

## **CHAPTER 6**

The secretary wouldn't allow Hanna to accompany me to the meeting so I found myself sitting all alone in the principal's office as she waited for me outside in the hallway. I cooled my heels for five minutes, nervously clutching the theremin like a security blanket until the principal finally walked into the office along with Keith and his father and closed the door behind them.

"Andy, do you understand why you're here?" he asked as he sat down behind his desk.

Before I could say anything, Keith Henderson's father interrupted. "I have an important appointment in half an hour that I can't afford to miss, so if you wouldn't mind, can we dispense with the niceties and get this over with? I mean, it's not like there's any dispute about what really happened, is there?"

The principal stared at him over the top of his reading glasses and frowned. "This is strictly an informal hearing, and it shouldn't take long. You can certainly leave at any point if you want to, but I would remind you that I have a responsibility to be fair to all parties concerned. Needless to say, that includes Andy."

The principal glanced in my direction. "I know you're aware of the allegation made against you. Do you have any questions about the process?"

"I only know what Keith has told practically everybody in the world that I did. To be honest, I can't really figure out what the problem is. As far as I'm concerned, I didn't really do anything wrong."

Mr. Henderson snorted. "The problem we're dealing with today, young man, is that you used a racial epithet to describe my son. This happened in a public place, in front of dozens of witnesses. Do you not understand how serious that is?"

Epithet? I was about to reply but didn't because I suddenly began hearing an annoying buzzing sound that abruptly interrupted my train of thought. The room around me was transformed in a way that I'd never experienced before. To me, thanks to the synesthesia instantly bestowing a shape and color to the buzzing noise, it appeared to be raining black soot inside a cylinder that encompassed the area where I was standing, almost like being in a shower stall. Fortunately it was just a visual illusion, although it looked real enough that I half expected to get wet. Of course nobody else could see what I was experiencing, so I just had to ignore it until it faded from my view. What the hell could that buzzing sound be?

Officer Daniels, the School Liaison Officer, walked into the room at that point. As the cop apologized for being late and took the last available seat in the already-crowded office, I stood up for a second and walked to the window. As I moved the rain followed me and the soot particles seemed to bounce off the floor and evaporate instead of pooling at my feet. I could feel my pulse start racing and I shook my head to try to get rid of the sensation. This had certainly never happened to me before, although the synesthesia

had created some near-hallucinatory experiences in the past that had left me bewildered and more than a little bit frightened.

The principal smiled in the cop's direction. "I didn't think you'd be able to make it, Adam, so we started without you. I was just asking Andy here if he understood the seriousness of the charges brought against him. Andy?"

The black particles surrounded me and seemed to be probing me in a very intrusive way, almost as if somebody was poking me in the sternum with their finger to provoke me into fighting. I guessed that this entity must be a visual manifestation of whatever it was that had triggered the feeling that I was being followed earlier, but that still didn't help me identify what was happening. I was so distracted by the illusions I was experiencing that I stammered something unintelligible in reply to the principal's question, then stopped to collect my thoughts.

"I had an opportunity to talk to Andy about this in the course of my brief but thorough investigation," Officer Daniels said as he winked in my direction. "Maybe I can save us all a lot of unnecessary trouble by short-circuiting this process. To the best of my knowledge, he's never been in any trouble with the law before and his disciplinary record here at school is unblemished. This was just an isolated incident, so I'm sure if he agreed to apologize..."

Mr. Henderson leapt from his chair. "Totally unacceptable! Look, the fact that I serve on the local school board is, of course, irrelevant to these proceedings. However, I'm proud to say that I was the architect of the zero tolerance policy our district recently adopted. As far as I'm concerned, this type of infraction is exactly the kind of problem it was designed to address. We can't condone racial bigotry in our schools. So, the answer is no, we won't accept an apology. No way."

That's when it finally hit me. Not only was I about to lose this particular fight, but I was also beginning to feel extremely nauseous. Up till this point I had never been ill a day in my life, which is why I managed to avoid having to see a doctor. Discovering what it felt like to be sick at the same time as everything in my life seemed to be going from bad to worse was almost more than I could handle. I immediately began to wonder just how sick I was going to get, and why in the world this had to happen at the worst possible time. Could I be dying?

Officer Daniels wasn't going to give up that easily.

"Before we throw the book at this young man, let's take a look at what he's accused of saying and try to put it into context. I don't need to tell any of you that we have some serious problems in this high school, which is the primary reason the city has assigned me here. Forget for a minute that we have several violent street gangs currently terrorizing our students, not to mention dozens of drug dealers plying their trade in the hallways and on nearby streets. There's a vicious race problem in this city that nobody seems to want to talk about, and I've handled three serious race-related assaults at this school in the past two months. In short, I keep pretty busy around here, and I anticipate that it's going to get even worse."

Mr. Henderson acted bored. "All of which proves exactly what, Officer Daniels?"

"What it should prove to you, sir, if you were listening, is that we have far more serious problems to deal with in this school than this, so maybe it would be wise to find a less draconian punishment for this particular allegation and let this young man get on with his life. Just think about it. Don't we all have more important things to do with our time? 'White trash!' That's all he called your son. Granted, that's not a nice thing to say to somebody, and I'm sure Andy regrets making the remark, but it's not the end of the world. Why can't you just agree to put this behind you, right here and now? It's the right thing to do."

"My son was humiliated in front of his peers. That's not something I'm prepared to forgive and forget."

"Mr. Henderson, I don't have to remind you that your son has had a few problems this year himself," the cop said carefully. "Given his track record, which I'm sure we don't need to get into at the moment, I think it would be fair to state that he probably wasn't too traumatized by a little bit of name-calling. Isn't that right, Keith?"

"Don't say anything, son!" Henderson said. "As you know, Officer, none of the allegations leveled against Keith have ever been substantiated, so you are treading on dangerous ground here. This is not about Keith anyway. He's the victim this time."

"I'm sorry, gentlemen," the principal said quietly as he held up his hand to interrupt the argument, "but it looks to me like we aren't going to be able to reach a rational compromise on this issue. Andy, do have anything to offer in defense of your actions?"

"No sir," I said quietly.

The principal tried unsuccessfully to take the sting out of what he had to say next. "Andy, as you know, I have no choice but to suspend you as of today, pending an appeal to the school board. That means you won't be able to attend graduation ceremonies with the rest of your class. I'm very sorry, but those are the rules we must live by now at this school."

"Just wonderful," Officer Daniels said dryly.

"But I can still go to the prom as somebody else's date, right? I'm supposed to take my girlfriend, Hanna, and we already have tickets."

"Are you absolutely certain you still want to go to the prom?" the principal asked. "It could be a little awkward, given the circumstances."

"He can't go to the prom. My son will be there, and that could lead to another confrontation," said Keith's father indignantly.

"Actually, it occurs to me that we can't stop him from going to the prom," the principal said. "I hadn't thought about it, but the prom is a separate issue altogether from graduation. If you read the guidelines for our school's zero tolerance policy, Mr. Henderson, it states clearly that while I must suspend a student who is accused of this type of offence, there's nothing that says I must also ban him from any extra-curricular activities he might be involved in. Presumably he'll be at the prom as his girlfriend's guest, so there's no reason why he can't show up and have a good time, just like everybody else. Yes, I think that's fair, don't you, Mr. Henderson? After all, it was you who drafted these regulations, wasn't it?"

"This is outrageous," Henderson sputtered.

"Makes sense to me," the cop said, stifling a laugh.

"You won't be causing any problems at the prom, right?" the principal asked as he looked directly at me.

"No, sir, and thanks."

"A good compromise," said the cop approvingly as he left the room. "I'll be chaperoning at the prom, so I'll see you there, Andy. If you don't recognize me in a suit, I'll be the one wearing the heavy-duty hearing protectors."

Mr. Henderson brushed past me without saying anything, opened the office door for his son and gestured for him to leave. Keith stepped to one side and stood face-to-face in front of me.

"This isn't over, geek," he whispered quietly so the principal couldn't hear him.

He then turned to face the principal and in a louder voice said, "No hard feelings here, sir. As far as I'm concerned, I accept Andy's apology and that's the end of it."

I rallied what strength I had left and faked a smile. "No hard feelings here either."

Hanna, hearing the exchange through the open door, couldn't resist injecting herself into the conversation. "I'd like to congratulate you, Keith, for that essay we've all heard so much about lately. It truly was an original idea if ever I've seen one. Good work."

She made a supreme effort to keep any trace of sarcasm from her voice, but I still felt that she shouldn't have said anything. That was confirmed moments later when I observed the thoughtful expression that crossed the principal's face. I hoped I was mistaken about what that look meant, but all I could think of was how much trouble she'd just created for us. Keith would find a way to get even, especially if the principal began asking awkward questions about his essay.

Mr. Henderson seemed oblivious to the by-play, however, and pointed his finger in my direction from the doorway. "Well, I think we can make an educated guess now as to why this happened," he snorted. "You two were jealous because Keith won a scholarship as a result of the outstanding work he did on that essay. Perhaps if you had applied yourself to your schoolwork, young man, instead of picking fights with your peers, all of this unpleasantness might never have happened."

Hanna was incensed. "If your drug dealer son hadn't started pushing his weight around, there wouldn't have been a problem in the first place."

"Mall Goth!" Keith said as he gave her the finger.

The principal stepped in between us but the argument was already over. Keith glared at Hanna with an insolent sneer on his face as he sauntered out of the room with his father. After he left, the principal walked over to me and shook my hand.

"You, I'm afraid, just got a lesson in how bureaucracies function, which is to say not very well and not very wisely. I'm aware of how sick your mother is, and I wish you, and her, all the very best. If I can ever be of assistance, say for a reference, just let me know and I'll be happy to oblige."

"I appreciate that, sir. What's going to happen about my diploma?"

"Leave it in my hands. I can usually work my way around obstacles like our friend Mr. Henderson, although I guess I haven't been very successful so far today, have I? Anyway, I'll call you at home as soon as I have some news for you. Meantime, you two have a good time at the prom and try not to let this get you down. It's really no big deal."

Hanna took my hand and guided me down the hallway toward the main entrance. "The funny part is, Keith has already talked to my father about maybe taking a music course from him next year. Can you imagine? He's such a loser. So, what happened inside the Star Chamber?"

"I won't be graduating yet, but apparently I'm allowed to be your escort at the prom, if you don't mind going there with a convicted felon," I said. "Hanna, something's wrong with me. I've never felt this sick before."

"That idiot Keith is such a thug!"

"Yeah, but today he looked more like a victim than a bully, which would surprise most of the people around here who have grown to hate his guts so much. Once again he gets away with it, just because his father's on the school board. It's so unfair."

"Don't take this so seriously. Remember what the principal said just now? He obviously thinks you're okay or he wouldn't be offering you a reference, would he? Keep in mind that this is only temporary because you know they have to graduate you sooner or later. Meanwhile, life goes on. No need to feel bad about it."

"No, I mean I'm really sick, as in throwing up sick. I've got to use the men's room right away."

She directed me to the door, opened it for me, and helped me stagger inside. There was a student standing at one of the urinals. He took one look at her, zipped up quickly and ran from the room. With her help, I leaned over a urinal and emptied the contents of my stomach in one convulsive upheaval that seemed to drain all the energy from my body.

Hanna moistened a paper towel and washed the area around my mouth.

"You must have come down with the flu."

"I don't think so. I don't know. I just feel horrible."

"Trust me, everybody gets it sooner or later," she said as she tossed the used paper towel in the garbage and put the palm of her hand on my forehead. "Didn't that make you feel a little better? You aren't running a temperature, if that helps."

"Not really. Well, maybe just a little. Everything's going crazy. I've got this weird buzzing sound in my head that won't go away and a black funnel cloud tracking me like a vengeful tornado. Now I think it's giving me a headache. Sorry, I guess you don't want to listen to me whining, do you?"

"No need. Everybody does it when they get sick. It's expected."

"It was really weird. There was a strange, black fog raining down on my head while Mr. Henderson was in the process of humiliating me, and I've got to admit, it really freaked me out. That was when I started feeling sick."

"Jeez, I wonder if you're getting a migraine. You seem to have all the symptoms. You're sure this has never happened to you before, even when you were a kid?"

"No, I would have remembered it."

"Some people see a golden aura when they're in the middle of a migraine..."

"Whatever it was that I experienced was dark, as in cold, scary, clammy darkness. There certainly wasn't any golden aura present. That much I know for sure."

"Well, back when we were kids you once told me that when this synesthesia of yours started to become too intrusive, you were usually able to make it disappear. Sit down on that bench over there and try to concentrate on getting rid of it. If you did it before, you can do it now," she said. She then walked out of hearing distance so she could make a phone call without disturbing me.

I stopped and pressed my index fingers against my temples. After clearing my mind, I struggled to force myself to visualize the black soot disappearing back towards its source. As I did so, the soot immediately stopped falling from the dark cloud overhead and then began to reverse its path and exit through the ceiling and out of sight. It was like a film being played backwards. I could still hear the annoying buzzing sound, although it soon faded away as well. Hanna returned several minutes later and helped me to my feet.

As we made our way down the hallway again I began to feel better almost immediately, although my hands were shaking and I was still unsteady on my feet. "Was that your father you were calling?"

"Yeah, I told him how the hearing went, and he asked me to tell you how sorry he was to hear that. He's offered to give us a drive to the hospital, by the way."

I was having difficulty getting excited about anything but I knew I couldn't get away with feeling sorry for myself much longer. "So, did he learn anything about my theremin?"

"He was still researching it when I talked to him. I sent him a couple of digital pictures and he did an Internet search for any theremins or similar instruments that resembled it. So far he hasn't had any luck but he said that's to be expected if it's custom-made. Regardless of what its origin is, he says it's definitely unique, which might mean it's actually worth some significant money. In fact, dad admits he's never seen anything like it but I'll let him tell you what his theories are when we meet later. Meanwhile, he's absolutely thrilled at the prospect of examining something this unusual."

"You know, I'm really glad you came with me. I don't think I could have handled that hearing without you there waiting for me."

"Nice to feel useful," she said with a grin. "Are you feeling better now?"

"Much better, thanks to your expert nursing. As you suggested, I was able to make it mostly disappear."

"If that black apparition that was following you around is actually a visual representation of some serious illness, then perhaps your synesthesia is giving you a peek at a disease you're developing. If that's the case, then you'll want to see a doctor and find out what it is so you can get it treated."

"Sure thing. When I have more time..."

"Which, of course, means you have no intention of following my advice. Would you accept a second opinion about that from my father?"

"I'll think about it. I promise."

"You're a very strange guy," Hanna said, smiling proudly as we sat down on a bench outside the school to wait for her father. She pulled out her computer and scanned it as I sat back and tried to relax.

"Now this is getting interesting," she said. "The SETI folks are expected to make an announcement shortly about that mysterious signal they're investigating. According to our sources there have been some exciting developments in the last hour or so, although we don't have any details yet. However, there's another story from NASA that's just broken in the mainstream media. Apparently the Hubble telescope has detected signs that there's something of a blackout developing in the universe."

"You mean they aren't receiving data from the telescope anymore?"

"No, apparently the latest data from Hubble indicates that the fringes of the universe all around us have gradually been going dark, although they can't be sure why it's happening, or even when it started. One of the NASA scientists compared it to standing onstage as the house lights go out progressively from the very back of the theatre right up to the front row seating, eventually leaving just the stage lights on."

"Does that mean that whatever light source was illuminating the universe in that area has been extinguished?"

"They don't know," she replied. "The other explanation is that whatever existed out there no longer exists. We're talking about territory so far from our solar system that we don't really know what's actually out there in the first place, although there are plenty of theories. I get the impression that most of the discussion so far about this phenomenon involves an awful lot of speculation and very few proven facts. I'm guessing that discussions about this development and the mysterious signal are going to be flooding the comment section of my blog for the next few weeks. That should raise my blog stats."

"Either way, it sounds kind of ominous. How concerned should we be about this?"

"It's too early to say, but I get the impression they aren't all that worried, so maybe they know more than they're letting on. The experts are comparing the most recent Hubble pictures with all the previous ones taken since it was first launched into space back in 1991. They hope to find out how fast the darkness is progressing, although nobody seems to believe this is any threat to Earth at the moment."

Once again I had a fleeting sensation that I was being stalked, and I looked around instinctively to see if somebody was nearby, watching me. The area around us was deserted. I saw Hanna looking at me suspiciously. She'd seen me looking over my shoulder and must be wondering if I was in the middle of a nervous breakdown, given what I'd just told her about the black cloud following me around. Who could blame her for jumping to that conclusion? It was weird.

If I wasn't going insane what was happening to me?

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