

## CHAPTER 1

I'd seen him before. Old guy was probably seventy-five. Maybe eighty. Gnarled, arthritic fingers. Four-packs-a-day voice. Cottony-white hair with yellowed ends. Wrinkled ebony skin. A high-mileage chassis. He wore threadbare, blue-and-gray striped pants that had previously belonged to a wool suit and a soiled white button-down that he'd fastened clear to the top. To complete the ensemble, he wore two-toned classic oxfords. The white was dull and cracked, but what remained of the black had been polished to a spit shine.

And his guitar was as road-worn as he. It was an old Gibson J-45 and he'd strummed holes both above and below the sound hole, exposing some of the bracing. At some point he'd slapped duct tape around the back and sides. His tuners were different colors, and even at a distance his strings looked rusty. But when that old man cut loose, both he and his guitar came alive. His feet tapped in rhythm with his strum hand, adding a percussive beat and suggesting he'd also played drums somewhere. The smile on his face spoke of the memory of who he'd once been. Or believed himself to be.

I'm not picky about much, except guitars. Six strings are a passion. A polyphonic concert in which each majestic string has a voice. Truth is, I am mesmerized by the idea that we can glue together disparate pieces of wood into an hourglass-shaped box, wrap it in bracing, binding, and phosphor-bronze strings, and then apply a little of the right pressure to give rise to a voice — the sum of which is exponentially greater than the pieces it comprises and as distinctive as the hands that play it. Deep, throaty, boxy, punchy low end, scooped middle, accentuated highs ... I can make an argument for each.

That old man's guitar had lost its voice. It was played out. So was he. But while his mind might have forgotten more music than most would ever know, his fingers had not. Where most folks saw an itinerant drunk, I tasted the residue of musical genius. At one time, this guy had been somebody.

The last few Saturdays he'd set himself up on Leadville's Main Street, sat on a bench, and played until the tips carpeted the bottom of his guitar case. Then he closed his case and disappeared inside a bottle until about Thursday. Come Friday, he was thirsty. Parched.

Like now.

I slowed with the traffic and pulled over to park. The sidewalks were crowded. He'd do well today. I parked, tucked my notebook between the small of my back and my belt, took a swig of Pepto-Bismol, downed two Tums, grabbed my guitar, and heard him before I saw him. He was sitting on a bench across from a well-known biker filling station.

Leadville is a hot spot for weekend warriors out of Vail, Aspen, Steamboat, Breckenridge, even the Springs and Fort Collins. Expensive, chromed-out, low-mileage, no-muffler bikes driven by midlife men flaunting well-decorated, siliconized, tucked-and-lifted toys. It's an old mining town and one of the highest towns in the

US, as it sits above ten thousand feet. Once a prolific producer of silver, today it's a shell of its former self. The population ebbs and flows with the seasons. In the summer it's a destination spot for folks on two wheels, both motorcycles and bicycles. It's home to the Leadville 100, a grueling all-day mountain bike ride; to High Mountain Pies — some of the best pizza in the Rockies; and to Melanzana, a small, privately owned company that makes the world's best fleece jackets and sweaters right out of its shop on Main Street. The "Mellie" is standard-issue among serious Coloradans. You see one and chances are you're dealing with a native. Or a wannabe.

The old man sat just across the street from the saloon so his sound projected into the bar. Smart. He had picked a good spot, but he had two problems. The first was the smell. He hadn't showered or thought of deodorant in weeks. Possibly months. The second was the inharmonious sound coming out of both his mouth and guitar. He might make some mercy money, but little more.

My next move was a little dicey. For all intents and purposes, this was his fire hydrant and I was the new dog sniffing around. The trick was to come in alongside him, or underneath him, and make him feel like he was riding on a carpet of notes. I wanted him to like my being there before he even knew I was there. Working in my favor was the fact that he was focused on his next bottle, so his peripheral vision didn't extend too far. Working against me was the fact that he was focused on his next bottle, and he'd probably want to fight if he thought I was a hindrance to that.

I knew the song he was playing, so I matched the key, and since he was strumming (or banging on the strings pretty hard), I picked around him. To the ear I was a complement, not a distraction. After about sixty seconds he noticed me, stiffened a bit, turned one shoulder, and began to sing and play louder. The sound coming out of his mouth wasn't in the same key as the sound coming out of his guitar, and shouldn't have produced the smile spread across his face. He was definitely lost in the memory of what it once sounded like.

My gamble was this — I had the feeling he'd played with other musicians before and he'd know when somebody was making him sound better. He was loosely playing in the key of E, so I sat just off to the side and continued to flat-pick an answering lick underneath him. He frowned, raised an eyebrow, and started hammering out a few riffs his fingers knew but his mind had long since forgotten. I clamped on a capo and filled the air around with a percussive strum that gave beat and timing to the old blues riffs he was sporadically hitting.

Irritated, he switched keys and began barking out an old ballad he'd probably sung ten thousand times. I adjusted the capo and played an embellishment around him, lightly filling the air with color and melody while not taking the spotlight. This was a delicate dance. His dramatic increase in volume told me he wasn't quite sure he wanted to be my partner. Not if it meant sharing his tips.

He was pivoting on his backside to stare me down when a guy in black leather dropped a twenty-dollar bill in his case. The old guy saw it, glanced at me, and actually stopped strumming to reach for it. But when I slid ever so slightly away from him — and from his case — my message must have registered somewhere in his foggy mind, and he returned to his song.

By the time it ended he was staring at forty-five dollars, and I could see the panic in his eyes; he'd hit the jackpot and was weighing the decision to cut and run.

Seeing I was about to lose him, I stood and dropped two twenties in the case. "Mind if I play along?"

He hooked the guitar case with his right foot and pulled it closer between his legs, then pointed his right ear at me. "Huh?"

I leaned in, pushing past the smell. "I won't be any trouble."

He stared at me, at the growing crowd, back at me. Finally his eyes settled on my guitar. His words were garbled. "J-forty-fi'?"

I nodded.

He pointed once with his strumming hand, directing me back toward my post, out of his limelight. I did as instructed.

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When I was a kid I had a box of sixty-four crayons — the kind with a built-in sharpener in the back. I was so enamored of all those different shades that I thought it'd be neat to melt them and see what swirl of color would result. Bad idea.

This old guy reminded me of my experiment. What was once beautiful and distinct had lost its brilliance. All the colors bled into one muddled mess of dark brown. But people are not crayons. And where wax melts and can never be recovered, the color of people is part of their DNA. We're more like stained glass in a cathedral. Somewhere along the way, something dark had been thrown over this guy, preventing the light from shining through.

In a rather inexplicable phenomenon, music makes up a small part of the frequency of waves we see with our eyes. That's right, music and light are part of the same spectrum. It's just that we hear part of that spectrum, suggesting that the angels both hear and see light, which adds a whole new dimension to the idea of daybreak, high noon, or sundown.

My job was to shine light on old glass. And when I did, that cathedral window shone glittering blue, crimson red, and royal purple.

The old man came to life.

Twenty minutes in, he glanced at me and then at the space on the bench beside him. I accepted the invitation. One of the mysteries of music is that two can achieve together what one never could do alone. The effect is exponential. It's also the only activity on Planet Earth that can transport those who hear it from place A to place B in about two beats. It can shift a mood from laughter to tears to I-can-conquer-the-world to what-if and hope. It's the original time travel machine.

The faces of the growing crowd around us spoke volumes. Moments before they had written him off as a faceless drunk. Now they were asking, "Who is this guy?" That look wasn't lost on him. The old man stood on the sidewalk and belted out melodies I doubt he'd thought of in thirty years. In his mind he was standing on the stage, and it wasn't long before his laughter mixed with his tears, proving that glass can't lose its color. It can become darkened by shadow, or painted in error, or dimmed by drink, but you can no more take the music out of a man than you can peel apart the fibers of his DNA.

Soon two girls in dresses were dancing and twirling in front of us, and when the old guy launched into "Over the Rainbow," folks started singing along. He fed off the smiles and tears and stared in amazement as bill after bill fluttered down into his case. Finally he broke out an a capella version of "What a Wonderful World" that would have made even Louis Armstrong smile.

At an hour he had run out of tricks. And breath. He was played out and huffing. It's always better to leave the audience wanting more, so I stood, signaling my time here was done.

His bloodshot eyes were having trouble focusing. Must have been several hundred dollars piled in his case. He asked, "You don't want none?"

The crowd was clapping. Whistling. I knelt in front of the old guy.

"You paid me plenty." Then I placed my guitar in his case on top of the bills.

To some, a guitar is just wood and string. To others, it's a shoulder, a jealous mistress, danger, sabbath, a voice in the wilderness, a suit of armor, a curtain to hide behind, a rock to stand on, a flying carpet, a hammer. But sometimes, in moments where light meets the dark, it's a stake we drive in the ground and the darkness rolls back as a scroll.

As I made my way through the crowd, a little kid wearing a cowboy hat and a buckle almost as big as the hat tugged on my shirt. "Mister?"

I turned. "Hey there."

He held up a piece of paper. "Can I have your autograph?" He looked up at the man next to him. "My daddy says I should get your autograph now 'cause even though you look like you live way back in the mountains, you're gonna be somebody someday."

"Really?" I signed his paper, handed it back, and knelt beside him. "You play?"

"Yes, sir." He stood a little straighter. "Banjo."

"You practicing your rolls?"

He nodded, then pointed at the scars on my right hand. "Does that hurt?"

"Not anymore."

"What happened?"

I held it up, opening and closing my fist. "When I was young and foolhardy, some stuff fell on me."

"Like a barbell or a brick or something?"

"No, more like the ceiling."

He pointed toward my voice box. "You always whisper when you talk?"

"Unfortunately."

"Why?"

"I got caught in a fire."

"A fire made it sound like that?"

"Actually, the flames weren't too bad, but the heat mixed with some toxic fumes and did this." I smiled.

"Makes me sound like I'm angry all the time."

"Daddy says he'll blister me if he catches me messing with matches."

I laughed. "You should probably steer clear."

As I started to stand, he tugged on me again. "Mister?"

"Yeah."

He touched my beard, allowing his fingers to tell his mind that I was real and not the scary man behind the scars. "I don't think you sound angry."

His words filtered down and into my heart where they met the welcoming echo of my father's voice. *Out of the mouth of babes you have perfected praise so that you might silence the enemy and the avenger.*

I liked that kid. "Thanks, pal."

When I turned around and looked back a block later, the old guy was playing my guitar. His eyes were as wide as his open mouth, and the smile on his face was worth a lot more than that pile of cash.

## CHAPTER 2

I drove south playing the kid's words over and over in my mind. The rearview reflected me back at myself, speaking a truth I'd long tried to bury. Shoulder-length, dirty blondish hair. Darker beard showing some gray. *Scruffy* would be one impression. *Mountain man* might be another. *Homeless* wouldn't be a stretch. Over the years I'd tried to hide the scars on my chest, back, neck, and right ear. When I "covered up" I found that people reacted more favorably to me. That said, I did look a bit scary. My right hand on the steering wheel caught my eye. I straightened my fingers and then made and remade a fist. Other than wearing a glove, there wasn't much I could do about that. Some things you just can't hide.

The Jeep was thirsty so I stopped for gas on the edge of town. Ambient noise filled the air around me. The slosh of gasoline filling the tank. Trucks on the highway muffled with the hum and *womp womp* of snow tires. A couple arguing as they came out of the mini-mart. A semi driving over a steel manhole cover, first the front wheel, then the back. A bulldozer and an excavator working in tandem in a lot behind me. A siren several blocks off, followed by a second. Kids playing basketball somewhere over my shoulder.

Given the mix of noise, any single sound was tough to follow. Like gnats at a barbecue. But every few seconds the noise would thin, and above it hung a melody. Someone was singing.

I looked down the road and saw a woman standing in the dirt, just off the highway. Thumb in the air. Too far away to see her features, but I could tell she wasn't young. Peroxide-blond hair falling out of a purple beanie. Sky-blue Patagonia puffer jacket. Faded jeans tucked into scuffed cowboy boots. A backpack at her feet. And a guitar case. A little thin. Looked like she could use a cheeseburger.

I would not say her voice was overly strong. In fact, it sounded tired. But weary or not, it possessed one thing that most did not. Near perfect pitch. Not to mention she had canary-like control of her vocal cords.

There was something oddly familiar about it. But just as quickly as I latched onto it, it ended. The wind swirled, brushed my face, and brought the memory of a smell I once knew.

As I watched, a rusted-out, green, long-bed Ford with a snowplow attached to the front pulled over. Not unusual for late September in Colorado. Three people sat in the front seat, two in the bed. I saw the woman nod, then lift her pack and her guitar into the bed and climb over the tailgate, displaying strength, grace, and a distance-setting amount of self-confidence. The truck descended into the valley in a cloud of smoke.

Lost in the distant residue of something familiar that I still couldn't place, and trying to gather the last of those notes as they faded off into the air, I was suddenly snapped back to earth by gas spilling out of my tank and sloshing onto my shoes. Up here the veil is thin, and it's easy to get lost.

Plus, I've always had a thing for girls who can sing.

I pulled back onto the road and stared out into one of the more majestic windshield-framed settings in all of Colorado: the road west and south out of Leadville toward Buena Vista. Through the glass in front of me the sun had set behind the snowcapped peaks of La Plata, Mt. Elbert, and Mt. Massive. The sheer enormity stretched beyond my side mirrors. Between them lay the deep scenic and historic cut of Independence Pass that led into the jet-set lifestyles of Aspen and Snow Mass.

Colorado is like a girl I once knew. Beautiful in any light. When the light or angle changes, something new is revealed. Something hidden rises to the surface. In late September and early October, the light in Colorado shifts. Snow dusts the peaks. The color in the trees has peaked and begun draining out. Colorado in the fall is a peek into the throne room. Colorado in winter is majesty defined. A declaration.

When God carved this place with His words, He lingered.

(Continues...)

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