

CHAPTER 9

As I considered the implications of Professor Johnson's last statement I watched Keith walk over to the theremin and furtively wave his right hand over it. When nobody voiced any objections, he began to move his hands tentatively through the air around its antennae, twisting and turning and gesticulating in a variety of ways that made Hanna laugh out loud. Nothing seemed to work and the theremin stayed silent. A couple of the other students also laughed at his futile efforts, which seemed to make him even angrier. He slapped his fist down hard on the top surface of the instrument as if punishing it for not cooperating.

"Keith, leave it alone please," Professor Howard said.

The student stepped back from the theremin, paused as if considering what to do next, then suddenly lunged toward the instrument. In one fluid motion he grabbed it by the strap, turned, and walked quickly toward the classroom door, elbowing his way past the other students. In the process the theremin banged against a desk, making a loud cracking sound as it hit that made me flinch. I watched helplessly as the thief stole my theremin, unable to react in time to prevent it. I felt sick at the thought of losing it but I couldn't seem to make my legs work to give chase.

"Hey, hold on a second! That's not yours to take," Hanna yelled.

"I'm just going to borrow this thing for a little while, Professor Howard," Keith shouted over his shoulder. "I've got some friends waiting for me in the cafeteria and I want to show it to them. I'll just be a couple of minutes."

Keith stopped suddenly as he reached the doorway when a red glow from the front of the instrument began to flood the music room until it bathed everything around him, including his face, with an eerie red glow. At the same time the theremin emitted a very ominous-sounding noise, the kind of scary music that in a horror movie often signals that the hero is about to be attacked from behind by a hideous monster. It was an intimidating sound and several of the students started to move as far away from it as they could. Judging by the fear showing on all their faces, especially Keith's, it appeared that everyone in the room was hearing the same sound from the theremin this time.

Professor Howard stepped forward and held his hand out to the student.

"Keith, that instrument you're holding is as priceless as a Stradivarius violin. You break it and your parents are going to regret the fact that they ever gave birth to you. Hand it over right now or you can forget about ever getting a shot at that football scholarship you've been lusting for."

After pausing a second, as if gauging Professor Howard's seriousness, Keith seemed to panic and abruptly tossed the box in his direction. The professor caught it and carefully handed it back to me. The ominous red glow faded and then disappeared, and immediately the fear and indecisiveness that had incapacitated me receded until finally I felt normal again. In fact, a

few seconds ago I'd felt like a baby who'd lost his security blanket, and the near miss forced me to confront the realization that the theremin now seemed destined to play an extremely important role in my life.

Keith stood there for several seconds, obviously in shock. He looked genuinely contrite as he stammered an apology.

"I'm really sorry, Professor Howard. I don't know what got into me. I've never done anything like that before."

"Why did you do it then?" the professor asked.

"I guess listening to this bizarre thing just freaked me out. Would you mind if I leave the room now? I don't feel very well, and I think I want to go home and think about what just happened here."

"Forget about it, Keith. Get some rest. Anybody can make a mistake."

The student stopped at the door, turned momentarily, and gave them the finger as he walked away. "You can all go to hell, as far as I'm concerned."

"For a second there I thought he was actually sincere," Professor Howard said dryly, sending the remaining students on their way with his thanks.

Professor Johnson paused at the door, shaking his head in wonderment. "I thought I'd seen and heard everything, but this is unbelievable! Andy, your music is obviously some kind of incredible gift, even though I can't for the life of me understand how you create it. I don't know what kind of advice Professor Howard will be offering you, but I hope you'll consider getting some tutelage from a professional."

He kept staring at the theremin. "You know, I do a lot of music reviews for the media, and although I'd love to critique what I just experienced, it would be impossible to put it in context because it's unlike anything I've ever heard before. I'm tempted to compare it to improvised electroacoustic music or perhaps even noise music, even though they're polar opposites, but that wouldn't begin to describe what you played. The sound and impact are nothing less than revolutionary. How I envy you!"

He had a huge smile on his face as he left the room, closing the door gently behind him.

"Very flattering," I said out loud to myself. The color of his words left no room for doubt that he was anything but sincere.

"Yes, and he isn't exaggerating about the impact either," Professor Howard said. "And to think that Keith could have spoiled everything by stealing it right in front of us."

"He claims to be a musician?" Hanna said. "More the shoplifter type, I suspect."

"Fortunately enough, it would seem this thing has some kind of anti-theft device," Professor Howard said.

I examined the theremin carefully but there was no indication that it had been damaged during the theft. It was nothing short of remarkable that this enigmatic box could produce such incredible music, and I found myself growing rather fond of it and all its quirks. As I smiled I suddenly sensed somebody looking over my shoulder. I turned quickly and caught a glimpse of an ominously dark, shapeless presence fading into the walls.

"Andy, are you okay?" Professor Howard asked.

"I don't think he is," Hanna said. "Something happened to you recently, didn't it? Honestly, the way you were acting in the dean's office, I thought you were having a nervous breakdown for awhile. Now you're obviously seeing things. This isn't just your synesthesia acting up, is it? Something's wrong with you, and you've got to share it with us so we can help you."

"Synesthesia?" asked Professor Howard as he picked up the theremin and examined it again. "Would somebody mind telling me what the hell is going on?"

"Andy?" Hanna said.

I hesitated for a moment, contemplating the possibility that they would consider me a freak if they learned the truth about my life, but in the end the need to unburden myself of my mounting problems overrode my fear of what they might think about me. My story spilled out over the next half an hour, and I held nothing back. Hanna and her father sat back and listened intently to what I was saying, asking no questions and deliberately, I decided, keeping neutral expressions on their faces, even when I explained some of the unusual abilities my synesthesia seemed to have granted me. Even to me it sounded bizarre, and I had to force myself to be completely candid. I needed their advice, but I also wanted their approval, and most of all, their friendship. Besides, now there was nobody else I could confide in.

Hanna was the first to break the silence when I finished my story. "Ordinarily I'd be very skeptical, to say the least, especially if I heard that story from somebody I didn't already know as well as I know you. However, given what we've just seen that theremin do, well, let's just say I'm a believer."

"For me it's a matter of trust but verify," Professor Howard said. "We shouldn't take anything at face value, Andy, because although I don't doubt you for a moment, what you may think is happening to you might in fact turn out to be something entirely different. There may well be a plausible explanation for everything so we'll just have to work together and explore this little mystery with you until we get to the bottom of it. Understand that I'm not accusing you of exaggerating or lying. I mean, I heard the theremin too. It's just that I want us all to keep an open mind about this. Are you okay with that?"

"Of course. Truth is, I need to find out if this is real or just in my mind, which is the only reason I'm telling you all these personal things about me. I need some perspective, I guess, and with my mother in the hospital I have nobody else to turn to."

"If you're crazy, then we must be too, if that makes you feel any better," Hanna said as she grinned. "We've all heard the music it makes, even if we didn't exactly hear the same thing. We should brainstorm what we know about this thing and figure out what's next."

"Agreed," said her father, "but let's ignore the music aspect for a minute and concentrate on what just happened to Keith. You all heard that bizarre noise as he tried to make his getaway, right?"

When we nodded in agreement, he sighed.

"I've got to admit, the sound scared the hell out of me and I wasn't even the person it targeted."

"I'm glad it wasn't just me hearing it this time," I said.

"No," said Hanna, "and we all saw the look on Keith's face so it's obvious he must have heard that horrible sound coming from the theremin too. He was so scared I thought he was going to fill his pants."

"Scared enough that he stopped what he was doing and surrendered the theremin to me, even though that's the last thing he wanted to do," said her father. "It sounded to me like something you'd hear on a horror movie soundtrack. Was it the same for both of you as well?"

The two of us nodded in agreement.

"Okay, there's some very sophisticated technology around that can create sounds that could potentially affect humans in bizarre ways, but I think it's very unlikely you would find that kind of expensive technology in an ordinary musical instrument. So, we're left with yet another mystery."

"Speaking of mysteries," I said, "how do you explain why Greg was able to hear the theremin? It doesn't make sense, and yet you didn't seem too surprised when he told us."

"That was just an educated guess, based on what Hanna told me about your first encounter with the theremin," Professor Howard said, "so don't give me more credit than I deserve. It ties in with an interesting story about Evelyn Glennie that may help to explain what we just witnessed."

I had never heard of her, and said so.

"She's a famous Scottish percussionist who also happens to be deaf," said Hanna. "I went to one of her concerts a few years ago with dad, and she's absolutely fabulous."

"A very accomplished musician indeed," said her father. "She reads lips and her speech is a little more natural than Greg's so you'd probably never guess she was deaf unless you tried to talk to her from a position outside her line of vision. She has some interesting theories about music that relate to this, I think. For instance, she feels that music is a language of communication and sound is just the medium that conveys the music."

"That's a little over my head," I said. "What exactly is she talking about?"

"Let me give you an example," the professor said as he continued to examine the theremin. "Apparently she once encountered a young boy who had been born with devastating brain damage that left him deaf and blind and unable to control most of his body functions or care for himself. She had his attendants place the boy on the wooden floor under her marimbas where the kid could pick up on the vibrations of the music. First she played a melancholy piece that visibly relaxed him almost immediately. Then she performed an upbeat, happy number, and the kid actually smiled for the first time in his life. Now, that's how one gifted and caring musician managed to touch the inner soul of a deaf person, which may help to explain what happened with Greg. Or perhaps not. I honestly don't know."

"That's incredible, but I still don't understand how you could suggest that a deaf person might actually be able to hear," said Hanna. "On the face of it, that seems impossible."

"Think of it this way," her father said. "Some deaf folks go to rock concerts to experience the music. There's a theory that sound vibrations might be transmitted by way of their skin, and that low tones are felt in their legs, middle tones in their torso and high tones felt in their fingers and head. If that theory is correct, then that would make it possible for someone without hearing to distinguish different frequencies according to where the body perceives them. There's much we don't understand about this concept, but at least it gives you some idea of how a deaf person like Greg could conceivably be able to experience music in his own fashion."

"Dad, wasn't Beethoven deaf?"

"Yes, but not until late in his life. By the time he'd written his last symphony he was totally deaf. However, he still had the ability to remember and imagine the songs he'd already composed and the sounds he'd heard before the onset of his deafness. He could still compose music as well as ever, but his attempt at conducting orchestras failed miserably because he couldn't hear the musicians."

"That was a long time ago," Hanna said. "Isn't it possible Beethoven may not have actually been deaf? I mean, the medical care back then wouldn't have been nearly as sophisticated as today's, so how reliable would their tests be? Besides, like any good legend, the extent of his deafness might well have been exaggerated over the years to make it a better story."

"That's possible, I guess, but I do know of several contemporary musicians aside from Evelyn Glennie who have very serious hearing impairments and yet are still able to perform certain types of music. I honestly don't know how they do it, but wouldn't I love to be the scientist who gets to investigate their cases! And before you ask, Greg doesn't wear a hearing aid and he hasn't had a cochlear implant, although he was a ringer. He and Professor Johnson briefed me on his deafness before you arrived. I've seen the results of his audiogram. He's definitely deaf."

"Dad, play the tape. I want to hear what Andy's little concert sounds like on the machine."

Professor Howard rewound the tape and then hit play. It was silent at first, and he fast-forwarded it several times, looking for the music. At the end they could hear the student's voice as he described his desire to have his parents buy him a theremin. Professor Howard shook his head.

"I'll be damned. I thought I must have screwed up the tape but obviously it was working just fine. Somehow this music seems to be coming to us in a form that can't be recorded. This is getting stranger and stranger."

"Dad, that's difficult to believe, but maybe it would explain why I heard something totally different than everybody else did even though we were all in the same room, listening to the same musical instrument, if you can call it that. Don't laugh, but what I heard this time was a New Age instrumental piece, sort of like a Yanni performance of a James Blunt song, if that makes sense. I certainly didn't hear classical music, like you heard, or rock like some of the others experienced. That's impossible unless the music is being transmitted in a way we don't understand."

"Let's try and examine our observations in a logical way, before all this speculation gets out of hand," Professor Howard said. "First of all, is it just

the machine that's making music or is Andy actually playing an active role in its creation?"

"When I played for you earlier it felt like the music was coming from me," I said as I held the instrument in my lap. "As soon as I picked the theremin up I instantly started feeling as good about myself as I've ever felt. I would think about producing a certain sound, and just like that the theremin would create what I'd envisioned, or at least a reasonable facsimile of whatever I was attempting to express. I don't understand how it happens, but it's like playing this instrument has already become part of my life experience."

"Maybe it is, in a manner of speaking. Since you're the only one who seems to be able to play it, I've got to wonder what it is about you that makes you so special."

"As far as I know, I've never had any exceptional talent when it came to music," I said, "although I've never had much chance to give it a try, other than some experimenting in the shower when mom wasn't within hearing distance. She really didn't like the idea of me getting involved in the music business for some reason."

"Let's work backwards then," said Professor Howard. "Since the theremin came from your house, let's assume for the moment that it's probably some kind of family heirloom, even though we have no way to confirm that. Where could it have come from?"

"My grandfather, perhaps? He was an inventor."

"From what little I remember of him, he seemed like a pretty smart guy but I don't think he could have invented something this sophisticated, given how long ago he died. Still, it's a possibility we should consider. Now, I guess it could have been a gift from somebody your mother knew, perhaps a scientist or inventor, or maybe she just picked it up secondhand at a garage sale. I've heard stories about government surplus sales where valuable electronic equipment gets sold for one cent on the dollar. Every once in a while top secret gear accidentally gets released to the public when it shouldn't be. You know, stuff like missile guidance systems or laptops with extremely sensitive data still on the hard drive. Given the kind of rightwing lunatics we've been electing lately, I wouldn't be surprised if our government was funding research into weapons systems involving sound."

"Typical paranoid liberal thinking," Hanna snorted. "So how come he's the only one who can play it, assuming it was built by some top secret government scientist who had no idea who Andy was?"

"Maybe it has some security device built into it at some level, like a laptop that could only be operated by the owner after he allows it to scan and identify his fingerprint," her father said.

"Except that there's no sign of any apparatus like that on the theremin's case," Hanna said. "Surely you'd be able to see it because you'd have to know where to place your finger on it so the fingerprint could be scanned."

"Good point," the professor said. "This is a little off the wall, but perhaps there's something unique in his DNA that gives him, and only him, the ability to perform with this theremin. He might be channeling some

unique musical talent through the instrument that science hasn't yet discovered, much the same way a gifted musician like Jimi Hendrix could make a guitar do things we mere mortals can only dream of. Andy, your mother might also have this gift, since it appears she visited the hidden room where it was kept and therefore may also have been able to play it. Perhaps you inherited it from her?"

"But if that's the case, why wouldn't she have ever played it for me? I'm her son, and the only family she's got left, and yet I've never even heard her sing, let alone play a musical instrument."

"Maybe we'll never know one way or another what her role in this mystery is, but I can tell you something you obviously don't know about your mom. I know for a fact that she had immense talent as a singer, because she and I both qualified for college scholarships on the basis of our musical ability. After the incident that Hanna already told you about, your mother dropped her plans to go to college even though, in my opinion, she could well have become a big name in the entertainment industry. I'm not exaggerating, by the way. She had an incredible singing voice and she was a natural performer, so she really had enormous potential. I have no idea why she gave it up, but it was a damned shame."

"Hanna told me the story," I said, "but I never knew anything about her musical talent until now."

"I wish I'd had a chance to hear her sing," Hanna said wistfully.

"Actually, you can. We did a demo tape together back in high school to audition for a talent show back east but it's in an obsolete format I'll have to get transferred to a cassette tape or CD. I'll do that as soon as I get the time. You'll know exactly what I'm talking about as soon as you hear her voice. It was magical!"

"That would be great," I said. "You know, I don't have much to remember her by. She wouldn't allow anybody to take pictures of her, and there aren't any family videos. In fact, we've never owned a camera, still or video."

"Dad, I'm a little confused about this business you mentioned regarding the DNA. What's the relevance of DNA to the theremin?"

"I'm only guessing, but there are all kinds of interesting theories about this. You have to keep in mind that music has been a part of man's history for as long as we can remember. They've actually discovered a sophisticated flute made from an animal bone that dates back to prehistoric times. That's around 50,000 years ago, give or take a few centuries. Some scientists say that baby's brains are wired to respond to music, and there's speculation that we're all born with a variety of musical skills embedded in our DNA."

"Would that explain why some idiot savants can play awesome music even though they can't even tie their own shoelaces?" she asked, looking at me with a sly grin on her face.

"Damned if I know," Professor Howard said, "but it does illustrate how little we understand about the way our brains function. It's remotely possible that Andy hit the genetic jackpot and ended up with an incredibly rare talent that is somehow displayed through that theremin, but remember, that's just idle speculation on my part."

He paused for a second, and smiled. "You know, I'm not sure if I've ever mentioned this before, but I really enjoy brainstorming ideas with you two. We've had some pretty good discussions over the years, haven't we? I felt the same way about your mother, Andy."

"That's why you make such a good teacher, dad, even though you could have been a professional musician. What made you give it up and decide to have a family and teach music at the university instead?"

"It was more by accident than design, actually. I met your mother at college, Hanna, and instantly fell in love with her. You were conceived a few months later. I loved music but I needed a decent job to support my new family. Everything just kind of fell into place after that. I never regretted marrying young and settling down to a teaching career. In retrospect, it was the smartest decision I ever made. Your mother was my best friend and there isn't a day goes by since her death that I don't think of her."

"I miss her too," she said quietly as she brushed a tear away. "But that's enough nostalgia for now. We have a mystery to solve. I still don't understand how we all could have heard something totally different when Andy played the theremin."

"Again, I'm only speculating, but I suspect this instrument may be producing music at a frequency we haven't yet discovered, or at least a frequency that I'm not familiar with. Of course that would also mean that we humans must already have the ability to comprehend those sounds, perhaps at some level of our subconscious, even though we can't hear them in the sense that we hear music on the radio. If this theory is correct, Andy's music must somehow arrive at our brains in a form that allows us all to interpret it in our own unique fashion. Scientists discovered that music heard only inside our heads, like a song that we are only thinking about, uses the same brain circuitry as music heard with our ears, so anything's possible, I guess."

"So, you think the theremin might be able to bypass our ears in a form that each of our brains interprets differently?" I asked.

"It's only a guess, but yes, theoretically speaking, I do think it could function that way," Professor Howard said.

"There's another possibility," Hanna said. "Maybe the theremin managed to create several different songs that were customized exclusively for each of us according to our tastes and then simultaneously transmitted the music to all of us."

"Either way," her father said, "this is one hell of a sophisticated technology. You won't pick one of these boxes up at a Walmart."

"If that's the case," Hanna asked, "then why did somebody go to this much trouble just to build an ordinary theremin? Given how much this instrument would have cost to develop, you'd think they'd have invested their time and money into something useful that would have made them rich."

"You underestimate just how important the sound of music is to our everyday lives," Professor Howard said. "When you combine it with lyrics in a song it becomes one of the most powerful means of communication known to mankind. There's an old saying that if mathematics is the universal language of the mind, music is the language of the heart. To take it one step further,

have either of you heard of mathematical Platonism?"

We both shook our heads.

"Okay," he continued, "that's the concept that there might be a universal mathematics that we haven't discovered yet. Some people, including me, believe there's a universal music out there waiting to be identified as well. For instance, that might explain why some bird and whale songs are remarkably similar to our music. Perhaps this theremin operates on the same principle."

"I'm starting to think we may be in on the ground floor of something that's going to make the history books," Hanna said. "It might be like being in the same room at the moment insulin was discovered."

"It's truly mind-blowing, isn't it?" her father said. "Frankly, I'm way out of my depth on this. I just don't have the expertise to go any further. What we should do is take this machine over to the engineering faculty and have it tested in one of their labs to see what makes it tick. They're the only ones around here who have the kind of equipment necessary to identify where this music comes from. We're obviously dealing with something I don't even begin to understand, and I have to admit that scares me a little bit."

"It certainly managed to get my attention," I said. "I want to know what's going on too, but I don't like the idea of letting it out of my hands, at least until I've had a chance to explore it a little further myself. If we hand it over to the scientists and it really is some kind of unique technology, I want to retain some control over what happens to it. If that means getting lawyers involved, then so be it."

"Lawyers?" Hanna said. "You aren't getting greedy, are you?"

"No, of course not. Well, maybe just a little. I don't have to remind you that I could use some cash right at the moment. Anyway, it's more complicated than that. This box and I have, for lack of a better term, bonded, and I have a responsibility to see that it doesn't disappear into some anonymous billionaire's art collection. In other words, I won't be pawning it."

"While you guys figure out what you're going to do, I'm going to check my blog," Hanna said as she moved to a nearby desk and switched her computer on.

"Andy, the theremin belongs to you and your mother," Professor Howard said, "so it's your decision to make. If you feel that strongly about it, then by all means let's explore it ourselves for a while and see what we can come up with. Just be careful."

"With Hanna supervising me, at least until after the prom, I don't see how I can get myself into any trouble."

"So if there's anything more I can do in the meantime, just let me know." Professor Howard said as he looked over at his daughter, then at me, and thoughtfully stroked his beard.

"Cool," Hanna shouted.

They both looked in her direction. "You guys aren't going to believe this, but there's another report from SETI. Apparently the source for that signal they detected earlier is on the move, and possibly headed in our general direction. If they're right, Earth may be getting visitors soon. Very soon."

READ EARWORMS ONLINE:

[Home](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)