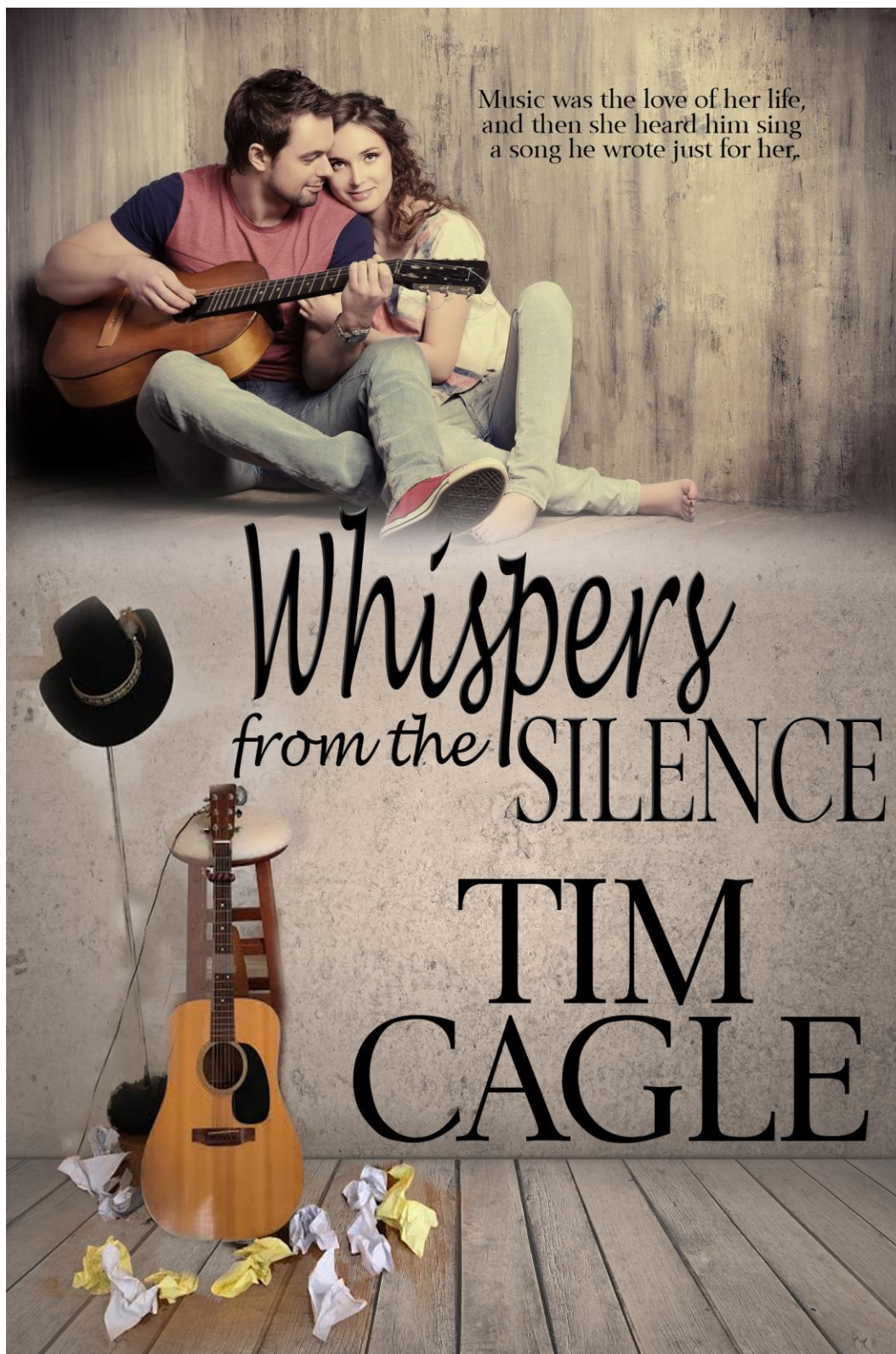




WHISPERS FROM THE SILENCE



TIM CAGLE

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DEDICATION

*To Linda,
Always the dance...*

CHAPTER ONE

As Orville Wright once asked his brother, Wilbur, “How do I start this son-of-a-bitch?”

The first time I heard that line, I was a seventeen-year-old kid making my college quarterback debut. It came from my roommate, Billy Joe Crowder, a maniacal middle linebacker. I nicknamed him “Hooker,” because he used to wrap his arms around a ball carrier’s chest like grappling hooks. He once hit a back so hard the runner’s sternum cracked. That was eighteen years ago.

Since then, that line has helped me launch songwriting marathons, pyrotechnic love affairs and amnesia-tinged hangovers. Tonight, it popped up as I walked onstage, picked up my guitar and did a sound check. The bass was a little tinny, so I adjusted my amplifier and took a deep breath.

Like always, an image appeared in my mind of the thirteen-year-old boy I once was, performing for the first time in front of the student body. My voice cracked and the shrill sound sent ripples of snickers racing like a tsunami across the auditorium. Ashamed, I saw myself fleeing toward the wings. Thank God my coach was waiting. “Son, you can brand yourself a coward for a lifetime or go back out there and kick fear in the ass like a soccer star on amphetamines,” he said, turning humiliation into triumph.

The crowd kept filing in as I hit a G9th. As the sweet tone resonated throughout the room, I smiled down at my Martin guitar, a Model D-28, I referred to as my “Stradivarius in drag.” The citadel of sound was always full-bodied and lush, like vintage wine aged in rosewood casks.

The touch of the hand-lacquered finish reassured me when I had to perform for belligerent whack jobs or obnoxious drunks. The Martin and I have acted like conjoined twins for years. It was my reward for getting a signing bonus when I got drafted by the Pittsburgh Steelers. The first time I held it, the sensation was like scooping up a ballroom dancing partner. The quilted maple wood was precision balanced while the frets were elegantly spaced, leading to action with more fluidity than a Gothic novel.

When I got traded to the Patriots, I even bought it a seat next to me so I wouldn’t have to risk shipping it. Playing the Martin also made my confidence soar when I found one special woman in the audience and sang my first song just to her.

My eyes swept the room, but candidates for inspiration were scarce. I wound up focusing on the pony-tailed guy in front of me in the stained tee shirt, Fu Manchu moustache, nose rings and tattoos. He was sitting next to the chartreuse-tipped pig-tailed woman in the soiled white shorts, skimpy halter top, neon blue mascara and mother-of-pearl studs triangulated on the top of her tongue like an arrowhead.

On his right forearm, there were smoking, crossed Colt 45 pistols with the words: “I Wish I Was Deep Instead of Macho.” He sneered at me like he just came down with hepatitis C, and I got pissed at myself because I’m still stuck playing in this dump, at least for tonight.

My lifelong dream is to be a songwriter in Nashville. I wanted to go after high school, but gave it up to play football in college. Then, I went to the NFL and played for six more years. After I got hurt and retired, my wife, Carol, refused to leave Boston. Last year she threw me out, and now I’m forced to stay, because she drained our joint account and left me so broke I can’t afford to pay attention.

I’m convinced this will be my last chance to leave. It’s time to follow the love of my life, music, instead of spending the rest of my days pretending I’m someone else.

Three beautiful blondes with pulled back hairdos, short skirts and snowflake white smiles pranced into the lounge like lingerie models on a runway. I took a deep, euphoric breath, and moved that the inspiration nominations cease.

“I’d like to start off with a medley of my favorite Gregorian chants,” I said softly, trotting out my favorite icebreaker as the stage illumination came on.

My spirits soared as the blondes raised their glasses toward me in a toast. I smiled like I just won Powerball, hit an E7 chord and spoke to the crowd.

“Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. I’m J. W. Steele, former Texan, coming to you on this hot Monday night from the Temptation Lounge in Boston. As Toby Keith once said, ‘I Should Have Been A Cowboy’ so, sit back and relax because the more you drink, the less you’ll have to testify about when a grand jury gets convened later.”

I led off with the old Eagles’ hit, ‘Take It Easy’. When I got to the part about having all those women on my mind, the trio cheered. Midway through my first set, the blondes stood up, blew me a kiss and left. At the entrance, they passed a striking brunette in a designer-looking suit.

I made eye contact and went through my final sets of country, rock and pop tunes. It seemed like she was following my every move like a sniper. At eight o'clock, I said good night and was packing up when someone touched my arm, and I turned to see the brunette.

"J. W., I'm Amanda Parsons. I'm an agent from Nashville," she said, as my entire body quivered. Up close, she was a dead ringer for Ann, my high school love and the first woman who ever broke my heart.

"Nice to meet you," I replied, grasping her hand like it was a royalty check.

"I got your name off the marquee and Googled you. Your football days are over, right?"

"I'd love to play but my knee needs a note from my orthopedic surgeon." I smiled.

"Are you here every night?"

"Just weekends. The regular act had an emergency tonight so I got called in," I said.

"What about future plans?" she asked.

I felt my face light up like a meteor shower, as I told her about moving to Nashville in January.

"Why wait until then?" she asked.

I explained about Hooker with the new coaching job and us planning to reunite once football season was over. I skipped the part about needing my next gig just to survive.

"Do you have a manager?" she asked.

I grinned and jerked my thumbs toward my chest. I felt my heart pound as possibilities raced through my mind while I surveyed her long chestnut hair and lightly-tanned face. Watching Amanda made me picture Ann as we used to sit by the lake, awestruck as a falling star turned the Texas sky into the color of burnished steel.

"Let me get to the point because I'm catching a flight. I have a friend in Nashville who's a producer. I think he could turn you into a star."

I felt the back of my legs semi-buckle. My chest rose and fell as her words were like injections.

"I counted at least three songs that were originals," Amanda said. "From what I heard, you have a real gift for songwriting."

"Tell me about the producer," I said, visualizing Ann and the first time I made love.

"His name is Sam Presley. He's worked with a lot of big names, like Waylon and Dolly," she said, looking me over like an item she found on final sale.

“Let me give you my contact info,” I said. We exchanged numbers, while a limo driver came in to notify Amanda it was time to leave.

“I’m talking big money and a real chance at stardom, J. W.,” she said, scoping out the hotel lobby. “No offense, but it’s not like what you have here. Sam will lead you to the big time.”

* * *

My mind was racing all the way home. Writing songs is the one thing I’ve dreamed of since I was a ten-year-old kid. When my music made people’s eyes light up, it meant I’ve unlocked a door in their soul. It almost seemed like a spiritual release, one filled with the purity of a love sonnet. The high reminded me of a drug, one that triggered a response like when true love blossomed and a partner turned into a soul mate.

I arrived at nine o’clock and made sure the door to the other half of the duplex was secure. That side was occupied by my landlady, Julie Gretskey, and her twin daughters, Emily and Alexa. Once inside, Dr. Coors became my anesthesiologist on call. I plopped on the ancient glen plaid sofa, thankful that the apartment came furnished. Everything was worn and dated, but Julie made sure the place was sparkling before I moved in.

I activated the sound on my phone, and heard so many pings from emails that I looked to see if my cell phone had mutated into a harpsichord. A huge grin appeared as I saw the last one from Hooker.

He addressed me as “Wilbur” and said he was in non-stop meetings all week. He’s headed to Oklahoma on Thursday to escort their top recruit to training camp. Tonight, he had a date with the third different woman he has fallen in love with this week. He said we could catch up on Sunday unless he was still entangled with a mattress mambo marathon.

My phone rang. The caller ID made me suck in a deep breath before I heard a deep voice. Its sound made me picture an antebellum mansion, a frosted pitcher of mint juleps and the caller petting a huge, floppy-jowled bloodhound named ‘Stonewall.’

“Mr. Steele, Mah name is Sam Presley. I’m a colleague of Amanda Parsons and a record producer in Nashville,” the voice said, with a deep Southern drawl.

“Good evening, sir,” I said, my throat drier than a John Kerry speech.

“Befoah you ask, Ah’m no relation to the King, heh, heh,” he said. “Ah would like to invite you to meet me in Nashville.”

“I’m starting a new gig next week but I can come down this Wednesday. Is that OK” I blurted.

“That would be mighty fine,” he said, as a lump formed in my throat while we exchanged backgrounds for a few more minutes.

“Amanda talked about an original song you did called ‘All Ah Am is Free.’ Ah’d admire it if you could send it before we meet,” he said.

I told him it would go right out. After we finalized our meeting details and hung up, my heart was pounding so hard it felt like a bass drum was in my chest.

I texted Hooker and Julie, the only friends I felt close enough to share the news with. Hooker said he would pick me up at the airport. Julie said she would stop by after work. I found a flight on Wednesday morning with a return Thursday. The tickets cost me five hundred dollars and I panicked because there was barely six hundred left in checking. Thank God I still had some credit.

Sadness came over me as I remembered my life in football and how things had gone downhill since then. After my knee injury, I took a job as a salesman for the company owned by my father-in-law, Allister “Boomer” Lyle. I sold shortening, frying fat and cake mixes to all the bakeries, restaurants, hotels and food service institutions in Boston. On my first day, I discovered that going to work was as exciting as watching C-SPAN reruns of Pakistani parliamentary debates without subtitles.

At least, I had a job until Boomer fired me after Carol kicked me out. He even fought my claim for unemployment benefits. I won that fight but my checks will run out in two weeks. I’ve been able to live by picking up extra cash playing at clubs even though I make barely enough to get by.

My new gig starts in a few days. It will net me fifteen hundred a week until January. I’ll have enough money to move and cash in on Hooker’s recent relocation to Nashville.

I got out my guitar, recorded my song and sent it to Sam. A few beers later, it was almost midnight, when I heard a soft knock at the door. It was Julie.

She had a wine bottle in her right hand and a takeout bag from a Chinese restaurant in her left. Her hair was fixed in a ponytail, she stood a regal five foot eight, and wore a navy top, white shorts, flip-flops and a frenzied smile. The top’s color was a sharp, distinguishing compliment to her light auburn hair and robin’s egg blue eyes. She came over and took me in her arms.

“You’re on your way to the red carpet, big guy,” she said.

“Well, let’s not write my Hall of Fame induction speech yet. It’s just a start.”

I got her a wine glass and sat next to her on the couch. Her eyes danced like a wheat field waving in the wind. I thought about all the nights she stopped by after work and the times she talked me down, especially when I was pissed. One night, I let my guard down and a few angry tears fell. It was the first time I had ever cried in front of a friend.

With no romance between us, our friendship took off after I started to fill the void in her daughters’ lives. She dated sporadically, and told me she refused to get involved with a man because it would interfere with her relationship with the twins. At times, she even inspired my lyrics. Above all, she became my closest friend. My biggest regret was that she never let me fall in love with her.

“You seem worried. I thought you’d be bouncing off the wall with joy,” she said.

“I’m scared. Playing at the hotel is one thing. Auditioning in front of a big-time producer is a higher level of fear.”

“Maybe making it in Nashville will soften your layer of scar tissue,” she said.

I flashed back to the night she told me my inner self was surrounded by a dark shroud of sorrow. That let me start a song called, ‘Clouded Soul.’ So far, I only had the title.

“Why am I getting your Freud impersonation?” I asked.

She paused and looked me up and down.

“When you’re not trying to out-clever yourself with quips, I hear agony when you sing. I don’t know the real you because you’re always onstage,” she said, as I started to pace.

“I’ve wanted this my whole life. What if I find out I’m not good enough?”

“What does your heart tell you?”

“That I’d better suck it up.”

“Like in front of the whole high school?” she asked.

My face tingled as I stared at her, but she wasn’t finished.

“You might be like that old Leonard Cohen lyric you gave me about being as free as some poor old drunk in a midnight choir. Maybe you’re searching for the freedom to fail,” she said.

I let out a short, smooth whistle at her talent for cross-examining me with the skill of a seasoned prosecutor. She touched my left hand and I felt like a guest who stayed just a little too long.

“At least I’m not some kind of manic depressive. Besides, now I can teach the twins all those heartbreaking songs. How long will they be at the beach?”

“My sister’s bringing them back Friday night. I said they could spend a few dollars from their puppy fund,” she said.

I grinned at the memory of how they asked me to convince Julie to let them have a dog. I said they should offer to pay for it, then reached into my wallet and gave them a ten to start the ball rolling. They had over ninety-four dollars in the fund, from doing chores around the house and babysitting gigs, now that they had completed their child care class.

“They took the Yamaha with them and wrote a poem so you can turn it into a song,” she said.

A vision of our first music lesson appeared. The girls showed up with a battered acoustic guitar they bought for five dollars at a garage sale. It was worn, the neck was too wide and the strings were set too far above the frets. They grew frustrated as they struggled to depress the strings. I knew the answer was a new guitar, but I was tapped out.

The next day was my unemployment hearing. Boomer testified I was discharged for cause as a result of misconduct, but the hearing official saw right through all of the bluster and bullshit and awarded me benefits. To celebrate, I went to a music store and found a beautifully preserved, secondhand Yamaha.

It had a thin neck and low frets and was perfect for twelve-year-old feminine fingers. Julie insisted on paying me but I said no, just like I refused to take money for teaching. Being with the twins was far too much fun to get paid, so she started sending desserts or casseroles instead.

“Did you tell them about meeting this producer in Nashville?” she asked.

“I wanted to talk to you first,” I said, after shaking my head.

“They’re going to be crushed when you move there,” she said. “You’re the only dad they’ve ever known.”

My eyes glistened as I remembered how she told me their father deserted the twins a decade ago. A vision formed in my mind of me taking them to their first father-daughter dance last June.

“If you’re trying to make me feel guilty, it’s working,” I whispered.

“Remember how you said you grew up Catholic and I said I’m a Jew?” she asked. I nodded. “Same guilt, different holidays,” she said, flashing a grin.

We talked for several more minutes as Julie urged me to check Sam out. A moment later, she leaned back and closed her eyes. I re-corked her wine bottle and we walked arm in arm to her door.

As she turned, I couldn't stop reflecting on how uncanny her insight was. Her best reveal was when she said I entered the twins' lives at the exact same age I was when my mother died.

I kissed her on the cheek. An image formed in my mind of me acting as Julie's date for hospital functions. At times, that made me feel strange and filled me with a longing I could not explain. I even composed a lyric about the two of us, '*Like a flame that's banked too long.*' Too bad it has stayed sequestered in the unopened pages of a work in progress.

I headed back to my music, while I questioned life's mysteries. Julie had turned into a platonic wife who never asked me to justify my actions or questioned my loyalty. I was especially mystified as to how the two of us ever became so close without activating episodes of heavy breathing and five-fingered, frenzied groping.

Maybe I should be happy Julie was not my lover. That would make it almost impossible to leave her. The pain of parting would make me question my decision. The heartache would leave a deeper scar and be saturated with guilt.

At present, I was seeing only one woman, Erica. Our sex life was hot and heavy, but light on involvement. Neither of us wanted anything permanent or complicated. That made perfect sense to me. It even had my stamp of approval based on an old Kristofferson lyric about how the lovin' would always be easy, unlike the livin' which was nothing but hard.

* * *

It was late Wednesday morning when I landed in Nashville and marched off to meet Hooker. We've stayed in touch by phone, especially after Carol left me. Hooker is the only guy who can sense exactly what I need—a rousing pep talk, a few beers or a swift kick in the ass.

We've been making plans to reunite since he moved to Nashville two weeks ago. He's now an assistant football coach at Tennessee Baptist College. He's also a marriage dodging bachelor, a semi-transvestite and more fun than Lady Gaga picking out a new chicken parmesan evening gown.

We're probably as close as two men have ever been without exchanging diamond pendants. In Texas, he said and did things that formed the basis for a song. The best one was the time he told me, "Love is just a gamble based on the promise of a lie."

Once, I was leaving a bar and asked if he was ready. He said in the middle of an intoxicated hiccup, "S'loon." That led to a tune called, 'It's Too Saloon To Tell.' He once said that the best way to tell if someone was a true friend was whether it felt right when you cried in front of them.

He's a big bastard, six foot four and close to two hundred fifty pounds, an inch taller and twenty-five pounds heavier than me. I turned thirty-four years old two weeks ago. He beat me by four months. I have a full head of light brown hair, but he's showing a little skin yarmulke that he tries to deny.

I rounded the corner and saw him holding a huge handwritten sign that said, "Welcome to the only guy who reminds me of St. Paul—a small, boring town in Minnesota."

"Let's drop your bag off at the apartment. I've got time for a quick lunch before afternoon meetings," he said.

"Tell me again why you're coaching at a Baptist college," I said.

"It's the fastest route to a division one coaching gig. So, I put up with the God jocks in exchange for career development," he said.

"You're safe as long as you never show up for an inspection in your underwear," I said.

"Thong you," he answered, as we both chuckled.

I grinned as I thought about Hooker being a semi-transvestite. It's not like he's a real heavy-duty drag queen, sporting around town in Carolina Herrera ball gowns or Jimmy Choo stilettos. But, he's really into women's panties. He says it's a lot easier being a guy than a woman, so women get to wear the best underwear. His official reason for cross-dressing is because the texture of silk or chiffon does more for romance than Fruit-of-the-Looms, but I don't buy that.

One night, when we were drunk, he told me his mother didn't want another boy and dressed him in girl's clothes until he was three years old. Maybe he associates women's clothing, and especially panties, with the love of a mother he always chased but never caught.

A smile formed as I realized I was about to reclaim RuPaul Light for a cellmate. I gave thanks it wasn't Rand Paul, as I heard Aerosmith singing 'Dude Looks Like A Lady', in my mind.

It was a short trip, until we reached the last building in a row of apartments and entered the first unit on the third floor. I was shocked to see that it was sparsely furnished, an upgrade from our last pad in Beaumont, when we used an aluminum storm door stacked on bricks for a dining room table. It was a typical single guy's apartment, with its drab, semi-disgusting clutter suggesting that it had been decorated by someone who thought an Oriental rug was a Chinese toupee.

Fifteen minutes later, we found a space in front of a bar and grill. When the server arrived, we both ordered burgers, fries and iced tea.

"I can't do beer, man. Too much to go over later," Hooker said, folding his arms.

“I need a clear head myself.”

“Son, talk to me about Carol. You gave me footnotes on the phone, but now I want the whole term paper,” he began, like he was ready to update his will.

As I began, he interlocked his fingers and reminded me of a coach telling me to start going to class or lose my scholarship.

“Things started to go downhill after I blew out my knee and had to retire from football. I was out of the spotlight and so was she,” I said.

“You caught her with your boss?” he asked.

I nodded. “Yeah. My flight got canceled and when I got home, Russ Hartley’s car was there.”

“Then you found the note about her diamond ring, right?” he asked.

An image flashed through my mind of me reaching for my laptop next to Carol’s attaché case the next morning, when my hand accidentally knocked the case to the floor. As I picked everything up, I saw a handwritten note from Russ that he was in love with Carol.

“That was only the beginning. I went to the bank and discovered that our joint account had less than five dollars. I found a bank officer who told me Carol transferred the money,” I said.

Briefly, I remembered how everyone said there wasn’t one goddamned thing I could do about it, because the money was held jointly. My sources were impeccable, two husbands who went through the same thing. One said a good lawyer might help if I could afford one by hacking into the Pentagon’s budget. The other told me finding an honest, competent lawyer was as easy as finding a used Yugo sub-compact that ran.

“That still wasn’t the worst part,” I said. “After the bank, two cops came to my door with Carol and Boomer. The first cop handed me an emergency restraining order and said I couldn’t have any contact with her.”

“That’s when Boomer fired you, right?”

I nodded as my anger flashed.

“Why did you go to work for him when you couldn’t stand him?”

“I never finished my degree and recruiters weren’t exactly breaking down my door when I retired. So, Boomer became my only alternative.”

“Carol refused to move here after your football career ended, right?” he asked. I nodded. He looked at me and I knew an impression was coming. His greatest gift was spot-on mimicry and

politicians and celebrities comprised his alter-ego. At times, he'd throw in a foreign accent and I'd start roaring like we were drinking with Sam Kinison. "I can hear her now. 'Why thayah? Ah Mississippi and Ah-kann-soo-wah closed foah the summah?" he said, capturing her native Massachusetts accent, where the letter "r" is pronounced "ah," and infusing the phony British dialect she added because it convinced her she sounded just like a Kennedy.

"She'll never leave Boston. Not with her monthly quest to see how much she can increase profits for St. John, Gucci and Giorgio Armani," I said, picturing Carol's four walk-in closets, one just for shoes.

"Ever since I met Carol at your wedding, I wondered how you two ever got together."

"I had never met a woman like her. Bright, beautiful and a blueblood. Maybe she picked me because I was a pro athlete and her friends were off the wall jealous."

"Didn't she want to be a charter member of the upper crust more than anything?"

I nodded, as an image of me moving to Boston appeared, with a picture of my teammates warning me about the city's aristocratic class, known as "Brahmins." Descriptions ranged from "cotillion assholes," to "they think they piss champagne."

"Carol's crowd convinced me that Brahmins are terrified about mingling with social inferiors, so they weed out those with low-tier college degrees and proletariat kinfolk. Every time Carol introduced me to someone, I got their educational pathways. As in, 'This is Quinton Wingtip, of the Beacon Hill Wingtips. Phillips Andover and of course, Harvard.' I started getting the jump on people by saying, 'I'm J. W. Steele, of the Stainless Steeles. Trap Play Prep and of course, Screen Pass University.' Go long, y'awl." I pictured that exasperated look Carol got when I wouldn't swoon if she told me somebody was a descendant of King George the Third. The only Georges I swooned over were Jones and Strait.

"You're still playing at the hotel, right?" Hooker asked.

"Yeah. Cocktail hour on weekends. Friday is my last night. I start my big one next week."

"Why don't you come down here now? You could live with me."

I shook my head and sipped my iced tea. "I need to save a few bucks first."

"I could cover you, man. You can pay me back when you start shipping platinum," he said.

"No, I'll pay my own way. Tonight might be my big break."

"Did you check this producer out?"

"I tried but there wasn't much. He gave me a reference but I couldn't reach him."

“Tell me about your new landlady-slash-therapist,” he said.

“I met her through her brother-in-law, Greg, an assistant trainer from the Patriots. Her name is Julie, but Greg said she likes to be called ‘Jewels.’”

“I sense a friends with benefits moment. You could also get an alternative way to pay the rent.”

“Just friends, no benefits.”

“You’re shitting me. Did your joy stick get repossessed?”

“She told me romance is not in the cards.”

“She must be homely enough to use barbed wire for dental floss,” he said.

“No way. She’s smoking hot.”

“Friendship with a beautiful woman with no hope for a fuckathon? Impossible,” he declared.

I told him how the twins met me before I became a tenant. The girls were shy and a little standoffish, but I must have passed the test. Julie told me they both thought I was a “hoot” and couldn’t wait to ask me about playing the guitar. She said if their attention bothered me, I was under no obligation to show them anything.

When I told Julie about splitting up with Carol, she replied that she didn’t expect me to be a cloistered monk, but hoped I would show some dating discretion as the girls noticed everything. Then, she looked me right in the eye and said there was one rule that was a deal breaker. She said to me, ‘I’m divorced and you’re separated. I’m sure we could steam up the windows while the twins are in school, but I’m determined that won’t happen. I can’t let myself get distracted by romance with you so close by. So, you won’t be spending time here reading the screenplay from *Fifty Shades of Grey* with the girl next door’.”

“Tell me about the twins,” he said.

I could feel my face grow a grin the size of a sinkhole in Florida.

“They saw me carrying my Martin. Emily asked if they could hear me play and Lexi said Taylor Swift was their favorite. I told them her music was perfect for young girls, but not so much for an old bastard like me.”

“Where’s their dad?”

“He left after their first birthday. Jewels said he never wanted children, so the selfish prick just bailed out on them.”

“I never thought of you as the fatherly type. What’s it like to be with kids?”

“Unvarnished honesty. I was terrified at first, because I never had much of a childhood. But, I didn’t want them to grow up fatherless like I did.”

“How often are you with them?”

“Almost every day. Julie works as a private duty psych nurse on the three o’clock to eleven o’clock shift. The twins come over after school and we play some music. Then, they do their homework and we make dinner, usually with enough left over for Jewels when she gets home around midnight.”

“How old are they?”

“Twelve.”

“What happens when you have to work?”

“I’m there except for weekends and Jewels has those nights off. She was worried when she took the shift and told me if I wouldn’t have come along, she might have passed it up. The pay differential is a real shot in the arm and she’s relieved to know I’m next door.”

He gave me a look like he was calculating the budget deficit.

“So, you get to babysit the twins, teach them the guitar, be their surrogate dad, make dinner for Mom and the only sex you get is on pay-per-view. Remind me to never let you negotiate my next contract or I’ll have to pay the school.”

He looked at his watch and told me he had to get to the stadium. I said I would keep him updated as to when he should start building a wing to hold my future Grammys.

* * *

Hooker dropped me off downtown just before one o’clock so I decided to explore before meeting Sam. There were a dozen street musicians with instrument cases open for contributions.

I saw an old man with a beat-up guitar and shrouds of stark white hair protruding from his cowboy hat. Behind him was a woman wearing a soiled bandana and accompanying him on violin. I thought the scarf was strange because of the August heat, until it slipped down to reveal the edges of a jagged, bumpy scar. Someone had deliberately disfigured her, probably with a shattered beer bottle.

It was obvious neither had found the luxury of a bath for some time. I stuck a ten dollar bill in his battered guitar case. He tipped his hat, smiled and told me Jesus was coming soon.

As I passed a historic-looking, red brick building, my mind told me something was familiar. I pulled up the address from Sam Presley's email, went inside and felt the blood rush as I checked the directory. When I couldn't find Sam's name or Syntron Productions, apprehension spread. Finally, I convinced myself there had to be a logical explanation.

A few minutes later, I entered the Country Music Hall of Fame. Many exhibits went back to long before I was born. I felt goosebumps when I came to the display of Alan Jackson's handwritten lyrics to 'Where Were You When The World Stopped Turning?' written soon after the attacks on September eleventh. It was eerily moving, sad and enraging, all rolled into one. Those words spelled out in longhand made me feel a songwriter's kinship like I never have before.

Before leaving, I went to the souvenir shop and found tee shirts for Julie and the twins. The shirts for the girls were covered with images of guitars. My joy escalated because they came in different colors, a must because the twins told me that dressing alike would make people think they were a couple of real "dorkers".

* * *

It was just before five o'clock when I arrived at the hotel. My breath came out in spurts, as I spotted an older gentleman and young woman occupying two easy chairs by an off-white sofa.

Sam was in his late fifties and dressed in a dark suit, cowboy boots and a string tie. He had wavy white hair and reminded me of the actor, William Devane. The woman's name was Darla and her curve-clinging, silver-sequined mini-dress was up to her thighs. Her hair was long, frizzy and blonde, and her eyes were a deep blue.

I felt my mouth grow dry as we all shook hands. The last time I was this nervous was when two three hundred pound linemen were chasing me, before they made the inside of my knee feel like shredded broccoli hugging overcooked fettuccine.

Darla sat next to me on the sofa and Sam flanked me in the chair on my right. I clenched my teeth to keep my lower jaw from dropping and making me look like a panting King Charles Spaniel staring out the window of a Ford pickup. My pulse felt like a ticking time bomb.

"Thank you for comin'," Sam said, as Darla smiled like Vanna White about to turn over a vowel. As she slid closer, I caught a whiff of perfume, a blend of jasmine and roses.

We spent the next thirty minutes getting acquainted. Sam said he and Darla had to leave early and asked how long I would be in town. When I said until tomorrow, he made me promise to meet them for dinner next time I came back, hopefully in a week or two.

I told them about my athletic career and how I grew up in Texas. Sam eyed my right hand and I saw him focus on the black and gold ring with the five diamonds at the top.

“Is that a Super Bowl ring?” he asked, with a hushed, reverent voice.

I gave a look of caution before nodding. People sometimes had weird reactions when they found out I used to play professional football. Some were mesmerized, some attentive, while others were jealous. I never felt like a celebrity, just a guy who worked hard to develop my skills and loved playing a kid’s game after I became an adult. That’s why I always downplayed the ring.

“It is. I was with the Pittsburgh Steelers then,” I answered.

“You must be the only man evah to combine pro football and songwriting,” Sam said dryly.

“What about Mike Reid? Cincinnati Bengals defensive tackle, classical pianist, Grammy winner and Songwriter’s Hall of Fame. He wrote for Ronnie Milsap,” I said.

Sam shot me a look of confusion before he quickly recovered.

“Oh, oh, yeah, Mike Reid. He was a legend, all right,” he said.

I could swear he had no idea who I was talking about and suddenly, felt on edge. At once, I told myself it was nothing more than a small mental miscue anyone could make. Besides, Mike hadn’t been current since the ’90s. I felt edgy, but wanted this meeting so much I convinced myself everything could easily be explained.

“What position did you play?” Darla asked.

“I was a gunner on kicking teams and the third string quarterback,” I said.

“What’s a gunner?”

“One of the point guys flying down the field and hitting everyone in sight,” I said.

“How many songs have you written?” Sam asked.

“Over four hundred,” I said. Then, I took a deep breath and told Sam he wasn’t listed at his office address. He said he was expanding his base of operations to Memphis, and had just secured a new satellite office here. His lease expired so his name was removed from the directory and he hadn’t updated his contact info.

I was ready to ask about the reference I couldn’t find, when Sam reached into his briefcase, removed an envelope and slid it toward me. It showed my name on a check underneath the cellophane window. My pulse pounded as I realized it was time to make a deal. I no longer cared about references or jocks becoming songwriters.

“J. W., ah want to buy your song. We think you’re a superstar songwriter,” he said.

My hands shook as I opened the envelope. Inside, there was a check made out to me in the amount of five thousand dollars. I resisted the urge to jump up and shout as Sam slid another document in front of me.

“We gotta keep the books straight for ol’ Uncle Sam. That there’s a form W-9 we have to file with the IRS, so I can send you a 1099 for your tax returns,” he said.

My hands shook as I completed the form. A broad grin popped up as I thought about the lyrics to the old Clint Black song, ‘When My Ship Comes In.’

“We’ll want you to come back in a week or two to do some recordin’,” Sam said.

I tried to respond but my voice quavered. Finally, the words appeared.

“I hope Amanda can meet us next time. I have a lot to thank her for,” I gushed.

“You can count on it,” Sam said, as we all shook hands and left.

* * *

I called Hooker like I just won the Heisman Trophy and told him we had a lot to celebrate. I said everything was my treat because I was now five grand richer. He got to the hotel thirty minutes later and we drove to a bar and grill called Panhandle’s, a dive located on the west side of town, to see the local talent.

Everything was the same color: dirt. The last time the floor was swept, it was by General Sherman's boys, who stopped to tidy up before making full-time work for the Atlanta Fire Department. Bacteria moved out years ago, after their demands for cleaner, brighter working conditions were ignored.

Hooker confiscated the last run-down booth opposite what passed for a bandstand. As I slid in over the seat, trying not to catch my Levi’s in the mosaic of cigarette burns that formed quills on the red plastic, he waved toward the bar. Our server arrived and we both ordered ribs.

We turned toward the bandstand and I saw a tall man in a huge black Stetson approaching a small stage. Hooker told me he was the owner.

“All right, Earl,” he said to the bartender, sounding like Michael Moore introducing Harry Reid to a remedial reading class. “Unplug the juke box, and git that shit off. Folks, we’re gonna start tonight off with our first act, Rib-Eye and the Gravy Stains, so give ’em a big welcome.”

Four men in faded, ripped Levis, stained tee shirts and mud-crusteds boots walked up to the stage. The tallest band member, whom I assumed was Rib Eye himself, went to the microphone. He

was about six foot two, and skinny with straggly hair. He wore a look that said he was exhausted from plowing since dawn, or that an OxyContin dealer had filled his back-order.

I licked my lips as our server arrived with what seemed like two truckloads of ribs, a steamer trunk packed with rings and fries, and a forklift filled with coleslaw. We greeted her like we just escaped after a month in Bangladesh. Hooker said to hit us again on the beers and began gnawing on a meaty rib.

Right then, as another alleged band took the stage, two women in cutoffs and halter tops approached our table. Each was twenty-something, shapely and had light brown hair.

The smiling one spoke first. "Howdy, Billy. How's the football team doin'?"

"Well, hidy there, Bobbie," Hooker said. "They're great. Come and join us."

"This is J. W. Steele," he continued. "Ex-quarterback for the New England Patriots and Nashville's newest songwriter."

"Hi, kids," I said, extending my hand.

Bobbie reached her hand across the table. "Hiya, J. W. This is my friend, Susannah."

I stuck out my hand, but Susannah kept looking around and shaking her head from side to side.

"I'm heading for the library before this place gets quarantined," she said, and left.

"So Bobbie, how's life treating you?" Hooker asked, motioning for her to join us.

"Well, I'm almost over the broken heart you gave me," she replied.

He reached over and kissed her hand as the owner returned to the mic.

"Now we come to our last act, a first time performer who comes from the great state of Texas. Put your hands together for Ms. Jillian Loving, singing her own creation, 'All Over Her'."

A woman in her late-twenties, wearing tight jeans and a tee-shirt, took the stage and adjusted the microphone. Her skin was tanned to a gorgeous bronze, like coffee with real cream. Her eyes were a beautiful shade of amber, and sparkled when she looked up. Perfectly straight teeth the color of white porcelain, gave her a smile that, when contrasted with her skin, was startling. I pictured a marshmallow inside a Godiva chocolate.

Her auburn hair with sunburst golden streaks was long and straight, and tied in a ponytail. She was barely five foot three, and looked as healthy as an aerobics instructor. I watched her every move like a freshman nerd who discovered a cheerleader smiling back at him, then told myself the true test would be when we talked. A grin formed as I prayed she didn't have a fake British accent.

She walked to the stage, placed her purse on top of the amplifier and opened her guitar case. I could see her instrument was also a Martin. The bar maintained a high-level of noise as Jillian plugged into the amplifier and sat on the barstool in front of the microphone.

The noise grew louder. Jillian waited for the sound to die down, but it only intensified. With no lull in sight, she finally strummed a chord, grinned at the crowd and said: "I like to start off with Billboard's 1-1-list of top ten Paderewski mazurkas."

I laughed my ass off as she began to sing in a smooth, silky voice.

* * *

*When you stared at me,
Said you'd swear to me
That none other
Would ever come between;
Candlelight and wine,
Then came lovin' time
But you took my hand
And called me by her name
Chorus
You won't get all over me
Till you get all over her
You won't find me
Standing in your line;
Although you say you love me,
One thing you can be sure
Our love's called off,
While she's still on your mind.*

All of a sudden, four guys, who looked like they were waiting for a decision from the parole board, began raising hell off to my left. The main event was about to start when one of them yelled to Earl, "Hey, we've heard enough of this pansy shit. Turn on the jukebox."

I was hoping his conviction was for income tax evasion, as opposed to serious bodily injury, when I stood up. Immediately, one of his sidekicks walked over and plugged in the jukebox. It came on with a loud roar.

When I got to the guy, Jillian confronted him. He was about six foot five and towered over her. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the owner take out his cell phone. I hoped he was calling 9-1-1 instead of his bookie to get down a last-minute bet on the other guys.

"What gives you the r-r-right to do that?" Jillian stuttered.

“Two hundred and fifty pounds and a couple of wrecked eardrums from listening to that shit you're warbling.”

“Hey asshole, whaddya think you're doing?” I asked, in my best Steven Seagal voice.

Jillian turned and gave me a look of disgust.

“I'm not a d-damsel in distress, you m-m-m-macho shithead,” she said.

“I'm sorry, ma'am, but I was...” I began, as she turned and faced the bully.

“Wanna come home with me, honey? You can bring these with you.” He sneered, reached out and grabbed her breasts.

I was ready to clock him when Jillian quickly stepped forward, bringing her right boot down hard on the bully's left instep, then repeating with her left boot on his right instep. The stupid bastard went down screaming in pain, as she slammed her fist into his groin and straddled him.

His three friends approached. One of them gave Jillian's amplifier a vicious kick, denting the speakers and sending her purse and guitar case flying.

“Hey, you bitch, what do you think you're doin'?” he asked.

Hooker and the bouncer joined me. The bouncer looked about five foot ten and thirteen thousand pounds. He had a neck so huge, his head looked like a bowling ball sitting on top of a short refrigerator. I wondered if he was big enough to have his own Google coordinates as I looked behind him to check if he had a balcony.

I was about to step forward, when the bouncer smacked the bully in the jaw with his raised forearm. I could almost hear his cheekbone splinter as he grunted, then slumped to the floor, plunging downward faster than shares of heart valve stock after a product recall.

Two deputy sheriffs walked in. The bouncer pointed toward the gang of four and signaled they started everything. I walked over to Jillian, who was trying to recover the contents of her purse and guitar case. She seemed angry and embarrassed as she refused to look up.

“Are you okay?” I asked, but there was no answer.

She continued gathering items from her purse. I searched for a way to get noticed. She refused, trying to make an exit as soon as possible. Finally, I invited her to have a drink.

“I'll pass,” she said.

“Hey come on. I grow on people,” I said.

“So does t-t-toxic mold.”

“Come on over and let's get acquainted,” I pleaded, taking her arm.

She tore her arm away faster than a lobbyist leaves a concession speech.

“Take this in the spirit it's meant. You'd do me a s-s-solid favor if you'd fuck off,” she said, turning to leave as ‘Trouble’ by Travis Tritt, began to play.

Hooker grew a contented look and said we handled those guys like Jean-Claude van Damme and Jackie Chan. I said my contribution was closer to Niles or Frasier. Of course, depending on his choice in lingerie, an argument could be made that we performed like Bonnie and Clyde.

Suddenly, I spied a dark object lying under the bass drum. Walking onto the bandstand, I saw that it was a woman's black leather wallet wedged in by the drum. Inside, I found a driver's license, credit cards, assorted cash and a membership card to a songwriters' association. I ran toward the door but it was too late. At once, I realized tomorrow might be a perfect way to meet her when I returned it on my way to the airport. My pulse quickened as I could almost hear the sound of her voice blended with mine. Then, I laughed out loud when I realized I had just met the first woman in years who would think of a lock and not a legacy if I shouted, “Yale!”

* * *

Thirty minutes later, Hooker and Bobbie were holed up in his bedroom while my mind was filled with thoughts of Jillian and how to pursue her. I ran my fingers over Sam's check and had a vision of introducing her to my music. I felt myself blush as another picture formed of us in bed together, and my whole body stirred.

At that moment, Brooks and Dunn began singing ‘Only In America,’ in my subconscious.

Bartender, set everyone up with some spacious skies and an amber wave of grain and put it on my tab, was my last conscious thought as I drifted off to sleep.