I know you haven't been getting enough sleep. Why don't you try and fit in a little more nap time before we leave?"

"I'm not tired. Not at all. Maybe it's just the shock of what happened to mom." At least she wasn't questioning my sanity yet.

"Understandable, considering what you're going through right now."

"You're probably right. By the way, the music has finally stopped but the dial is still glowing. How do we turn this thing off?"

"Well, it doesn't have a power cord, so we can't unplug it. Obviously it must run off batteries. Interesting that it doesn't seem to have a knob or a switch to turn it off, though. It must have already been left running in some kind of standby mode for at least twenty-four hours, so it's got to have

pretty good batteries in it," she said. "The fact that it was on must mean your mom played it, right?"

"That would seem logical. She may have come up here to listen to music on her headphones, but I still don't think she ever played this theremin. In fact she never came up to the attic when I was home, or at least not when I was still awake. Besides, if we're talking about the same Beach Boys song, a theremin has a pretty distinctive sound to it and I'd for sure remember hearing it. No, it's a small house. If there'd been any music playing inside it, I'd have noticed. Remember, she didn't allow any music at all here. No stereo. No TV either."

"Okay, I believe you," she said, smiling. "If you like, we could show this to my dad. I know he'd love to examine one up close, especially if it's a real theremin. Hey, he might even buy it off you to add to his collection of musical instruments. It's certainly unique enough for him to want it."

I closed the door to the hidden room again and then locked the attic door behind us as I carried the theremin downstairs. I put it on the kitchen table and tried to talk about the prom but Hanna didn't seem to be listening. She couldn't take her eyes off the theremin. She walked around the table, looking at it carefully from all sides, occasionally reaching out with her hand to wave it tentatively over the top surface of the device. She picked it up and tried pressing her fingers against all the surfaces, hoping to trigger some kind of a hidden on/off switch. Nothing she did seemed to make any difference and the theremin remained silent.

"I give up," she said with a sigh. "It's obviously still switched on because you can see the green light on the dial, but it won't play for me. You said it made some noise for you upstairs. Why don't you give it a try?"

I sat on one of the kitchen chairs, rested the theremin comfortably in my lap and waved my hands over the two antennas in a sweeping motion. It responded instantly to my input and unleashed a sound resembling a torrent of hard driving but generic rock music that became increasingly frenzied as my gestures became more and more animated.

I thought at first I'd have to keep track of the various positions of my hands somehow in order to reproduce individual sounds, but I soon discovered that the process was entirely instinctual. I eventually stopped trying to analyze what I was doing and simply concentrated on playing it like any other musical instrument, which was ironic since the only way I'd ever produced music before was by tapping a rhythm on a tabletop with the end of a pencil. My mother had been pretty lenient with me as I was being raised, but she had made it abundantly clear that she didn't want me involved with music or musicians. I had reluctantly complied, even though I never did understand why she was so adamant about it.

Playing the theremin was a lot like directing an orchestra. The song it produced seemed to incorporate dozens of different musical instruments subtly intermixed with incomprehensible yet vaguely familiar vocals, all of which melded into a very rich, pleasantly harmonious tune. Although I couldn't pick out the sound of any specific instrument, like for instance a bass guitar, the music was apparently created and controlled solely by the movement of my hands through the electromagnetic fields of the theremin.

It reacted in synch with my various hand movements so I must have been creating it myself. Even the vocals, which were beautiful to listen to, were performed in a language and tone I couldn't identify. It probably wasn't accurate to refer to them as vocals anyway because I'd never encountered a singer with a voice like that.

It seemed bizarre that seconds after I first picked up the device I immediately found myself able to create the kind of music I loved listening to even though I had never studied music or played any musical instrument before. I couldn't explain how it was happening because it seemed impossible, and yet I was doing it and I actually felt very comfortable with the process. As if the music wasn't incredible enough, the light show that accompanied it was like nothing I'd ever experienced before.

I lost all sense of time as the song and the accompanying colors ebbed and flowed around the cluttered kitchen. The light show that seemed to originate from the theremin's dial face gradually overwhelmed the illumination from the kitchen window and enveloped both of us like a warm sleeping bag. Hanna sat across from me, transfixed by the music, her eyes dreamily staring at me as if I was a rock star. It seemed like I was exploring a sensual world inside the music rather than just listening to it, and I made certain that I incorporated an expression of the complicated feelings I had for Hanna into the tune. I had no idea how I managed to do that but I could hear it reflected in the song and wondered if she could to.

All my problems, fears and inadequacies disappeared and were replaced with a comfortable, confident assurance that all would be well again in my life. I couldn't stop smiling. For the first time in a long time I was actually creating something, and for some reason this made me feel happy and secure. I was also well aware that this good feeling was probably only temporary, but the fact that it was displacing the sadness and despair that had dominated my life recently was invigorating.

The music ended as I rested my hands in my lap beside the theremin. The light show faded as the whirling colors stopped cavorting around the room once the song came to an end. As I placed the theremin gently on the table I could see that Hanna had tears in her eyes, although she was trying hard to smile at the same time. I reached over and held her hand. It took almost a minute before I could bring myself to speak.

"Wow! What an awesome experience! This has got to be the ultimate musical instrument!"

Hanna nodded enthusiastically. "Now *that* wasn't a product of your imagination, because I was able to hear it too this time! That was the sweetest, strangest love song I've ever listened to. Sort of like Sarah McLachlan and Enya singing a duet in a foreign language I couldn't understand. It was obviously some kind of synthesized music, although I've never heard anything quite like it. Still, it was absolutely beautiful. I've got to try this thing myself now that you've warmed it up. Do you mind?"

She put it on her lap and attempted to play it the same way I had, but nothing happened.

"There's still a green glow coming from the dial face, but I guess it must have run out of juice," I said.

"You know, it looked to me like the instrument was actually responding to your input as you moved your hands across the antennae, but it's certainly not working for me. It's got to be playing a tape or CD or something, right?"

"I honestly don't know. At the time it felt like I was creating the music myself, but now that I think about it, how could that be happening? It doesn't make sense that I could have played it that well, given the fact that this is the first time I ever touched it. Too strange."

"Maybe it's one of those reproductions designed to look like an antique but with modern electronics inside," she suggested.

"That would make sense. The quality of the music it put out was superb and I guess there's no way a radio built forty or fifty years ago could sound this good, let alone an antique theremin. Interesting that you should call it a love song, though. It was so loud that I was sure I was going to blow the speakers at one point. Pretty raucous for a love song, don't you think?"

She laughed as she turned the theremin over and examined it.

"As you are well aware, Andy, your taste in music has always offended me. Maybe it's a girl thing, but I wish for once you would at least acknowledge that music doesn't have to be played at a thousand decibels to be worth listening to."

"Maybe I was just compensating for the fact that I was always forced to sneak around and find a place where my mother wouldn't catch me listening to music. When I finally did get to hear it, I liked it nice and loud."

"Well, you obviously know exactly the kind of music I've always liked, which is what made these last few minutes so special to me. Sometimes I think there's hope for you yet. That tune I just heard was soft and mellow, with gentle, touching lyrics, even though they were in a foreign language or something. If I hadn't been born with such a high level of self-esteem, I'd be happy just to be your groupie."

I knew from experience that there was no point in arguing with her. She was as stubborn as she was attractive, which had often led to some rather heated discussions in the past. As I smiled at the recollection, I realized how much I was going to miss being with her when she left town to pursue her education. She also had a bizarre sense of humor, so perhaps this was her idea of a joke. I had no idea how to categorize the music I'd played, but it definitely wasn't a love song.

I looked at my watch. "Hey, you've probably got better things to do than hang around here. I don't want to monopolize your time."

She grinned. "Are you trying to get rid of me for some reason?"

"Not a chance. In fact, I wouldn't mind the company if you'd care to stick around. I promise not to whine too much about my troubles."

"Nice to be appreciated, but I'm too fascinated by your new toy to leave now anyway. You know, I've been looking at this thing pretty closely and there's something very weird about it. I can't find any screws, or any way to open the case. There aren't any seams to indicate where the case is joined together. Plus you can't see where the speakers are, and there's no way to put in a CD or change the batteries."

"Maybe we need to examine it with a magnifying glass."

"Considering the cheap quality of most consumer goods today, it's not often you come across something built this well. Whatever it is, it's definitely assembled by somebody who knows what they're doing. Say, I wonder if this is one of those portable satellite radios I've been hearing so much about? I know they cost a fortune."

"I can't believe mom would ever spend our money on something that expensive. Come to think of it, what money could she be spending? We don't have any to spare. Besides, she isn't the slightest bit interested in any technology that would remotely be considered state of the art."

"You aren't suggesting that this is stolen?" Hanna asked, grinning.

"Like she would! I just thought of another possibility. I wonder if maybe my grandfather built this. Wouldn't that be something?"

"I'd say that's pretty unlikely, considering how long ago he died. I'm positive he wouldn't have had the expertise to create this kind of sophisticated technology back then. There's got to be a logical explanation, although I have to admit that this machine is definitely unusual, to say the least."

"Unusual doesn't even begin to describe it."

"Agreed, but I'm sure my dad will still be able to figure out how it works. Nobody around here knows more about music and the music industry than he does. You want to show it to him?"

"Good idea," I said. "If the hospital will let me, I'm going to visit mom right after I meet my judge, jury and executioners in the principal's office at noon to discuss these allegations Keith made against me. I know because of the coma she probably can't hear me, but I've got to try to tell her what's going on anyway. I owe her that much. This theremin is a little awkward to carry, but I'll take it with me and we can meet your dad at the university afterwards if you like."

"Are you sure you don't want me to come with you to the principal's office? Keith's father will probably show up with him, and I hear he's a bit of a jerk, just like his son. I was just thinking you might find it a little less intimidating if you had a friendly face in your corner. I'd be happy to do it, if that's what you want, and I know dad would be willing to show up as well just so you have an impartial witness present in case this gets out of hand. Because he's a professor, I think they'll be more likely to give you a fair hearing with him there. He knows how the system works, and how to work the system."

"I appreciate that, but I don't want to get your father involved in this mess. Anyway, it shouldn't take too long. The principal will try to get me to feel like a jerk because of what I said, then he'll establish once and for all who the boss is and I'll grovel a bit until everyone feels sorry for me. Once that's behind me, we can try to set aside what happened to mom for a short while and then get grad and the prom over with."

"Fine, but if you won't let dad go with you, then I'm going."

"As if I could convince you not to?"

"You can't. Now that that's settled, we need to make plans. I'll leave your mom's papers off at my house so dad can try to make sense of them. Man, I can't wait 'til he hears you play this theremin. It'll blow his mind!"

"Maybe once he hears it he'll have some idea what we can get for it at the pawn shop."

"Don't even joke about pawning it when you talk to him. He has a real thing about musicians being forced to pawn their instruments, and he'd sooner toss it in the fireplace than see it sitting in a pawnshop window. I know it sounds crazy, and I'm sure he's half-kidding when he says it, but he feels that a fine musical instrument owned and played by a real musician has a soul, and the two should never be separated from each other."

"Okay, no pawnshop talk then. I wouldn't want my new theremin to feel threatened."

"Very funny," she said dryly. "Look, let's consider the worst case scenario. What are we going to do if the principal threatens you with disciplinary action?"

"At this point, I'm not sure I care. As long as I graduate I don't mind if they put this on my record. Who will ever know about it anyway? It's not like they give that kind of information out to universities or potential employers. All anybody wants to know is did you graduate and what were your marks."

"Okay, this all looks doable. Can you think of anything else we have to deal with?"

"I'm still worried about what's going to happen to Hugo, but I'm afraid there's very little I can do about it. Maybe that's a battle that should be fought by those animal rights people. If necessary, I can tell them about the torture CD and hope they'll take up his case with the university."

"Hugo is like a friend to you, and you're going to give up without a fight? Tell me you don't mean that!"

"But I don't know what else to do."

"If they try to fire you unjustly, make them put their reasons in writing and we can take them to court."

"I can't do that. Now that mom's dying, I'm starting to realize that it's time for me to grow up and take charge of my life. Without her helping to pay for my tuition, I can't even afford my first year of university now. Maybe I should just drop out and start looking for a real job."

"I can't believe you're thinking of quitting already. It's way too soon to make any decisions about your future, not when this thing with your mom just happened. You need to take some time to consider your options."

"That's fine for you to say, but don't forget, you've already decided what you want to do with the rest of your life and you made your plans without even telling me. No consultation. No warning. Suddenly our relationship is over, or at best put on hold for four or five years, or however long it takes for you to forget about me."

When I said that, Hanna suddenly looked upset and I thought for a second she was going to cry. I always seemed to know what was on her mind, even without monitoring the color of her words. She was one of those people who can't help but display their innermost feelings on their faces. It was one of the characteristics I liked most about her.

"What? What did I say wrong?" I asked, knowing that I had broached a topic that could potentially lead to the premature end of our relationship. Better it should finally be out in the open, I decided.

She bowed her head a second as if she were embarrassed, then touched my shoulder and looked me right in the eye. "You know how the two of us promised when we were kids that we'd never keep any secrets from each other? Well, before dad left for work today, he told me something about your mother that I think you should hear."

"So tell me. It's probably not going to be much of a surprise to me, not after living with her various eccentricities all these years. People have occasionally told me strange stories about her, but I just ignored them. I'm her son, remember, so I'll always love her, warts and all."

"I must admit, I never pictured your mom as a woman with a secret past, but it turns out she had one. Did she ever talk to you about your father?"

"Nope. I asked her once if she would tell me about him and she gave me the weirdest look and changed the subject instantly. I could tell she was hurt that I'd brought it up so I never mentioned it again."

"But you have a right to know!"

"Maybe some secrets are better kept hidden. Perhaps it was something so embarrassing that she would have felt like an idiot discussing it with me."

"Maybe, although I've never really seen her embarrassed or at a loss for words."

"True enough. She certainly had lots to say to me whenever I did something really stupid."

"I feel like I got to know her pretty well over the years," Hanna said. "After my mother died I didn't have anyone else to talk to about girl stuff. I used to drop by the house fairly regularly to shoot the breeze, but it was always much more than just casual conversation, at least to me. She was so open to new ideas! She actually listened to whatever I had to say, unlike my dad, so in the end I really learned a lot from her. Although she was always honest with me, she made it abundantly clear that there were areas of her life that she wasn't willing to share."

"Same here. So, what's the story your father told you?"

"I'm already wondering if I should have mentioned this at all. Dad told me I should keep my mouth shut about it because it might hurt you. Besides, as he pointed out, it's none of my business. With your mom in the hospital, I feel like a real jerk talking about her behind her back."

I put my hand on her shoulder. "I want to know. We shouldn't keep secrets. Whatever it is, it's certainly not going to make me think any less of my mother."

"Okay, if you're sure. This is a very strange story, and admittedly there's a lot I still don't know about it. It seems that something very bizarre happened to her right after she graduated from high school. Apparently she just disappeared one day, leaving all her belongings behind. It looked very suspicious, and of course your grandfather reported it to the police immediately. Dad told me that the poor guy couldn't sleep or eat or function at all, and after a couple of days he looked like hell. He was a single parent, and the disappearance of his only child had a devastating impact on him. All the neighbors did their best to help out but he was inconsolable.

"Everyone thought your mom had been kidnapped and when there was

no ransom note, they feared the worst. As soon as the police got involved, everybody in the community heard about her disappearance and there was a huge uproar. It became a media event and even made the national newscasts."

"Hang on a second. You're saying that pretty much everybody in the neighborhood is aware of this story but me?"

"Don't forget, this happened a long time ago so only the folks who've lived here all that time would remember it. Besides, your mother is very well liked around here, so most people who know her would probably have kept this to themselves."

"I'd have understood if she'd told me..."

"Of course you'd have forgiven her, because everybody makes mistakes, but maybe she couldn't forgive herself for what happened next. The ordeal must have been too much for your grandfather, who had already lost his wife to cancer. He had a heart attack two weeks after her disappearance and died."

"I haven't heard any of this before, although I had been told he died from a heart attack before I was born."

"Andy, I'm afraid there's more to the story. Your mom returned home just in time to discover her father's body in the house. She told the cops that she'd been abducted but she wasn't able to provide any further details. She claimed she couldn't remember what happened, actually, but nobody believed her. After they confronted her she refused to cooperate any further with the police investigation and she wouldn't talk to the press about it either. They, of course, had a field day with her, and her picture was seen everywhere until the next media event eventually knocked her abduction story off the front pages."

"That must have been horrible for her."

"It gets even worse. A few months later, after it became obvious your mom was pregnant, people put one and one together and concluded that she must have run away from home, had a fling and then concocted the kidnapping story to protect her reputation. Needless to say, the authorities were not impressed, and most people blamed her for your grandfather's tragic death. There were even rumors she might be charged with a criminal offence and jailed, although thankfully nothing ever came of that. She'd obviously suffered more than enough as it was. She gradually lost many of her friends, and since your grandfather was the last remaining family member, aside from you, it must have been terribly lonely for her."

"So I must have been conceived at some point during her abduction? I always wondered what had happened but I never asked her for details. I just couldn't."

"From what I've been told by my dad, who was friends with her ever since they started grade school together, your mother was never the same after that. Although she was apparently an extremely talented singer, and could probably have had a career as a professional musician if she'd been serious about it, she lost all interest in performing. He said she had the most beautiful voice he'd ever heard, and you know dad – he never exaggerates when it comes to music."

"Yeah, I guess a single mother holding down several jobs doesn't end up with much spare time for hobbies, or friends for that matter. I don't suppose there were any rumors about who might have been my father? All mom would ever tell me was that he was dead. End of story as far as she was concerned."

"I asked dad about that, because I thought you'd want to know. He told me that nobody ever figured out who the father was. Your mother left town near the end of her pregnancy. When she returned a few weeks later she brought you home with her. It was quite the scandal at the time and I'm sure it must have been very tough for your mom to deal with all by herself, what with her being a single mother and all. Dad had heard a few rumors, one in particular that involved a local man whose wife had left him around that time, but it turned out to be nothing more than malicious gossip. Anyway, I'm really sorry you had to hear this from me but I figure you have a right to know, since everyone else seems to be well aware of the story already."

"Better I should hear it from you, then. I know she would have eventually told me the truth before, ah, before she died. If that tumor hadn't hit her so hard, so suddenly, we'd have had time to take care of all this unfinished business. Maybe that's part of what she said she wanted to tell me just before she collapsed. At any rate, I'm really glad you told me about it, but if you don't mind I'd rather not discuss it anymore. Maybe later, or maybe never. I don't know. I'll have to think about it for awhile."

"Okay, let's compromise. How about I meet you outside the principal's office at noon, and we can visit your mom together afterward? I'd really like to see her, if you don't mind."

"Yeah, it would be nice to have someone to talk to if I get stuck in one of those dreary waiting rooms again, as long as you can spare the time."

"No problem. Hey, why did you do that?" she said with a look of amazement on her face as she stared at the theremin on the kitchen table.

"What?"

"Look at it and tell me you didn't just attach that strap to it."

"How the heck did that happen?" I asked as I picked up the theremin by a plastic strap that was now neatly attached to the sides. "I didn't touch it."

"Neither did I."

"Now that's interesting."

"No, that's scary. Either we're both getting very absent-minded or that thing just grew a strap while we were sitting beside it, talking."

"Maybe it wants to make sure we take it with us," I joked, as I stood up and put the strap over my shoulder. "It's a lot easier to carry around now."

I stopped laughing as I witnessed the incredible light show my actions triggered from the theremin as I stepped away from the table. The colors were unique, but I immediately recognized one unmistakable hue that I didn't expect to see: happiness, a personality trait that an inanimate object should not have been able to exhibit.

As Hanna passed me on the out the door to do some errands she

kissed me lightly on the forehead.

I sat there in the kitchen, staring at the theremin. I had a busy day ahead of me, and I wasn't looking forward to meeting the principal, but I was sure I could finesse my way around him. I had mixed feelings about seeing my mother, and I couldn't understand why until I realized that over the past few hours with Hanna I'd managed to work my way through the various grieving stages until I finally accepted her death as inevitable. Heartbreaking, but inevitable.

I also had several hours of work to do at the warehouse tonight unless the university decided otherwise. Hugo would probably need a little reassurance after all he'd been through last night, and, as always, there would be lots of elephant dung to clean up. And then perhaps I could get some sleep.

I couldn't stop staring at the theremin. Could we both have missed seeing that strap until just a few minutes ago? That seemed unlikely, to say the least. The fact that that Hanna had also witnessed this meant that at least I wasn't the only one going crazy. Small comfort indeed.

On the other hand, I had a gut feeling I couldn't shake that something horrible was about to happen to me and there was nothing I could do about it. The sound of my earworm starting up inside my head reassured me at first, but there were so many problems to deal with that I couldn't stop thinking about them.

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