



“What’s happened?”

Michael asked quietly without moving anything more than his lips, clutching his guitar tightly to his body. “Where are we? And who are they?”

The *where* seemed to be their house. Except it was different now. Shabbier. Older. With unfamiliar furniture. The *who* Michael referred to were three young women staring at them with varying degrees of surprise.

No one answered Michael. The women were rooted in place, offering no response; the other members of the band were simply speechless.

A moment later, a redhead scurried in from where the kitchen should be and skidded to a stop, mouth dropping open in shock. Her eyes flared. Bret could tell she wasn’t one to take surprises well.

“Who are you? How’d you get in here? Where did you come from?” Her voice went from harsh to strident.

Bret felt the tension break. He saw it in the others as limbs loosened and faces relaxed.

“I asked a question,” the redhead said.

Steve shook his head slightly and put his hands on his hips. “Look, lady, we don’t know what happened here anymore than you do. We were at home, minding our own business, when *bam*—here *you* are. So, why don’t you pack up your crazy girl-circus and go back to wherever you came from?”



VAGABOND



RHONDA EUDALY



ZUMAYA OTHERWORLDS

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AUSTIN TX

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons or is purely coincidental.

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**FOR DR. CHARLES
ETHRIDGE, JR.**

*He saw something in
this story long before
anyone else did.*





CHAPTER 1

That's it?" Tommy Doyle asked as Steve pulled the moving van into a sprawling, two-story house's wide circular driveway. "I thought a house with a reputation like this one would be...I don't know...creepier or something."

"What were you expecting?" Steve threw the van into park and looked over at his friend and bandmate. "The *Psycho* mansion or something out of a *Halloween* movie?"

"Well, it sure doesn't look haunted." Tommy not only sounded disappointed, he actually pouted.

Steve shook his head. Tommy was overly dramatic, but a killer guitar player, and he did have a point. Steve wasn't sure what he'd expected, either. In all honesty, he hadn't

believed the online photos to be accurate. So far, he was pleasantly surprised.

Tommy bounded out of the van like a kid visiting an amusement park. What he lacked in height—he was only about five feet seven inches—he made up for in energy like it was concentrated in his slight frame. Steve chose to approach more cautiously, but that was sort of his role as the lead singer and front man for Vagabond. He was the “responsible” one.

As he closed the driver’s-side door, the other two band members pulled in behind them in their old tour van and trailer. In moments, all four stood in a clump staring at the huge house with columns.

White stone gleamed in the twilight. The Los Angeles skyline glittered behind and below the house as darkness fell in a blue-violet drape. Solar-powered security lights winked on within the unruly landscaping. Not a lot of gardening had been done while the house stood vacant—just enough to pass ordinance regulations and to keep the ground neat while it was on sale.

“Sure doesn’t look haunted,” Tommy said again.

Michael Fowler elbowed Tommy in the bicep—aiming for his ribs; but at just over six feet, he overshot. “And you would know...how? Come on, Tommy, how many real haunted houses have you seen? Has *anyone* really seen?”

Michael’s sarcastic tone echoed Steve’s sentiments. Bret Harris sniggered behind Tommy. Still, he brought it on himself, acting like he was twelve.

“Well...” Tommy didn’t have an answer.

“Maybe the stories are true,” Michael said. “Don’t judge. Something had the guy back at the store spooked. Maybe he knows something you don’t.”

“You really believe that, Michael?” Bret asked, incredulous. “Dude, you’re as bad as Tommy. He’s supposed to be the gullible one, not you.”

“Hey!” Tommy turned on Bret and jabbed at his chest with an index finger, pushing Bret back a bit despite the other man’s being a few inches taller and more sturdily built. “Cheap shot.”

Steve sighed. Yeah, buying a house together had been a *great* idea. This was going to be fun.

He steeled himself to step into the fight about to erupt. Sometimes being the “Designated Adult” wasn’t all it was cracked up to be. He wasn’t even sure how that had happened, but it made sense to have one contact person to run band business. Steve not only was the “front man“, he’d earned a law degree before chucking it all to be a musician. So, the role had fallen to him.

Michael bristled first, but Steve could almost see his hackles lower as he shrugged and said, “Well, maybe not the actual ghost part. But the dude who lived here before us did disappear without a trace. There’ve been strange occurrences since. Those are documented facts.”

Steve smacked the back of Michael’s head, easy enough since they were about the same height.

“Are you trying to scare us?”

Michael shrugged. “Just saying maybe we should be careful. This place may not be haunted, but something weird happened here.”

“Can we move on, please?” Bret said. “It’s not like we’re all a hundred-percent sure of this move as it is without having to deal with bickering over whether or not the place is haunted. Let’s all grow up and go inside.”

Steve sighed as he saw Tommy and Michael about to turn on Bret. It was time to step in. “Everyone just take a breath. We all need to knock it off. We don’t need to be going at it before we even get in the door.”

Tommy, who never stayed angry long, grinned. “So, what are we still hanging around out here for? It’s getting dark.”

“Steve, you have the keys, right?” Bret asked.

“Yeah, I’ve got ’em.”

Steve searched the pockets of his brown leather bomber jacket while he fought to control his face. He didn’t want the others to see a troubled expression when his questing fingers failed to come up with the keys right away. He also hid his sigh of relief when he found the ring in his pants pocket.

He held them up. “Who wants to do the honors?”

Tommy threw Michael a dirty look. “If no one believes in ghost stories, there’s nothing to worry about, right?”

“The warehouse looked okay, too,” Bret finally weighed in. “From the outside.”

The warehouse. Steve wasn’t the only one to shudder at that vivid shared memory. The warehouse was their common nightmare.

In the beginning, they’d taken over the rundown industrial building as a rehearsal space. When early gigs dried up and times were tough, they’d ended up crashing there as well. They’d fled at the first opportunity—along with the cockroaches.

Bret butted Steve in the back with an elbow. “You have the keys, just open the door. We can’t stand out here forever.”

Steve shot the drummer a venomous look but took the first step on their new adventure. He approached the door cautiously with the rest of the band clustered around him. He didn’t know if it was for moral support or to keep him from retreating. Not that it mattered—he was thankful not to be facing the unknown alone.

He fumbled the keys once more getting the right one into the lock. Fortunately, the tumblers turned easily. He pushed the heavy wooden door. It swung open easily on well-oiled hinges.

No one made the move to step across the threshold.

“Now we’re just being silly,” Bret pushed past Steve. “Let’s go.”

With Bret taking the first step, the others seemed to move in a single mass; Steve felt himself caught up along with the others. They all but tumbled into the entry in a physical-comedy parody.

Steve’s mind raced. He couldn’t have made a coherent thought if someone put a gun to his head. He didn’t know what he was expecting, but what greeted him wasn’t it. If his bandmates’ expressions were any indication, they felt the same way.

The main room was huge. The floor was tiled in three gigantic intricate mosaics in hues of blue, pink, and pur-

ple inlaid with gold and Cambrian Black granite. Each mosaic marked a period of time—Past, Present, and Future. The Past end of the room boasted a floor-to-ceiling picture window overlooking the countryside around the property. The Future end contained nothing but a small, round window facing the driveway. Present lay squarely in the center of the room.

There were two exits and a staircase. The doors included the one the band had just come in and another presumably—according to photos—leading to the kitchen, utility room, and garage. He turned to see a magnificent curving stairway leading up to the second floor. He wasn't the only one craning his neck to look up.

"This is wild!" Tommy's excited voice bounced and echoed off bare walls. "Let's see what else it's got!"

His comment broke the spell rooting the band to the foyer floor. Like shot, they scattered—Bret heading straight for the kitchen door, Tommy and Michael bolting up the stairs. Steve gave the great room one more look before hustling upstairs himself.

"How many bedrooms does this place have again?" Tommy asked as they hit the landing.

Steve did a quick count in his head from memory. "Six."

"Cool. Rooms to spare. Who'd've thought." Tommy sounded positively giddy.

"But more importantly," Michael said, "how many *bathrooms* does it have?"

Steve fought hard not to roll his eyes. "Didn't any of you read the specs?"

Neither answered him. Michael, though, had the grace to look guilty. He broke eye contact with Steve. Tommy came off as simply oblivious.

The lead singer sighed. "Each bedroom has its own full bathroom. There are half-baths downstairs under the stairs and off the utility room."

Steve could all but feel the joy radiating off his friends. Having a bathroom all his own hadn't been a reality for any of them since they'd formed the band, and for some probably longer than that. Bathroom time and space was

a big deal, considering none of them could be considered low-maintenance when it came to grooming.

“Who decided who gets which room?” Tommy asked as they stood in the hallway, nearly dumbfounded by the possibilities.

“Does it matter?” Steve asked.

A piercing screech from the kitchen downstairs interrupted further discussion. The guys all exchanged wide-eyed looks then broke and ran back down the stairs. Steve had the horrible feeling they were going to find a broken body and/or a blood pool. As one they barreled toward the kitchen door, only to be met by Bret coming back through, grinning wickedly.

“Ha! I gotcha!” Bret pointed and laughed. “You should see your faces! That’s the best!”

“I’m going to kill him!” Michael lunged toward Bret, only to be held back by Tommy. Steve stepped between them.

“Michael! No! Stop.” Steve put his hand on Michael’s chest. “We don’t need a fight on our first night here.”

“Oh, it won’t be a fight,” Michael said through gritted teeth.

Bret rolled his eyes. “Oh, come on. It was a joke. What’s the big deal? Where’s your sense of humor?”

“It wasn’t funny, Bret.” Steve jabbed at him with a finger. “This is all new and weird. We’re all on edge.”

“We wouldn’t be having this conversation if you’d just let me kill him,” Michael said.

Steve put a hand on his shoulder. “I can’t let you do it.”

“Why not?” Michael’s voice rose to a whine.

“We don’t have time to replace him before the tour.”

“Aw, man.”

Steve laughed. “Maybe next time, okay? When we’re not in a time crunch.”

The tension broke with laughter. Steve caught sight of Tommy drifting toward the picture window as the other two wandered off in other directions. He didn’t want that to happen. They had work to do.

“Come on, guys, let’s get the important stuff unloaded. A lot of it can wait until tomorrow, but we should get the equipment and our personal stuff inside.”

As the other three trooped for the front door, Tommy stood transfixed by the window. Beyond the treeline, the lights of Los Angeles twinkled in the darkness.

“Take a look at this view.”

“Yeah, yeah, Tommy, it’s great. The best.” Bret crossed the room in long strides to pull the small blond man away from the window. “Let’s go. Didn’t you hear Steve? We’ve got work to do. We’ll appreciate the view later. It’s not like it’s going anywhere.”

They joined the others, who stood outside staring at the vans.

“Where do we start?” Tommy asked.

Steve shrugged. “With the equipment. Definitely don’t want to leave that outside. Then let’s concentrate on our van. The truck doesn’t have to be back until tomorrow, and we all have important stuff in the van. We can leave most of the truck stuff until morning.”

“Where do we put everything?” Michael asked. “After all we’ve been through, please don’t say the garage.”

“Why would we use the garage?” Tommy asked with a dismissive note in his voice. “We have that huge room on the first floor.”

“Okay.” Steve rattled the keys. “Let’s do this thing.”

They moved forward as a group., then hauled out anvil cases, instrument cases, suitcases and duffle bags until it seemed like an impossibly large amount of stuff had come out of the small space.

“Man, I miss the crew,” Tommy said, stretching a kink out of his back. “We haven’t done this on our own for a long time.”

“It’s good for us,” Michael said. “Let’s get this stuff inside, it’s getting late.”

They shouldered the first load and headed inside.

“Which end do we want to set up in?” Tommy asked, stopping just inside the door, causing a bottleneck.

Bret craned to see over the load. “This end. It’s closer.”

Tommy followed Bret’s head tilt. “Future. That’s appropriate, don’t you think?”

“I think I’m going to dump this thing on your head if you don’t get out of the way.” Michael bumped a hip into Tommy. “This is heavy!”

Tommy jumped out of Bret’s and Michael’s way to land squarely in Steve’s path as he guided a rolling platform in with monitors stacked on it.

“Out of the way, Tommy!”

“I guess I’m not wanted.”

“Oh, we want you,” Steve said. “We want you out of the way. Then we want you out at the van to hand stuff out. You’re the one who fits.”

Tommy made a face but jumped out of the way. Steve dumped his load and hooked an arm around Tommy’s neck.

“Come on, bro. The sooner we get the van unloaded, the sooner we can call it a night.”

Tommy blew a raspberry as he stormed out of the house and stomped toward the van. Steve tried not to laugh as he followed, but Tommy *was* a small guy and actually fit inside the van. He was also a master packer, even though he’d never admit it. Every band had a “van guy,” and Tommy was theirs.

The bandmates took several trips back and forth from van to house. All four were hot, tired, and ready to be done. Bret shoved sweaty, sticky bangs off his forehead as he leaned against the bumper.

“How much is left?”

Tommy threw a duffel bag to him. Considering he was a drummer, Bret barely got his hands up in time to catch the bag before it smacked him in the face.

“How much more is there?” he asked again.

Tommy ducked back inside. “Only a couple of things, and I think they’re mine. You guys can go in. I got this.”

A ragged cheer went up from the others as they hurried back inside. Steve held back as Tommy grabbed a guitar case and a suitcase; then he slammed the back doors closed and checked the locks to make sure everything was secure. He waved Tommy ahead of him.

“You didn’t have to wait,” Tommy said.

Steve threw his free arm around the guitar player's shoulders in a mock headlock.

"Come on, let's go start our new adventure."

After a brief debate of who got which room, they called it a night. Darkness and quiet descended over the house.

Steve was the last one to retire. As he started to close his door, he thought he saw a pulse of light downstairs. He went to the railing overlooking the main floor. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary. Whatever he thought he'd seen was gone. He chalked it up to exhaustion as he went back to his room and closed the door behind him.



CHAPTER 2

Michael was the first one awake the next morning. He showered quickly, threw on sweats and a t-shirt, and headed for the kitchen. His fuzzy bear-claw house slippers made quiet shuffling sounds as he padded down the stairs in the almost unnatural quiet.

He stumbled into the kitchen and rummaged around in the bags on the counter. He took out a vacuum-sealed bag of ground coffee, measured out grounds, and was filling the carafe with water when he frowned.

“Did we bring in the coffeemaker last night?”

It didn’t matter to him whether or not the coffeemaker had magically appeared or not as he hit the button to brew. A magical one was just as good as an unpacked one if cof-

fee actually appeared. He wasn't going to look gift coffee in the mouth.

He stretched, listening to his muscles and joints creak and pop. His stomach rumbled in counterpoint. He contracted in on himself and blinked away the hypnotic effects of the brewing coffee.

"Doughnuts. I bought doughnuts. They have to be around here somewhere."

He rifled plastic grocery sacks with commando intensity, so focused on his goal he didn't notice Steve come into the kitchen.

"Mornin'," the singer mumbled as he grabbed a mug next to the coffeemaker and rinsed it out. He gestured toward the machine with the mug. "Is that safe to drink?"

Michael hid his surprise by fumbling with the donut box. "Better than anything you've ever made."

"That so?" Steve's voice hid a note of friendly sarcasm.

Michael plucked the mug out of Steve's hand and grabbed the pot before Steve could. "I made it. I get the first cup."

"You have a point." Steve backed up a step and grabbed another mug. He looked at it and the pot. "Where did these come from?"

Michael shrugged. "I figured one of us brought them."

Steve frowned. "I don't recognize them."

"Come on. Coffee. Morning. Does it really matter?" Michael asked. "Maybe the Realtor left it."

"Good point." Steve poured coffee and sipped. "Hey, not bad."

"Told you so."

"What's not bad? Oh, dude! Coffee!" Bret came into the kitchen, hair still damp from his shower. He grabbed a mug then froze. "Wait, which one of you made this?"

"Michael," Steve said with a grunt.

Michael nodded around a mouthful of chocolate cake doughnut.

"There *are* miracles." Bret poured a cup of coffee.

Steve open and closed his mouth. "Come on! My coffee is not that bad." He seemed to be taking the ribbing pretty hard.

“What are you talking about, Steve? *You* don’t even drink your coffee. We used the last pot you made as a wood stripper for that bookcase.” Bret studied the bags. “What’s there to eat?”

Michael gestured to the doughnut box with his mug. “It’s not much...”

“Gimme.” The red-headed drummer pounced on the box.

“Wow. Good thing you weren’t holding that, Michael. You’d have to count your fingers.”

“Let’s take this out to the steps,” Bret said, picking up the box. “I heard the shower going. Tommy should be down soon.”

“Tommy’s right here.” The guitar player poured his coffee. “What’s this about the stairs?”

“It’s the only place to sit down for now,” Michael said.

“Good point.” Tommy looked at the near-empty pot. “I’ll be out in a minute. We’re probably going to need more coffee.”

The other three tramped out to the stairs and settled down. Bret squirmed and grunted as he settled on a step.

“You okay, Bret?” Steve asked.

“I think I’m getting too old for sleeping on the floor.”

Tommy joined them a moment later. “Coffee’s brewing. Anyone else feeling...crunchy...this morning?”

The three tried not to laugh as they all denied being stiff or sore.

“That’s bull, and you know it.” Tommy snatched a doughnut out of the box.

Before anyone could respond, the doorbell rang. The whole band froze, staring at the door. Everyone who knew where they were or about the house was in the room. To make matters even more odd, the door seemed to open on its own.

“Anyone expecting someone and forget to tell the group?” Steve asked.

“Good. You’re here. And you’re all awake.” Marian Blackwell blew in wearing a conservative suit and high heels,

carrying a briefcase as if she owned the place. It was almost true.

“Ever heard of knocking, Marian?” Tommy asked, bringing his mug up.

Marian plucked the cup away from him, took a deep drink, and handed it back. She wasn’t a large woman, but she defined the “power” part of her power suit. They’d all seen her cow security guys twice her size without blinking.

“Hey, Steve didn’t make the coffee this time. You boys are learning. And why should I knock when I have a key?”

Tommy stared down into his nearly empty mug. “This is so not starting out to be my day.”

“Yeah, and about that key, Marian...” Steve said.

Marian waved him off and looked around. “It’s just good sense for someone else to have one. For security. Didn’t I tell you this place was something?”

“Why are you here, Marian?” Michael asked, shorttempered.

“I’m...Where’s the furniture?”

“Still in the truck,” Steve said. “But you didn’t answer the question. And who do you think you are? Our mother?”

“No, I’m your manager. That’s a whole different level of worse.” Marian set her briefcase on one of the steps and opened it. She pulled out a thick leatherbound Post-It flagged planner and opened it. “Okay, now, pay attention. This is important. You have studio time booked all next week starting first thing Monday morning. You have the weekend to get settled and rehearse.”

“Wait, why studio time?” Tommy asked. “The new project’s already in the can.”

“And now we’re doing some stockpiling.” Marian said. “Consider it bonus material. We’ll talk about bonus tracks on the CD or maybe download material. But that’s not all.”

“Not all?” Michael looked at their empty cups. “Let me put on another pot. I think we’re going to need it.”

He realized how true his words were when he came back a few minutes later with a mug-heavy tray.

Marian flipped through her book.

“Okay, we’re going to hit this cycle hard. Interviews. Promotion. Social media. All of it. We had a huge start with the first release. Pacific needs to know you can do it again. We can’t afford to blow it now.”

Tommy gave her his best boyish grin. “Have we ever let you down, Marian?”

She shot him a withering look. “Do you really want me to answer that?”

“That’s harsh.” Steve seemed to actually take offense. “Good to know how little faith you have in us.”

“It’s for your own good. Keeps you grounded.” Marian sounded sincere.

Michael almost believed it. “Good grief, she *has* become our mother.”

Marian snorted. “Fine. Have it your own way. But when you’re doing dinner shows in Indian casinos or appearing on celebrity reality TV shows, don’t come whining to me. I love saying *I told you so*.”

“Okay. Okay.” Steve held up his hands in surrender. “What do you want us to do?”

“Prove to everyone—and I mean everyone—that you’re going to be around in twenty years. That you’re not just some pretty boys who happen to play a little music. Right? Let’s make ’em stand up and take notice.”

“We’re up for whatever we have to do,” Steve said. “What’s first?”

Marian flipped through her calendar. “*Rock Beat* is sending a reporter and photographer over the day after tomorrow at ten a.m. The reporter wants to do a story on all of you. Probably for the cover. It’s a ‘behind the scenes’ kind of thing. I want you to get this place in shape and look nice, okay? This is just the first of the lot.”

“We’ll do our best, Marian. Really. We promise,” Tommy said. “Cross our hearts.”

“Good. Reporter day after tomorrow. Studio time on Monday. Use your time well.” Marian packed up her planner. “I’ll be checking on you, so don’t even think of ditch-

ing on anything. I'll text you all the times and the reporter's details. Put them in your reminders. Whatever you have to do." She started toward the door and paused. "Oh, Steve? Melinda said to tell you she'll be out a little later this afternoon. She has some things to take care of in town."

Michael saw Steve smile as he said, in what Michael could only describe as a love-besotted voice, "Thanks, Marian." He caught Tommy and Bret rolling their eyes behind Steve's back.

"Hey, Marian?" Bret asked, looking innocent. "When Steve marries Melinda, will we get to call you 'Mom'?"

"Only if you want to buy your dentist a new house." Marian took one last gulp of coffee and handed the mug back to Michael. She swept out of the house with a casual wave. "Ta-ta. Be in touch later."

The band sat silently in the aftermath of Marian's unexpected visit. Steve was the first to lever himself up off the stairs.

"The sooner we get started, the sooner we'll be done."

Michael stretched. "I'll go get my shoes."

As Michael shuffled up the stairs, he hoped he could waste enough time he wouldn't have to do much more of the heavy lifting. He tied his Chuck Taylors slowly, but still found plenty to do when he went out to the driveway.

"Did we grow more stuff overnight?" Tommy asked on one pass to the truck. "There didn't seem to be this much stuff when we loaded it."

"I don't know about that," Michael said. "But I definitely remember the truck being a whole lot smaller last night."

"We're going to be lucky to be done by lunch."

Michael laughed. "Wishful thinking."

The ground floor of the house resembled a box city when Michael set his load down. He paused a moment beneath the A/C vent and let the cool air dry his sweat-beaded brow. At least once everything was inside, they could sort boxes and belongings slowly, and in air-conditioning.

"I'm going to double-check the van," Steve said. "Make sure we have everything."

Before he got to the door, it opened on its own once more. Michael looked at Tommy.

"We might as well just convert that to a revolving door. It's not lookin' like we need a regular one."

"Stick a sock in it, Mike," Steve said as Melinda came in. "Hi, honey."

"Mom said this place was great, but I had no idea." Melinda turned in a slow circle to take in the house. "It'll be even better when you're unpacked."

"Yeah, I know—it's a mess."

"It's not so bad." Melinda leaned in to kiss him. Steve backed away. "What?"

"I'm all sweaty and dirty, and the guys are watching." He seemed genuinely embarrassed.

She waved off his objection. "Oh, come on, Steve. We've kissed in front of the guys before. And if I always wait until you weren't sweaty and nasty, we'll be married for years before you ever kiss me."

"This is different, Mel."

"Sure it is." She patted his cheek as she grinned. Sometimes, she came off as a younger version of her mother—same height, build, and attitude."Can I see the rest of the house? After that, I'll pitch in and help you unpack."

Tommy elbowed Michael. "Why can't *we* find girls like her?"

"Because girls like her come with mothers like Marian a good percentage of the time." Michael hefted a box. "Come on, let's keep moving. We have to tame this zoo. We still have a lot of work ahead of us."

They all dove in and worked like dogs through the afternoon, until boxes and furniture were shuttled to the appropriate places, if not in their final resting states.

"I need a break." Michael fell on the couch and checked his watch. "Wow! It's almost five. No wonder I'm beat. We've been at this for hours. Anybody know what's for dinner? I'm starving."

"You're always starving," Bret said, collapsing on the other end of the sofa. "I don't suppose we have anything here? I'm too tired to go out. It has been a long day."

"I think we ate what we had for lunch?" Michael didn't feel sure of his own statement. "I know we didn't bring a whole lot with us."

Tommy popped up from behind the entertainment center he was wiring. "I'll go for takeout. I'm done here, and I have some energy left. What do we want?"

Steve tossed the van keys to him with one hand. His other remained around Melinda's shoulders. "Surprise us. I don't think any of us care."

Tommy felt his pockets. "Anyone got cash? I only got a couple of bucks."

Steve rolled his eyes. "You've got to start carrying a card or something."

"You really want to get into that now?" Tommy sounded defensive.

Steve held up a hand in surrender. "I've got some money upstairs. I'll go get it. Come on, Mel, I don't think you've seen the upstairs yet."

"If they're going upstairs, you may never see that money, Tommy," Bret said.

"You guys are pathetic. Pathetic." But Steve was already halfway up the stairs.

"Anyone else got any cash?" Michael asked.

Before anyone could answer, a wad of flying leather smacked Tommy in the head. They all followed the projectile's path back to the mezzanine. Steve leaned on the railing. "I want that back, intact, with change and a receipt."

Tommy saluted with the wallet. "You got it, Steve, I'll be right back."

As he left, Michael grabbed the remote. "Let's see if Tommy set this up right."

"Are you kidding? He's probably got the satellite going through the refrigerator."

"Yeah." Michael studied the remote warily. "Tommy's always been the one yammering about smart systems. Maybe

he *did* wire the TV to the fridge. Some of the stuff he talks about sounds pretty cool, in a Terminator kind of way. You know, when I actually listen to him, which isn't often..."

"Yeah, but what's that old *Star Trek* movie line? The more they overthink the plumbing, the easier it is to clog up the drain?" Bret grabbed the remote from Michael. "We don't need the lights to come on when we pull into the driveway. We just need the television to turn off and on like this..." He pushed the button, and the sixty-inch LCD television glowed and sprang to life.

"Hey! That's that special on guitars I wanted to catch! Can we just watch it? I don't know if the DVR kept the recording settings," Michael said.

"Sure. I'm game. What else do we have going on until Tommy gets back?" Bret settled back on the couch.

They were drawn into the special and didn't realize how much time had passed until the storm warning interrupted programming.

"The National Weather Service has issued a Severe Thunderstorm Warning and a Flash Flood Warning for Los Angeles County, Orange County, and the surrounding areas until ten-thirty p.m. This warning covers all cities in the viewing area. The storm cells are showing winds in excess of sixty miles per hour, and golfball-sized hail has been reported in some locations.

"Travelers are advised to avoid streets where water is covering the roadway. Stay tuned to this station for further updates as they become available. We return you to our scheduled programming."

Bret headed straight for the window. "It's really starting to come down out there."

"Hey, has Tommy come back yet?" Steve asked from the landing. "We heard the weather alert."

"Not yet," Michael said. "We hadn't been paying attention."

Melinda pulled Steve aside. "Maybe I should go. Before the weather gets worse."

"That's not a good idea, Mel. It'll be safer if you stay here. There's no telling how long the storm's going to last."

“Then maybe I should try to beat it home,” Melinda said.

“And get caught in a flash flood going through the valley?” Steve hugged her. “Mel, I love you, and I’m not facing your mother if something happens to you.”

Melinda hesitated. “I don’t know...”

“You can’t see for crap out there, Mel—these roads don’t have a whole lot of lights. It’s dangerous. And I’m serious about your mom. She scares me.”

Melinda laughed. “Make you a deal. I’ll hang out here for a while. The warning’s only for a couple more hours. If the warnings expire and things blow over, I’ll go home then. I need to be in town tomorrow morning. Let me call Mom and tell her the plan so she doesn’t worry.”

“One of us should try Tommy’s cell, too.” Steve said. “See what’s going on with him.”

“Hitting send now,” Michael said. Almost immediately a blast of music rang out somewhere among the remaining boxes. “Great. He forgot his phone.”

“I know. I realized that about halfway down the hill,” Tommy said, kicking the door closed behind him. He juggled bags that were starting to show grease spots. “I could use some help here.”

Michael jumped to grab a couple of the bags. “Where have you been?”

“Where’s Mel? She didn’t leave, did she? It’s really nasty out there.” Tommy asked, ignoring Michael. “I brought enough back for her, too.”

“I’m right here,” Melinda said, coming down the stairs, clicking off her phone. “Apparently, the storm’s worse downhill.”

Steve followed her. “See? I told you it was too bad to go out. But that doesn’t explain why it took Tommy so long to bring back dinner.”

“Well, it’s not like we’re in the middle of restaurant heaven.” Tommy gestured toward the door. “And in case you haven’t noticed, there’s a monsoon out there.”

“But...” Bret said, prompting Tommy.

“Well, there was this girl...”

“Of course there was,” Bret said.

“And she wanted an autograph...”

Steve put up a hand. “Save it. We don’t need to hear any more.”

“Did you know they play our stuff out here?” Tommy went on blithely.

“That’s fantastic,” Steve said. “Can we eat now?”

“One of our songs came on when I was there, and of course we had to listen...”

A jagged bolt of lightning and loud clap of thunder interrupted the conversation for a split second. A solid sheet of rain pounded the picture window, obliterating the view. The band and Melinda stared at Tommy for a moment to see if he’d been struck for lying.

“That was a coincidence,” Tommy said. “I’m telling the truth. No one’s being smited here. Smited? Smote? Smit-ten?”

Steve turned Melinda toward the kitchen. “Come on, let’s eat.”

Tommy followed everyone into the kitchen. “Really.”

They ate quietly, watching the storm. The most severe part seemed to pass quickly enough, but the downpour remained steady. Lightning created a sporadic light show as it sailed eastward. The weather advisories stayed in effect until the next morning.

“Wow. I guess we have a good excuse to stay put,” Bret said. “If the rain’s sticking around for the next couple of days.”

“Leaving us nothing to do but unpack.” Michael wasn’t thrilled with the idea, and it reflected in his voice.

“We could always practice,” Steve said.

“Unless the power goes out,” Tommy said, looking at the ceiling.

“Then we practice acoustic.”



CHAPTER 3

Tommy paced the length of his bedroom for the sixteenth time. He knew because he was counting. His clock's bright-green digital 2:30 display burned into his retinas. He rubbed knuckles into the corners of his baby blues. Nothing helped.

"Why am I awake? Why can't I sleep?"

Nothing answered him but the sound of steadily pouring rain.

Finally, he couldn't stand it any longer. He fled downstairs with his worn acoustic guitar. It was his first, and had been with him since he was a kid. It was a no-brand, bought with summer-chore and birthday money, but he'd

learned to play on it, and it held the tuning. He was sentimental about it. It helped him think.

He pulled the big comfortable leather chair close to the window and flopped down in it to watch the rain. The wind had changed, so now the rain fell more like a curtain instead of pounding the window. He could see some of the landscaping and the view. Raw nature whipping through the trees on the mountainside was breathtaking.

He let his thoughts go as he stared out the window, curled up in the chair. His fingers wandered up and down the fretboard, letting the weather guide his playing. Minor chord progressions left a haunting turn behind. He lost himself in the melody until a flicker of light behind him, reflected in the window, stopped him. He looked up to see a girl outside the large plate window not fifteen feet away.

She seemed as surprised and confused as he was. He stumbled to his feet as lightning flashed, close and blinding, with a corresponding boom of thunder. When he could see again, the girl had vanished. He rubbed his eyes, but she didn't reappear.

"Must've been my imagination," he said to himself as he pressed close to the window to scan the lawn outside. He didn't even find a footprint. There was no evidence for what he'd seen, but he knew in his gut the girl had been real.



She thrashed in her sleep, clutched in an active dream haunted by melody. In the dream, she stood in the midst of a violent storm without being affected by the elements. Neither rain nor wind touched her as she stared through a window into a room that was both strange and familiar. She wasn't sure what she saw.

On the other side of the glass was a man curled up in a chair, playing an instrument she didn't recognize. She paused a moment to wonder why she could hear what he played but nothing else, then gave up quickly to not lose the dream.

She couldn't make out much about the man—he kept his head down while he worked the instrument. When he did glance up, details were obscured by the rain on the glass.

In that instant, he stopped and looked right at her. She tried to memorize his features, taking an unconscious step forward. He'd seen her, too, because he started to get up...

A brilliant flash of lightning and boom of thunder jerked her bolt upright in her bed, clutching the covers to her chest. She sucked in huge gulping breaths to slow her pounding heart.

“Lights.”

She tried to calm her shaky voice as the light automatically illuminated her room. She sought comfort in the familiar surroundings. As she felt her breathing and heartbeat return to normal, she thought of the man in her dream. Unlike with other, easily forgotten dreams, she clearly remembered him, and his lonely melody.



Tommy wasn't sure how long it had been since the storm passed when he heard the shuffling of someone coming down the stairs, trying to be quiet. He chose to ignore the intrusion on his solitude as long as possible.

“What are you doing up at this hour?” Michael asked, standing over the chair.

Even though he knew someone was there, the quiet voice seemed to boom in the late-night stillness. Tommy jumped.

“Geez, Michael! Don't do that! You trying to give me a heart attack? Why're *you* down here in the middle of the night?”

Michael crossed his arms over a rumpled Mickey Mouse t-shirt, which seemed at odds with plaid lounge pants and Bullwinkle-head slippers. Michael's crazy slipper collection was notorious. Fans and family tried to outdo each other providing him with new ones at every opportunity.

“I asked first.”

Tommy sighed. “Couldn't sleep.”

“So you came down here?”

Tommy shrugged. “Yeah, so? I didn’t want to risk waking anyone up. Gotta problem with that?”

“It was just a comment, man.”

“Okay, Mr. Nosy, your turn. What *are* you doing up?”

It was Michael’s turn to shrug. “Storm woke me, and I was hungry. I came down to get a snack. You want anything?”

“No, thanks. I’m about to head back upstairs.”

“Suit yourself.” Michael headed off to the kitchen.

Tommy sat staring into the storm for a moment before pushing out of the chair. He gathered up his guitar and started for the stairs. The room lit up once more, pulsed, and faded. Tommy froze, waiting for the corresponding boom of thunder, since it seemed the flash was right on top of the house. None came. Only silence.

He paused, realizing the light hadn’t come from outside. If he were to believe his eyes, the light pulse had been *inside* the house—from the floor. But that was impossible.

He squared his shoulders and took a firmer grip on his guitar. “This is all a crazy dream. I didn’t see anything. There was no girl. The floor didn’t just light up. I’m exhausted, not crazy. Everything will be fine in the morning.”

He turned off the lights as he headed toward the stairs. As he was halfway up the steps, he heard a thump of Micheal bumping into one of the piles in the living room along with a mumbled curse.

“Sorry, Michael.”



When Tommy crawled out of bed the next morning, the rain was back but not the storm. By the time he made it downstairs, he was one of the last ones up.

“Morning, Tommy,” Melinda said, grabbing a piece of toast as it popped up. “Thanks for breakfast. I really need to head out.” She kissed Steve and swept through the door.

Tommy snagged a coffee mug and poured. “How’d she make toast?”

“We found a loaf of bread in a bag we missed yesterday,” Michael said. “Or maybe you brought it back last night.”

"I guess we should finish getting the house in order," Steve said. "If there's a reporter coming, we really should ditch the boxes."

No one was surprised—much—when Marian appeared unannounced once more.

"You never did say where you got the key, did you, Marian?" Bret asked.

Tommy tried not to laugh. Bret sounded huffy. The one thing all the guys in Vagabond learned early on was not to barge in on Bret. He liked the concept of privacy.

Marian pinched Bret's cheek. "I had one made, you silly boy. I helped set up the deal. I get a key. Now, come on. Enough Happy Homemakers. I want to see a couple of numbers before my meeting with Pacific this afternoon. Let's go. Time's money."

"Okay, okay." Steve didn't hide his sigh. He looked around at the others and shrugged. "Why don't we do 'Time Warp'? That's one of the newer ones we've got down cold. It'll make her happy, then maybe she'll leave us alone."

"I love the enthusiasm." Marian didn't hide her dripping sarcasm as they all trooped out to the equipment. The band grumbled the whole way.

"Take what you can get," Steve said.

When everybody was in place, he nodded to Bret behind the drums. The drummer gave them a four-count, and they were off and running.

Sometimes I don't know if I'm
Coming or going.
I've been looking behind to see
What's ahead.

You've got me watching the past
To see the future.
It's been a loony, crazy world
That we've lived in,
And it's happening again.
It's almost like being in a Time Warp.
Time Warp.

Tommy noticed Marian was barely paying attention while they played. She sat back on the sofa, her foot seeming to keep time, but that was all the interest she showed. She made notes in her planner while they worked through the song.

Tommy had known it would be a single. He'd told her that when they'd written it. As usual, no one had listened to him until after they'd recorded it. Now, Marian was talking in terms of sales numbers and video concepts. Tommy just knew it was a fun song to play.

Suddenly, the room seemed brighter, as if the whole house agreed with him. He glanced over at Marian. She was sitting up straighter. He had no idea why she looked suddenly so concerned. Her head whipped around as if she was looking for something.

Then he had a hard time seeing her through the bright light. Where was that coming from? They didn't have any stage lighting at the house. Not yet, anyway.

The light flared so brightly Tommy threw a hand over his eyes. Then everything went black.

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