

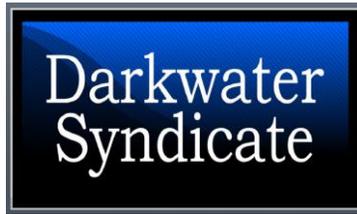
THE MAN IN THE FOREST



MICHAEL WARRINER

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IN THE FOREST**

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The Man In The Forest
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PROLOGUE

Lightning flashed above the Jilava Prison; thunder echoed through its stone hallways.

Inmate Alex Mueller sat on the floor rocking back and forth in the corner of his cell. The walls of the cell were covered with phrases written in blood – play time, smile, dug too deep. He muttered these same phrases to himself. The words held no meaning for him anymore, and truth be told, he was hardly aware he was muttering them.

The straightjacket that bound his arms to his torso was covered in filth and reeked of the mold that pervaded his dank cell. His stringy blond hair fell over his face like a stage curtain, obscuring half of his tormented visage, while his bloodshot eyes stared at a spot along the far wall, just above his cot.

It had been so long since he'd slept.

A blast of lightning lit the crimson words on the walls as the thunder almost spoke them, reverberating through his chest. Yet what captivated him weren't the phrases he kept repeating, but the reoccurring symbol that covered many of the words – an upside-down horseshoe with a smaller one within it and a single line connecting them at their center. Centered on top of the curve of the large horseshoe was a circle. The image in its entirety resembled a man with long arms. Alex kept his attention on the most prominent of these many repeated symbols.

"Play time," Alex muttered, rocking back and forth. "Play time... Johnny wants to play... Silent jester smiles – frowns – looks angry... Smile jester, smile... Too deep... In the darkness Yell would seek a way to power and coal to keep, 'til one night he lost all sleep, when he realized he had dug too deep..."

Thunder blasted throughout the prison. Alex's mindless mumbling continued, until he realized that he couldn't hear himself and that the thunder was no longer following the lightning strikes. He scrambled to stand up in a panic. There was no sound. He yelled, but nothing came out.

Terrified, Alex leapt at the wall across from him, slamming his head into it repeatedly. His cries of pain went unheard even to himself. When he tired himself out, he fell to the floor sitting upright against the wall, his head covered in blood.

One of the symbols on the wall lit up with two green lights. Alex stared as the fluorescent lights took the shape of eyes within the circle. The hundreds of symbols on the walls followed suit. One by one, green lights resembling eyes appeared in each circle and increased in brightness. A high-pitched ringing resonated from the walls, growing louder as the eyes became brighter and clearer.

Alex fell to his side trying to scream in pain, unable to cover his ears with his hands from the straitjacket. Slowly, his agonizing screams faded into his ears. He could hear himself again. With a flash of lightning and the resonating thunder behind it, he realized that the screeching was gone and that the eyes had vanished from the walls. He looked around and slowly sat himself back up. He looked towards the door and then up at the camera. The red light by the lens was blinking. After a few seconds, the light turned off.

"No," Alex muttered to himself, feeling terror overwhelm him again. "No!"

He was silenced from saying "no" again by the sound of an echoing step in the corridor outside his door. The heavy step came from a distance away. He stared immobile at the door, feeling that if he moved a single muscle he would surely die. He knew what was in the corridor.

Silence. He hushed his breathing but kept his eyes pasted on the door to his cell. Still there wasn't any noise in the corridor outside. He slowly turned toward the bed railings. He wanted to corner himself between the wall and the railings, thinking that he would somehow be safe there. He inched his way to the corner, hesitating at every noise he made no matter how slight.

The heavy steps echoed in the corridor once more. Alex's head spun to face the door again. Only having covered half the distance, Alex froze and held his gaze to the door. Another step echoed in the hall. It sounded closer.

"No..." he whispered. "It can't be... no."

The steps echoed closer. Not caring about the noise he made anymore, Alex shuffled the rest of the way to the corner. Lightning lit up the room, causing the crimson words to glow in the darkness. The thunder resonated in between the echoing footfalls in the hall. Alex knew what was coming for him, but he still couldn't believe it.

The echoes stopped outside the door to his cell. Alex stared at the black iron door, hoping that what was just outside would simply move on. Silence. Alex's face twitched. He knew that it was still watching from the corridor, just waiting for him to make a sound.

A loud bang reverberated throughout the cell, causing Alex to jump. Something massive had hit the door. His unblinking eyes continued to stare at it. Another bang pealed from the door causing Alex to jump again. A third bang and the door was forced from its hinges. The door shook, causing the stone around it to fall to the floor as powder. Alex went into a blind panic and began hammering his head against the bed railing.

"It's not real..." he mumbled, now closing his eyes. "It's not real, it's not real, it's not real, this isn't happening, go away, go away, go away, go away, leave me alone!" he shouted at the door. The door stopped shaking. Mortar crumbled to the floor around the door frame. There was silence once again.

The door shot open, blasting off its hinges. Alex jumped back against the wall and stared through the now destroyed doorway with its iron door hanging half off. The darkness from the cell combined with that of the corridor. He knew

he was about to look death in the face. His pulse raced; his eyes adjusted to the prevailing darkness.

Lightning flashed, illuminating the cell for only a second. In the doorway stood a figure over nine feet tall; a thin man with skin like tree bark covering bone without muscle. Its large, claw-like hands hung down to its ankles from its unnaturally long arms. The head held a lipless mouth. Its gangly neck was anchored to a large upper torso which quickly shrank tendril-thin as Alex glanced down to its lower body. The creature wore no clothes and was devoid of genitalia. Sparse strands of hair like Spanish moss clung to its face.

It stood outside the doorway motionless, watching Alex.

After the flash of light had faded and everything went black once more, hysteria seized Alex. He chuckled, then laughed the laugh of the truly mad, for he knew his end had come at last, and there was not a thing he could do about it. And yet, in some strange, sad way, he almost welcomed it.

CHAPTER 1

A woman's terrified scream pierced the air amid a burst of blinding white-hot light.

"That's good, Brian!" a voice yelled through the chaos. The light blinked off, revealing a stage in disarray. Construction crews worked to finish their project. The smell of sawdust filled the open area.

The indoor Orlando arena was empty of any spectators. The only people inside were construction crews and event staff. Twenty yards away from the front of the massive stage was the control center where Tyler King now sat, making final adjustments on his syncing equipment. He brushed his light curtained hair away from his eyes to maintain his focus, then stretched backward to flip a switch on the console behind him.

"Everything synced together properly," he said into his microphone. "Can you find Vincent and send him up this way?"

"Yeah," an electronic voice responded.

Tyler stood up and stepped out of the "control center." He walked up a flight of stairs to the next guest seating area above and turned to face the stage again. He outstretched his hands in front making a rectangle with his thumbs and index fingers, as though he were looking through a camera.

The stage was outfitted in a Gothic style. Foreboding yet elegant candelabras rose from the faux stone floor like stalagmites in a cave. On either side of the stage, black curtains with white tassels were pulled aside. The backdrop was translucent, but made to change with projected images based on the scene. Midway up the backdrop was a hidden walkway which could only be seen from an extreme angle.

Above the stage was a massive expressionless face, done up in black and outlined in white, which was designed to have expressions projected on it and was even capable of talking to the audience. Under the face was writing which curved like a smile and read "The Nightmare."

"Perfect," Tyler said to himself. Satisfied, he put his hands down. He looked away from the stage and saw a slim man in semiformal attire walking up the stairs of the front seating area with his hands in his pockets. "Hey, Vincent," Tyler called to the man. "Come take a look."

"I'm coming," Vincent responded.

Vincent was a quiet individual, slightly younger than Tyler. His straight, long nose and dark hair pulled up into a ponytail gave him the look of a musician from a bygone era – which, in some ways, he considered himself to be.

"We're almost there?" Vincent asked.

"Yep, take a look," Tyler smiled.

Vincent turned to look, then nodded his head. "I like this arena. It's a shame we're only doing one performance in Florida."

"That's the next thing I wanted to talk to you about."

"Oh?"

"The orchestra and production crew are ecstatic that you're allowing them to have a week's paid vacation here after the concert. A lot of them are talking about hitting some of the theme parks and beaches before going back to New York."

"Okay..."

"They're antsy and over-excited."

"Your problem is that I've made them too happy?" Vincent asked with his sharp eyebrows raised.

"Kind of. As you pointed out, we only have one performance here and we need it to be perfect."

"What do you want me to do, Tyler? Take away their vacation time?"

"No, of course not. There's no jealousy of course, that they're getting the vacation time and not Mary and me... but that's not the point."

"What is your point, Tyler?"

"Be the one who gives the pep talk this time."

"What?"

"You're the face of this concert, Vincent. Remind them that you appreciate all of their hard work and try to keep them focused on tonight."

"I may be the face but you and Mary are the brains and heart of these shows."

"Yes, but you're the violin prodigy, which makes you the most interesting to them and your fans. Speaking of Mary, where is she?"

"Right here," a soft voice answered behind them.

Mary descended the steps toward them. Her business suit and no-nonsense pencil skirt complemented her tanned skin and dark hair. While she was in her thirties, her face didn't betray her age. She hugged Vincent.

"Morning, little sis," Vincent said.

"Morning, Vince," she replied.

"What do you think, Mary?" Tyler asked. She stepped back from Vincent and looked over at the stage.

"It looks like it's almost time to rehearse again," she said.

"Yep."

"There's been a slight change for your intro," Vincent said to her. "We went with your idea and will put your double-decker keyboard on the hidden walkway by the backdrop."

"That's good," she said, "I think it'll just make more sense that way."

"Agreed."

"Has the syncing issue with the lights and scream been fixed?"

"Finished it just a few minutes ago," Tyler answered.

"What about the *Erich Zann* snippet the laser face is supposed to tell?" Vincent asked.

"Set up an hour ago," Tyler replied.

"Then I guess we're running out of excuses to hold off rehearsals," Vincent said with a smile.

"I suppose we are," Tyler responded. He turned to the stage once more. "Hey, Brian?"

"Yeah?" a distant voice responded.

"Go ahead and assemble everyone in the front seating area."

The trio walked down from the audience area and then climbed on top of the almost-show ready stage. Mary walked backstage for a moment and came back with two folding chairs. She handed one to Tyler. They sat themselves on opposite sides of the stage while Vincent walked toward the center and watched the stage crew and orchestra gather in the front. Several of his violinists had their instruments in hand and were tuning them. After most of the seats were full, Vincent stepped toward the edge of the stage, by the orchestra pit.

"Hello, everyone," he said. No one seemed to notice he had spoken. "I just wanted..."

A stagehand ran up to Vincent and handed him a mic head piece.

"Thank you, Brian," Vincent said, attaching the microphone to the side of his head. "Hello... hello?" he said trying to turn on the microphone. "Hello," his voice blared over the speakers. "There we go. Can everyone hear me?"

"The streets can hear you," a voice shouted from the crowd, followed by some laughter.

"Well, Mike, you're my audio tech and I won't see this as a reflection of your work," Vincent responded with more laughter coming from the crowd. "Today is the final day of the tour. After tonight, and for some of you tomorrow night, you'll start a well-deserved vacation."

Clapping and cheers came from the crowd. Vincent waved his hands to quiet the cheering.

"But until then, you still belong to me," he said with a grin. "I'd like to read something to you." He walked over to where Mary was sitting as she handed him a couple of rolled up newspapers. "It's the reviews," he continued as he walked back to center stage, "the reviews from our past three performances." He opened the paper and quickly scanned it to find his place.

"Truly spectacular," he started. "A show for everyone including those who can't stand music. Vincent's trio and orchestra take you on an amazing journey through beauty and the macabre." Vincent threw the paper to the floor and scanned the next one. "It is the story of a violinist, a cellist, and a pianist who find themselves immersed in the darkness of an orchestra whose talent can't be matched, with the most advanced special effects in use during concerts today. Truly a voyage in the many emotions music can evoke." He threw the paper to the floor and scanned through the last one. "Oh, this is from our first show... we

don't need to read this one," he said, crumpling it up, which drew more laughter from the crowd.

"The point is this," Vincent continued, "We've done something here that no one has done before, and we're damn good at it. This is going to be our only show in Florida this time around, and I want it to be a show this state will never forget. You all have been amazing through this entire process. It has been an honor taking this journey with you and I see it as the start of many more. So let's get ready for rehearsals and prepare for our best show to date." Everyone in the crowd clapped and cheered. As Brian appeared from backstage, Vincent handed him the microphone head piece and shook his hand. "Thank you," Vincent said before walking backstage himself.

"All right, everyone," Vincent heard Brian shout, "Let's finish clearing the stage and get into place."

* * *

Vincent sat in his cluttered dressing room. The orange lighting bathed the small space with warmth. The room was filled with his scattered clothes; his large suitcase sat empty along the back wall. On the mirrored dresser in front of him was a plain mask with blackened eyes and his Stradivarius violin. Vincent sat in the flimsy chair staring at his mask while holding his head.

The weight of his costume had caused him to overheat. The smell of sweat from his clothes underneath reminded him of a gym locker room. The thick, murky cloak he wore outside everything was made to wave through the air like ripples through water. For now, he kept the hood down for air.

He always felt nervous before a show, no matter how prepared he was or how well rehearsals went. So much so, his crew knew that they had to leave him in peace thirty minutes before each show so that he could compose himself to be as elegant as the music he wrote. He left the last-minute things to Tyler, his cellist and best friend, and Mary, his pianist sister.

A knock at the door snagged his attention.

"Five minutes to show, Mr. Morales," a voice said on the other side of the door.

"Thank you," Vincent responded. He stood up and grabbed his violin. He ran his fingers up one of the strings. Its coarse feeling at his touch reminded him of sandpaper while the low tone this produced soothed his mind. The smell of fresh rosin across its strings filled his nose with pine. There was nothing in the world to him that came close to playing this instrument. He knew every scratch, notch, and valley of his antique violin. Sometimes he felt as though the instrument knew him just as well.

Now relaxed, Vincent grabbed his mask and walked out into the crowded hallway. As he tried to shove his way through the endless sea of people, he spotted Tyler moving ahead of him. Vincent rushed to catch up.

Tyler wore the same type of costume as Vincent, mask and all. In his hand was his redwood cello. The two of them moved toward the stage, but stopped at the edge of the curtain. The stage was pitch black with the only thing visible being some movement on a platform midway above the stage. Tyler pointed upward.

"It looks like Mary's in place," he said to Vincent.

"My turn," Vincent said as he turned toward a steel ladder behind him.

"Ever get used to playing in the air?" Tyler asked.

"This was the hardest thing I ever had to learn to do with the violin," Vincent responded as he climbed up the ladder and out of sight. Tyler looked over at one of the stage crew who was pulling the curtain towards him.

"Don't strain yourself too much," Tyler said to him, "As far as opening effects go, yours is one of the most important."

"Yes, sir," he said with a smile. Tyler looked across where the back-stage area was lit and saw another person holding the opposite curtain the same way. "Showtime," Tyler said to himself as he walked through the blackness of the stage and sat in a chair, unseen and blocked by the curtain. He looked down at the dimly lit orchestra pit. The conductor, looked up at him with a questioning face. Tyler looked straight above him and saw a flashlight blink twice. He looked back at the conductor.

"Vincent's ready," Tyler said, now realizing the show was about to start. The conductor nodded and beckoned the attention of the orchestra.

The lights in the seating area dimmed. Then the string section started up with a single repeated note, gradually ramping up the speed as it reached crescendo. A pipe organ joined in as a smoke effect billowed the area above the stage. As it cleared, lasers projected an ominous white-outlined face. It stared at the audience as applause filled the arena. When the crowd settled, the face spoke in an eerie voice.

"What I did succeed in doing was to overhear the nocturnal playing of the dumb old man. As I listened at the door, I heard the shrieking viol swell into a chaotic babel of sound; a pandemonium which would have led me to doubt my own shaking sanity had there not come from behind that barred portal a piteous proof that the horror was real – the awful, inarticulate cry which only a mute can utter, and which rises only in moments of the most terrible fear or anguish."

The face disappeared and in an instant, a blinding white light flooded the stage while the scream of a terrified girl echoed throughout the arena.

The pipe organ blasted out a shrieking trill.

The light cut out and now a spotlight shone on Mary, who sat at her keyboard in a black cloak and blank mask. She was elevated on a platform half way up the stage. The stage itself, yards underneath her, was still covered by what looked like crisscrossing curtains pulled tightly.

The bottom curtains pulled back and seemed to float away as phantoms, disappearing along both sides. A spotlight shined on Tyler, also in his mask and cloak, beginning violent strokes of his bow across his cello as he took over the melody.

Tyler held the final note of his piece, and before it died into silence, a spotlight illuminated Vincent, who stood on a platform above where the face had been. He took over the melody with strong and quick bow strokes of his Stradivarius. The orchestra came in full volume following Vincent's lead. The audience cheered as they saw the faceless figure in a black cloak play above the stage. While still leading the orchestra with the melody, Vincent jumped from the platform and seemed to fly over the audience; his cloak fluttering behind him. The crowd cheered louder. After completing a full circle, he was flawlessly lowered to the stage and continued to play without interruption.

"The hardest thing you had to learn?" Vincent heard Tyler say as he walked by him.

The orchestra and the trio were now in perfect harmony. Their playing intensified as they approached the climax of the song, and then faded away into one note played only by Vincent on his violin.

As the last of the sound faded into nothing the stage lighting faded with it. A single spotlight remained focused on Vincent. Applause broke out through the arena. Mary left her platform and walked backstage. The rest of the stage lights came on. Vincent made his way to center stage and turned on his microphone headpiece while Tyler went back to his seat.

"Thank you!" Vincent acknowledged the cheering crowd. "Thank you. Welcome, everyone, to our nightmare. I'm Vincent Morales and I'm going to weave you a tale of great terror tonight. But of course, I will not be doing this alone."

He gestured to his right. "Tyler King on the cello, ladies and gentlemen."

The crowd erupted into vigorous applause.

The backdrop drew away, revealing Mary seated at a white grand piano on a dais to Vincent's left.

"And of course," Vincent went on. "My talented sister, Mary Morales on the piano."

The audience roared its delight.

"Though our tale of terror tonight is sure to leave you in torment, one cannot despair without first having been uplifted," Vincent said. "Which brings us to our next song, *Dreams*."

The stage lighting went down once more. Projected on the backdrop was a hilly expanse of tall prairie grass.

As Vincent made his way in between Mary and Tyler, Tyler began the intro to the song. With long bow strokes, he cascaded down three notes and built his way back up to where he started, and then repeated the intro. Mary then came in, playing chords in her right hand and following Tyler's cascading notes with

her left. Finally, Vincent joined in, playing a sweet, serenading melody with his violin.

All of his self-doubt melted as he hit his stride. He smiled. This concert would be flawless.

CHAPTER 2

Morning dawned vibrant and warm. Vincent stood in the backlot of the arena where several of his trucks were being loaded with his concert equipment. He looked to the back entrance of the arena and saw Tyler heading his way.

"Hey, Vincent!" he yelled waving one hand in the air.

"Coming," Vincent responded, heading up the ramp to the back entrance. As Tyler walked inside, Vincent followed.

"Now," Tyler began, "We need to decide what goes to storage for our next concert and what goes in the miscellaneous storage."

"I really haven't thought about the next concert yet," Vincent replied, dodging the oncoming work crew.

"I figured you already had an idea, though."

"No, not yet."

"Then we need to guess. What about the face effect? That went over really well."

"Yeah, but we have too many reoccurring themes in our concerts now. We would have to change it up a bit."

"So concert storage?"

"Sounds good."

"Okay," Tyler said as he took out a pocket notebook and started writing.

"Your new filing cabinet?" Vincent asked.

"Are *you* going to keep track of this stuff?"

"Nope."

"All righty then," Tyler said without looking up from his notepad. "What about the stage props?"

"I typically redesign everything per concert so only keep them for scrap and reuse as something new."

He nodded. "Ten-four."

Vincent's cell phone rang with the tone of *Liebesträum* by Franz Liszt. He raised it to his ear and answered. "Hello?"

"Hey, Vince," Mary said on the other line. "I'm waiting in the back for you."

"On my way," Vincent said as he hung up the phone.

"Mary?" Tyler asked.

"Yeah. Is there anything else?"

"I should be able to handle the rest, I suppose. I'll see you on the plane."

Vincent nodded and walked toward the backlot. After a few strides, he turned back toward Tyler.

"I need my violin," he said. Without looking away from Vincent, Tyler grabbed a violin case from a stage worker passing by and handed it to Vincent.

As Vincent took it, he looked at the front of the durable case and saw a large, white V. "You're good," he said.

"It's what I do," Tyler said, turning to walk away. "I'll have everything handled as usual." Vincent turned and walked back the way he came.

As he entered the backlot, he saw a white rental car with Mary standing next to it.

"Your chariot awaits, oh Dark One," she said with a grin. Vincent chuckled halfway down the stairs. Breaking his stride only for a moment to hug his sister, he walked over to the passenger side.

"How are you this morning?" he asked as he climbed into the car.

"Just dandy, thanks," she replied. "Tyler almost done?"

"Yeah, he'll meet us at the plane."

"Sounds good," Mary said, turning the ignition.

As they left the backlot, Vincent stared at Downtown Orlando's busy commercial district.

Music came to him in snippets as he watched the bumper to bumper traffic. Each passing car played a different note to a melody he was constructing from scratch. He focused his attention on a single rhythm hidden in the chaos and started building on its foundation.

He added the voice of a violin to follow the rhythm, accompanied by a cello. New instruments chimed in, all playing different parts. First a piano, then the French horn, flute, pipe organ and even a choir.

"Vincent?" Mary asked.

"Yeah?" he asked, not turning away from the window.

"Tomorrow, you will be interviewed by Sarah Thatcher at her studio."

"I know."

"You'll be asked mainly about this past tour and how new special effects on stage remain your signature."

"Our signature."

"You know how this works. You will also be asked about your past experience with Raiffe Weisz." Vincent turned away from the window.

"How do you know she'll ask about him?"

"They faxed me over a copy of her questions today with the disclaimer that she may change some of them before the interview."

"What does she want to know about Raiffe?"

"Where you guys met, how long you worked together, what went wrong. The usual questions."

"I'm tired of him staying in our shadow."

"Not our shadow, Vince, yours. You need to keep this in mind during the interview. Tyler and I appreciate the credit you give us, but you overlook your own contributions, the complete opposite of what you used to do when we worked with Raiffe."

"Has he made an announcement of his next scheduled concerts?"

“Not that I’m aware of. This reporter is also going to dig a bit into your introduction to music.”

“Charles, huh?”

“Yeah, you always leave that part of your life vague so reporters continue to ask about it. Do you ever think about him?”

“All the time.” Vincent turned toward the window and stared, listening to the sounds in his head. The noise he heard this time wasn’t music, however, it was the chaos of a thunderstorm. It reminded him of the tumult of his early years.

* * *

Vincent ran down an endless stretch of muddy farm road. The musty New Jersey night was thick with an impending storm. He was ten years old and had endured ten years too many of his father’s abuse.

He closed his one good eye and pressed on, his tears obscured by the fresh rain that had begun to fall.

He veered off the road and into the woods at full sprint, the branches ripping his shirt and scraping his exposed skin. His foot descended onto a sharp decline and he tumbled headfirst down a gully, coming to rest at the base of a chain-link fence. He lay on his back, dazed, wondering if he should turn back. His father’s voice boomed between his temples as thunder cracked the sky above. This was all the convincing he needed. Vincent scrambled to his feet and vaulted the fence.

Now on the other side, he took stock of his surroundings. All around were junked cars and car parts stacked in piles taller than him, forming a labyrinth of rusting metal. The rain intensified. Vincent turned up his collar and ran until he was out of breath, then planted a hand against a wall of cars. In the ensuing silence, his ears perked to the sound of footfalls.

“Who’s there?” he called out.

The answer came moments later in the form of a baritone growl. A giant furry beast pawed toward him on all fours. Its eyes flashed in the dim light. Vincent turned and ran as the monstrous hound barreled after him, barking all the way.

Floodlights came on in rapid succession, illuminating the yard as if by daylight. A fork in the path came into view and Vincent cut left, then dug his heels in to change direction when he saw the shadow of an elongated man emerge from that corridor. He bent his knees and leapt through the open window of a rusted-out car and rolled up the window not a moment too soon—the hound slammed into the glass, its snarling lips pulled back to reveal vicious fangs.

“Down, Chase!” Vincent heard the man yell. “Down, boy. Let’s see what you’ve found.”

A flashlight beam swept the car's interior. Peering through the glass was an aged, grey bearded man with a ball cap. "Are you all right, son?" he asked.

Vincent hid his face into his knees.

"Sorry about ol' Chase," the man went on. "He means well, but he don't know who's a threat an' who's not."

The man opened the car door. "He won't hurt ya, come on out."

Vincent lifted his head and looked at the man gesturing towards him. The man had a wrinkled, kind face and pleasant smile. Vincent stared at him in mute shock, wondering if this man had cast the bizarre shadow he'd seen only a few moments ago.

"Come on, little buddy. Let's get ya inside to dry off."

Vincent inched his way toward the man. When he climbed out, he saw the dog sitting by the car's hood, staring at him.

"Ol' Chase won't bother ya none while I'm here."

He was a plump individual in overalls with a red and black checkered, flannel shirt. The aura of a pipe followed him wherever he went, but the smell was more a comfort to Vincent. The man put his arm around Vincent's shoulder and led him down one of the pathways in the endless maze of junk. "Let's get ya dried off inside," he said to Vincent. "Come on in, Chase." The dog followed them through the outside corridor. "My name's Charlie. Who might you be?"

"Vincent," he whispered.

"Vincent, huh. That's a nice name." When they cleared the walls of scrap metal, Vincent looked up and saw a rusted metal arm on top of the junk pile that was bolted to the hood of a car and was holding up a worn steel platform with a larger car on top. As they passed, Vincent could swear he heard the precarious structure creak, but returned his gaze in the direction they were heading and saw a small house made from dark, aged wood. A torch-like glow came from the windows across the front side. They walked across most of the single-story abode and to the end where three steps lead to an A-frame entrance. Charlie opened the olive colored door and let Vincent and Chase inside.

They entered a square room with a pine door directly ahead. Showcased along every inch of the walls were old tin toys, model cars, and toy locomotives. Everything was so neat and cared-for compared to the scrap outside.

Vincent was startled at the sound of Chase making his way to one of the corners of the room to lie down. After Chase was settled, Charlie led Vincent through an open archway to their left.

They walked into the kitchen and dining room of the house. Vincent felt the weakened floorboards give underneath his feet. The smell of a spiced sausage lingered in the air, but Vincent was still distracted by the décor.

Along the walls of this room were weathered gas station signs. Charlie sat Vincent down at an oak table and proceeded to walk behind an old-style bar which separated the dining area from the kitchen. Charlie then took a glass from a cabinet and filled it with water from the sink before walking it back to Vincent.

"Thank you," Vincent whispered.

"Welcome," Charlie replied. "You're the Morales kid, ain't ya?"

"Yes."

"I'll be back... I'll get you a towel."

"Thanks."

Charlie smiled and then walked back in the direction they came from. Now alone in the room, Vincent looked around at the gas station signs. His eyes were drawn toward a circular sign without words on it, but instead had a picture of a green dinosaur. He enjoyed learning about them in school and was trying to figure out whether it was a brontosaurus or a brachiosaurus.

He started to whistle. It was a song he made up and was his go-to song every time he whistled. It started with a low note, followed by a higher one, climbed again and repeated the note, and then lowered for an ending. He felt it could be a song, but normally never got past the four notes before repeating them again. He looked at his scratched-up arms and his once-white shirt. He stopped whistling when Charlie walked back into the room and handed Vincent a towel.

"Don't worry about getting mud on the towel," Charlie said. "It'll wash off."

"Thank you."

"You're a very polite boy. I don't see that a lot. Anyway, your mom's on her way over."

Vincent nodded.

"Son, I want to ask ya bout that black eye of yours."

Vincent froze. "I was running from a kid I know in school."

"A bully?"

"Yeah."

Charlie's expression didn't change. "Are ya sure it was a kid from school?"

"Yeah."

"Okay," said Charlie, but he didn't sound so sure.

* * *

"Vincent? Vincent!"

Vincent blinked twice in rapid succession as he was pulled out of his reminiscing. "What?"

"We're here," Mary said. "Do you remember the hangar our plane's in?"

"C3."

They drove along a road parallel to an airstrip with rows of hangars to their left. Mary pulled up to their hangar and shifted into park.

"The rusted bar that held the car on top," Vincent murmured, swept up in memories of his youth with Charles. "Did I really know of it that early on?" He shook his head before exiting the car with his violin and followed Mary.

"We're packed and ready to go home," she said as he jogged up alongside her.

"Great," Vincent replied.

In the hangar was their private jet. It was a third the size of a normal commercial plane and had a single black stripe that went from nose to tail on both sides.

Standing beside the jet's open hatch was their pilot, Tim. A tall man with short, blond hair, he had a welcoming face that was partly obscured by his shades and the brim of his cap.

"Morning, Tim," Vincent said, shaking the pilot's hand.

"Morning, Mr. Morales," the pilot responded. "Almost ready?"

"Yep, just waiting on Tyler."

"I'll go ahead and prep the engines then." Tim walked up the stairs into the plane.

"Vincent?" Mary's voice echoed in the hangar.

"Yeah?" Vincent asked, turning toward her.

"Have you been thinking on our next concert?"

"Yes. Why?"

"I have a request?"

"What's that?"

"A vacation." Vincent paused a moment. He knew Tyler and Mary had talked to him about it in the past, but he wasn't concerned with it.

"We haven't announced any plans for our next one yet, so that can be arranged."

"I thought the three of us could take one together."

"I have no problems with this. Does Tyler know?"

"It was his idea."

"Naturally," Vincent chuckled. He looked through the open back door of the hangar and saw a golf cart being driven by a security guard. Tyler stepped out of the passenger side. "Speak of the devil."

"My ears were ringing," Tyler grinned.

"Good morning, Tyler," Mary said, hugging him.

"Morning," Tyler replied. "Are we set?"

"Yep," Vincent said. "I think it's time to go home."

CHAPTER 3

Morning saw Vincent stepping out of a New York City taxicab before the TV studio where he would have his interview.

Pushing through the building's front door netted him a flood of chaotic noise that rang in his ears. The lobby was astir with people going about their day.

"Mr. Morales!" A man's voice rang out over the crowd. Vincent turned to see a short man in a dress shirt and khakis. He had short, black hair and appeared to be very young.

"Mr. Cummings, I take it?" Vincent replied, shaking the man's hand.

"Please, call me Al."

"All right, Al."

"For starters, can I just say... I'm a really big fan."

"Well, thank you."

"If you follow me this way, we'll get you set up." Al made a path through the crowd of people and led Vincent to a hallway towards the back of the lobby. The hallway had black tiled walls with floors to match and contained six elevators. Al took Vincent into one of them. As the doors closed, Al turned toward Vincent. "You'll have about forty-five minutes to get ready before you and Mrs. Thatcher will be on the air."

"Sounds good."

"If you have any questions at any time, please don't hesitate to ask."

"Thank you for your help, Al."

"Not a problem."

The elevator doors opened to a receptionist's area which resembled a doctor's waiting room. Al took a work ID from his pocket and showed the receptionist. Without saying a word, she hit a button and the door next to her unlocked. Al led Vincent through the door and into a backstage area. They forced their way through several waves of personnel until they made it to a peach wall with a rose-colored door which seemed slightly out of place with the darkened surroundings. Al opened the door for Vincent and closed it behind him.

Vincent looked around the softly lit dressing room. He sat in front of the mirror and grabbed a comb, then let down his hair and combed through it. As he put his hair back up, he heard a knock on his door.

"Come in," he said, finishing his ponytail. A video tech wearing glasses and oversized head phones stepped in holding a clipboard in one hand and a small envelope in the other.

"Mr. Morales," he started.

"Yes?"

"This came for you earlier today," the man said as he handed Vincent the envelope.

"Thank you," Vincent said with a smile as he took the letter. The man turned and exited the room, closing the door behind him.

Without looking at the envelope in his hand, Vincent's expression turned to anger. He set the envelope on the vanity in front of him and stared at the front. His first name was spelled out in calligraphy with red ink.

"How does he keep finding me?" Vincent asked himself. He tore open the envelope and pulled out a folded piece of paper. As he unfolded it, he realized that the paper was for writing sheet music on. Across the staves was a series of notes. Underneath the notes were words in red ink that read:

*Enjoy your moment in the spotlight, my old friend. You'll hear from me soon.
I'll be watching.
– The Albino*

Vincent read the music notes above the letters and realized it was the song that ended their working together. He crumpled the piece of paper and threw it in the garbage behind him. He should have expected this. "The Albino" was as masterful at music as he was at holding grudges, and had made it a point to send him similar messages periodically. As for the song, it was no secret to him or the rest of his trio who its author was: their previous conductor, Raiffe Weisz – "The Albino" himself.

* * *

Vincent sat across from a woman in a jade formal gown. She was middle aged with blonde, bobbed hair. As Vincent settled in his canvas foldout chair, he was fitted with a microphone on his suit jacket by a crew member on set. Once the production tech walked away, the woman reached out her hand to shake Vincent's.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Morales," Sarah Thatcher greeted him.

"Likewise, Mrs. Thatcher."

"Now, this will be a live interview," she said.

"Of course."

"When you see the gentleman behind me," she said motioning to the cameraman, "raise his hand in the air, that'll be the two-minute warning. Afterwards he'll count down from ten on his hands when we have ten seconds left."

"Sounds good. Slightly lower tech, but I like it."

"Fantastic." A stage hand walked by Sarah.

"One minute, guys," he said.

"Thank you," Sarah replied.

Vincent looked around at the artificially lit, cramped space. The heat from the lamps left a burning smell in his nose. The surrounding walls were black, but lined with several production workers. Behind him, off to the side, was a decorative false window to give a homey feel to the otherwise blank space. The murmuring around him quieted.

Vincent struggled to compose himself. He ran through his mind some of the questions and subjects he knew he was going to be asked. He had done live interviews in the past, but hated them. It stressed him out not knowing what to expect and as a result, he relied on Tyler and Mary to coach him before every interview.

“And we’re going live in three, two, one...”

“Good morning everyone,” Sarah started, “Today we have a guest who has just finished a concert tour through the states and has become world-renown for not only his visual effects on a live stage, but also for his flawless abilities on a violin. With us today is Vincent Morales.” Sarah leaned forward and shook Vincent’s hand. “Thank you for being with us, Vincent.”

“Thank you for having me,” Vincent replied, acting as though they hadn’t already done this.

“Your performances have been described as combining a magic show with acrobatics and a musical concert. Every venue you play in seems to get sold out and critics view your performances as only getting better and better. Can you please tell us how this all started? Who inspired you to do what you do?”

“Well,” Vincent began, “The person who introduced me to music was a man named Charles Norman.”

“Was he a music teacher?”

“He became an unofficial one, I suppose. He was a family friend who helped us through some hard times.”

“How did he introduce you to music?”

“I helped him with his junk business from time to time and stumbled across a rather valuable item of his.”

“Would that be the famous Stradivarius violin you use at all your performances?”

“Yes it would. I asked him if he knew how to play it and he picked it up and played Bach’s *Air Suite* for me. I remember the sound it produced being so beautiful that I wanted to learn how to do it myself.”

“About how old were you at this time?”

“I think I was about ten years old.”

“So you were introduced to music theory a little later than most children who play professionally today?”

“I suppose, yes... but I learned very quickly.”

“Tell us about that. You have been called a prodigy from both your ease of learning an instrument and your control over your technique when you play.”

"That was something that Charles helped me to uncover. He taught me patterns at first, and then notes. Now my mind can naturally break apart patterns into their individual notes and vice versa."

"So you're able to deconstruct music you hear?"

"Yes. I can replicate a song after hearing it only once."

"Wow! How many instruments can you play?"

"I can play the violin, viola, cello, piano, French horn, and a little guitar."

"When was your first live performance?"

"When I was about fifteen."

"And what song did you play?"

"I played with a trio, and the song was *Adagio for Strings* by Samuel Barber. After I finished that performance, I knew what I wanted to do with the rest of my life."

"What performance would you say catapulted your career?"

"I don't think it was any individual performance. I'd say it was when I was hired to create the soundtrack for *Beauty Everlasting*."

"For those who may not know, *Beauty Everlasting* was a movie directed by Harmony Gale."

"Yes, she was amazing to work with."

"How did you come up with some of the melodies for that movie?"

"I thought it was most important to tell the story of the main character, Countess Elizabeth Bathory. She was a Hungarian noble who is said to be the origin of many vampire stories. She had a warped view of beauty and thought for whatever reason that virgin's blood kept her looking young and beautiful. Her character development from a domestic abuse victim into a tyrant ruler and eventual serial killer I thought was pivotal in the story the music needed to tell."

"When did you start performing what is now known as the Morales-styled stage show?"

"About three years after the release of *Beauty Everlasting*. I performed with my sister, Mary, my best friend, Tyler King..." Vincent took in a breath for patience, "and occasionally the conductor and composer, Raiffe Weisz. We wanted to experiment in combining unique special effects and simple stage illusions with music."

"You mean the man who would call himself the 'Phantom Composer' under the alias 'The Albino' Raiffe Weisz?"

"Yes."

"How did you meet Raiffe?"

"We met during auditions for the orchestra I was putting together. He was initially going for the role of a pianist, but I recognized he was capable of more when I asked him who wrote the song he was playing for us."

"Who wrote it?" she asked.

"He did. It was brilliant. Not only was his technique on the piano amazing, but he had a keen ear for writing a song."

"How long did you perform with Raiffe?"

"For close to ten years."

"What happened after those ten years?"

"He was getting into the habit of writing musical stories that I thought were too dark. When I refused to perform some of his songs, he started saying things to the press like the success of our trio was due to him and we were holding him back."

"That didn't sit well with everyone I'm sure."

"Not in the slightest. We parted ways and he ended up becoming the success he is today on his own."

"Did it surprise you?"

"Part of it did..." He hesitated. "In fact, only one part."

"What do you mean?"

"His talent goes without question, but what catapulted him to success was the song I continually refused to perform."

"What song was that?"

"*The Man in the Forest.*"

"And you thought the story was too dark?"

"It was the story of a monster who was a child snatcher."

"Do you regret not performing it with him now that he seems to be your biggest competition?"

Vincent took a moment to steady himself. He glanced up and saw the cameraman raise his hand. Two minutes were left.

"No, I don't regret it. It is true that most of my music can be classified as darker sounding, but I believe in the story a song tells above all else. If I don't believe in the story, then I won't tell it to others. I also don't really consider myself to be in competition with Raiffe. We tend to schedule our concerts on separate dates and locations."

"I know that you've just finished a concert, but have you heard about Raiffe's new line up?"

"What?"

"He's just announced this morning that he's doing a series of concerts in Romania, calling it the 'Dracula Tour'."

"I hadn't heard."

"His media relations contact sent us the announcement just a couple of hours ago."

The cameraman began counting down on his hands from ten. Vincent sat silent for a moment.

"I look forward to hearing his new compositions," Vincent said in a rehearsed manner.

"That's all the time we have today," Sarah started, "Thank you once again for being with us, Vincent."

"Thank you for having me."

"Any idea when the next concert will be?"

"Not as of yet."

"Have a wonderful day, Mr. Morales. And now back to you, Mark."

"And we're cut," a voice said from behind one of the cameras. Sarah and Vincent stood up at the same time.

"It was a pleasure meeting you," she said. "We'll have to set up another interview real soon."

"Sounds like fun," Vincent said scanning the room. Sarah walked away as Vincent continued to look at the faces of every production worker moving in the room until he located the one who handed him the envelope. Vincent rushed him without giving a chance to react. "Excuse me," Vincent said, frazzled.

"Yes, sir."

"The man who gave you the envelope, did he also give you the announcement about Raiffe's concerts?"

"Yes. The station knew the man to be reliable."

"Oh, I bet."

* * *

Vincent stood in the center of the crowded network lobby, scanning everyone who walked by. He knew exactly who he was looking for. He spotted a man wearing dark business slacks with a white striped vest and a red tie tucked neatly underneath. He wore large sunglasses and a black fedora which covered most of his white hair. The man was grinning and staring at Vincent. Ignoring everything else in the room, Vincent made his way over to the couch the man was sitting on and sat on the opposite end, leaving a large space between them.

"You just couldn't resist," Vincent scolded without looking at the man.

"You knew it was only a matter of time," Raiffe said, still grinning, "before I became successful enough on my own to pull a stunt like that."

"Your narcissism sickens me, Raiffe."

"Now, now, play nice, Vince. Otherwise I might not let you come to this one."

"What makes you think I would want to?"

"You've come to all of my concerts, Vince. Think I haven't noticed?"

"Just as you're always following mine."

"As much as neither of us wants to admit it, our time together isn't over. There will still be several more battles before the end."

"You always had a flair for the dramatic."

"You're not going to want to miss this one, old friend. See you in Romania, I'm sure." Raiffe stood up and walked toward the building exit. Vincent's eyes followed Raiffe until he left. Afterwards, he stared blankly into the endless crowd of people in the lobby, frustrated at the monster he had created.

END OF SAMPLE

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Born and raised in Central Florida, Michael Warriner pursued an early interest in learning music and creating characters in hand-drawn comic books. He began his career working simultaneously in the mental health industry and as a character performer at his local theme park.

It was while pursuing his degree in Psychology that he began writing stories “just to kill time.” Before long, he had written two manuscripts. This developing interest in telling stories was further driven by his fascination with amateur filmmaking.

By day, Michael now applies his education and training to assist clients diagnosed with mental illness. By night, he writes novels, and in his free time he composes music. He draws upon these varied interests to create unique characters and thrust them into memorable stories.

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