

***Ladies and Gentlemen...The Redeemers***

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## Chapter 1 – Abe and Bert

“Miss! Miss! Hi! You look like a patron of the arts. Could I trouble you for a small contribution for my friend Abe over there?” Bert matched a young woman stride for stride as she strode briskly across the subway concourse. He pointed toward Abe, who was standing along the white tiled wall, next to the Fresh Cut Flowers stand, singing Marvin Gaye’s “What’s Going On.” The woman forged ahead.

“Fully tax deductible!” Bert continued cheerfully, and with that, the woman turned to look at Bert with a skeptical glance. “Okay, okay. It’s not really tax deductible,” Bert said with a laugh.

The woman returned a brief smile, seemingly somewhat amused by Bert’s approach. She unzipped her handbag and pulled out a crumpled dollar bill. She gave Bert the bill along with a distinct look of finality.

“Thank you, miss. God bless,” said Bert with a tip of his hat, ending a routine that had been rehearsed over many years of strolling through the subway corridors beneath San Francisco. He carefully unfolded the bill and wrapped it around the other six dollar bills he had collected.

The 7:30 A.M. rush hour crowd swarmed through the Montgomery Street station of San Francisco’s BART, or Bay Area Rapid Transit, system. Bert headed back toward the spot where Abe stood, as he had for the last three years, every Monday through Friday except holidays, in the main corridor that led from the subway turnstiles to the stairs that led to street level.

A hulking, legally blind African-American, Abe Jackson towered over most of the subway crowd. He stood at 6’3” and weighed close to 250 pounds. His habitual costume

-- black shoes, black dress pants, a blue crew neck, long-sleeved shirt, and black wraparound sunglasses – perfectly complemented the classic 1960s Motown tunes he sang. In his left hand he held a plastic, gallon-sized milk jug, filled about a quarter of the way with coins and bills.

Bert Ingram had stepped into Abe’s life about a month earlier, pitching Abe on the idea of working the crowd in order to increase the donations. Abe had not been particularly interested, being satisfied with his routine and his low-pressure approach. Plus, he showed an obvious distrust of the stranger. So Bert simply appeared every few days at first to give the crowd his sales pitch.

More recently, Bert had started showing up every day. Today, he wore chocolate-brown polyester pants, a cream-colored shirt, brown paisley tie, and a brown and tan checked sport jacket. His ubiquitous gray fedora rested on his head, pushed slightly back so the brim tilted upward. Bert always wore his signature hat whether it matched his outfit or like today, did not.

As Bert crossed in front of him, Abe spoke in a booming voice that resonated through the subway concourse corridors. “I told you, Bert, I don’t need your help. You ain’t my manager, I don’t need an agent, and you’re just stealin’ my money.”

“Are you crazy, Abe? I’m a money machine!” Bert countered. “I’ve collected seven dollars in just the few minutes I’ve been here this morning. We’re a great team. You just keep singing, and I’ll handle the sales and marketing side of things. You should feel lucky to have a manager like me. Bands used to clamor to have me as their manager.”

“Do we have to play this out every morning, man? I told you this is my territory and I’m quite fine, just singing and taking in what I take in.”

“Don’t be foolish,” replied Bert, ignoring Abe’s frown. “Don’t you get how much we’re pulling in together? How much did you bring home every day before I showed up?”

Abe’s frown deepened. “I don’t know. Thirty dollars, maybe forty on a good day.”

“See, and just yesterday you took home sixty-two dollars, and that was after giving me my share.”

“Yeah, well, I couldn’t help but notice that it’s not me ‘giving’ you your share, but you collecting the proceeds, taking your piece of the action off the top, and giving me what’s left.”

“Fine. Split hairs if you like, but I’ve raised your income over fifty percent, so what’s the difference?”

“We’ll settle this after the crowd goes. We’re losing precious time here,” Abe muttered, and with that, he broke into Sam Cooke’s “Cupid,” hitting each note, the high and the low, with expert precision.

By 9:30 the crowd heading into San Francisco had dwindled, and Abe wrapped up his last song. Bert was seated on a bench a few feet away, tallying the bills and coins he had collected on Abe’s behalf. He got up and walked over to Abe. “Here you are, buddy, seventeen dollars and thirty-eight cents. Add that to what you’ve collected on your own in that jug which looks to be around, oh, I’d say, ten to twelve dollars and you’ve had a pretty good morning. And we’ve still got the afternoon shift.”

Of late, Bert had also started to show up for the outbound commuter rush in the late afternoons.

“I do have to admit, Bert, you’ve got a certain talent,” Abe responded with a grudging grin. “But you’re still a leech.”

“Glad you recognize my skills. I’m just a born talent scout,” replied Bert. “By the way, I’ve been meaning to run a proposition by you. Can I buy you a cup of coffee and we’ll talk?”

Abe shrugged. “It’s your money, man.”

The two walked toward the north stairs, Abe using his red-tipped white cane for guidance. Bert took Abe’s arm as they reached the stairs that led up to the street level.

Abe jerked his arm away. “I’ve been coming up and down these stairs for years without you. I don’t need your help.”

“My apologies, my friend,” responded Bert quickly, trying to recover from the unexpected scolding.

“Yeah, well, I don’t like being touched, and I’m not one for help or attention. I just do my own thing, my own way. That’s all.”

Bert followed Abe silently up the stairs and into the sunlight. The early morning haze that enshrouded San Francisco had lifted, and it had become a typical clear, comfortable, seventy-five-degree late summer day. The two men followed Market Street in the direction of the bay, stopping at a Donut World. Bert bought them each a large cup of coffee, which he paid for by dumping a pile of coins on the counter, sorting out the correct change, then gathering the remaining change off the counter.

The two men continued on until they reached the plaza at Battery Street, where they headed for the unoccupied benches near the Mechanics Monument, the large bronze sculpture that served as the plaza's centerpiece. Bert chose one where an overhanging tree threw some shade. People walked quickly through the red and gray brick plaza, and a couple of teenagers were kicking up their skateboards and trying to catch them, but otherwise the plaza was empty. The two men sat down, Abe placing the milk jug between himself and Bert, keeping a hold on the handle. He leaned the cane against the bench.

"Glorious day, eh, Abe?" started Bert.

"You gonna proposition me or what," countered Abe.

"Okay, okay. All business. I get it." Bert paused for dramatic effect. "Here's the idea. I'm putting together a band. I'm the manager, and I'd like you to be the lead singer."

"Are you bullshitting me?" Abe snorted.

"Of course not. I told you I used to manage bands."

"You haven't really managed bands. What would you be doing hanging out in the subway?"

That cue was all Bert needed to launch into the story. "Things change, my friend," he started with a sigh. "Many years ago, in my previous life, I was in the recording industry, working as an A&R rep for Sapphire Records. I used to tour the country, going to bars and clubs, scouting for new bands. My job was to spot who had the talent, the energy, the drive -- that intangible quality that meant the difference

between a bunch of guys having fun playing in a bar and getting their drinks for free, and being the next big thing.”

Bert took a long, slow sip of his coffee, then continued. “The guys at Sapphire loved me. On some of the high-potential bands, they put me in as the manager.”

“Uh huh,” said Abe. “Let me guess. You’re Berry Gordy’s long lost son?”

“Of course not,” answered Bert. “But I had some successes. You’ve heard of the Crooning Wombats, right?”

“No.”

“Well, anyway. They were going to be the next big thing. They had kind of a funky blues sound. I discovered them at One-Eyed Jack’s in Olympia. That was long ago, of course.”

Bert paused to assess Abe’s reaction, but Abe just waited. “The band put out a few albums,” Bert went on, “and we had a few good years. But the band broke up before putting together any kind of breakthrough album. Too many egos. The band couldn’t agree on anything.”

“Keep talking,” said Abe, starting to display faint traces of a smile.

“Silent Scream did all right too,” continued Bert. “And of course there were lots of other bands. Those were the days. I had a place on Nob Hill and life was one big party.”

Abe stirred. “Okay. I’ll bite. Then what happened.”

“Then I lost the house in a messy divorce. And things change fast in the music biz. One day you’re a star, the next you’re odd man out.” Bert quickly added, “But

that's okay. I still have a few bucks left. I work when I want to, doing this and that." He looked toward Abe. "I don't let them get me down."

"And what makes you think Bert's going to get back to the top?" asked Abe. "Begging for dollars in the subway with some blind guy ain't exactly the first rung on the ladder of success."

"It's been awhile but I've still got contacts. Listen to me, Abe. I can pull this off." Bert's voice grew in both excitement and volume. "Get this concept! I'm building the band from talented performers such as yourself, who got dealt a bad hand in life. It'll be a bunch of --" He paused to think of the right words. "Gritty, street-hardened folks with the hunger and the passion to rise up and get one more chance at the world!"

Then Bert took on a quiet, passionate tone. "Abe, you've got the fire inside you, and you've got the sweetest voice I've ever heard. The band needs you." He took a deep breath. "What do you say?"

Abe's face broke into a wide smile and he started laughing heartily, his big body convulsing with each guffaw. "What do I say? What do I say?" He gave another chuckle. "I say you're full of shit, brother. Great story, though." He slapped Bert's arm gently with the back of his hand. "But I'll tell you what. I'll call your bluff. If you can pull together the musicians, I'm in. But here's the rest of the deal. Until then, you need to stay away from my turf."

"Fair enough," answered Bert cheerfully, and the two men sat on the bench in the plaza silently for several minutes. Then Bert spoke. "Hey, Abe. What's your deal? How'd you end up singing in the subways for a living?"



“Look. Don’t get all chummy with me, all right?” Abe answered irritably. “You laid out a deal and I agreed to it. That’s all you need to know. I don’t need you getting inside my head.”

Bert looked at Abe, wondering whether to respond and decided to let it go. In any case, he had his singer. He stood and tossed his empty cup into a trash can. “All right. I’ll keep in touch.”

“You know where to find me,” said Abe.

Bert sensed that Abe figured that come later this afternoon, they’d be right back where they had been – Abe singing in the Montgomery Street Station, and Bert hustling for his money. He’d figure out soon enough that Bert was serious.

As Bert walked along the plaza and turned to head up Battery Street, he heard Abe bellow. “Hey, Bert! Your band need a sax player?” Bert froze in his steps and turned back to face Abe, who was still on the bench. “Sure,” he yelled back, unsure whether Abe was just setting him up.

“Go find Charlie at the Sixteenth Street Mission Station.”

“How will I recognize him?”

“You know how to play three card monte?”

“Yeah.”

“Good luck then.” Abe laughed, drank down the last bit of his coffee, crumbled the cup in his hand, and reclined on the bench, arms outstretched to take in all the sun that now shone on the bench.

Bert shrugged and walked on, leaving Abe in the plaza. He made his way along Battery Street and then the Embarcadero, following its curving path in the direction of the

wharf. It was now late morning and the business crowds were beginning to emerge from the buildings in twos and threes, stepping out onto the sidewalks to get some fresh air and a bite to eat.

Bert stopped frequently along the way to people-watch, conscious of the contrast between his own rumpled clothing and the clothes of the working crowd. As dapper as he tried to look, he knew he looked more like a used car salesman who kept his clothes in his briefcase. He longed for the day when he could again walk through the fashionable men's clothing stores in Union Square, buy what he wanted, and look presentable, maybe even sharp.

Bert continued to the wharf and stopped at Ted's Crab Trap.

"Hi, Bert. Good to see you," came the greeting from Ted, dressed in his usual red polo shirt with the restaurant logo, white painter's pants, and white apron. Ted flashed a broad smile under his gray, handlebar mustache. His face, marked by its olive complexion and weathered from the years outdoors, lit up when he spoke.

Quite a contrast from Abe's surliness, Bert thought.

"How's tricks?" Ted continued.

"Picking up," answered Bert brightly. And this time it was true. He was starting to feel a warm internal glow for the first time in years. He realized how much he'd missed having some direction in his life. It was no matter that his plan was still in its infancy. He had places to go, people to see.

"Bowl of chowder?" asked Ted.

Bert had been stopping by Ted's stand once or twice a week for upwards of two years now, and very rarely had he ordered anything other than a bowl of clam chowder to go, served in the traditional Styrofoam bowl with plastic lid.

Bert nodded. "How's business your way, Ted? Have all the tourists discovered who makes the best clam chowder in the city yet?"

Ted lifted the ladle out of the large black kettle and poured the steaming contents delicately into the bowl. "Always a flatterer! It sure seems that way. We're busy as anything, especially on glorious days like today. Here you go."

Bert paid and moved on, heading down to the benches on the wooden pier a few blocks back. He gazed out on the bay, watching the ripples of white-capped water move in, splash softly against the wharf walls, and move back out. A refreshing breeze blew in off the bay. As he hungrily ate spoonful after spoonful of the steaming soup, he thought about his dream to get back on top.

He didn't have any real leads on where the band mates would be found, and was more than happy to have a referral to a sax man, assuming Abe wasn't just having some fun with him. Truth be told, Bert's contacts in the recording industry had disappeared long ago. He had been an up-and-comer at Sapphire Records some fifteen years before. He'd had a gift for identifying talent, almost a sixth sense. And he was a pro at networking. He could develop a human chain of resources to call upon to make almost anything happen, and happen quickly. Those skills, along with his track record in discovering new bands, had propelled him quickly up the ranks at Sapphire.

Bert became the A&R manager responsible for signing new acts throughout the Northwest region of the country, and he'd enjoyed the travel, the glamour, and all the

wining and dining that came with the territory. Unfortunately, this last part was a bit too enjoyable, and Bert quickly became known throughout the industry as a guy who played every bit as hard as he worked. His career had escalated too quickly and he'd struggled to make the transition from field scout to deal maker. Deals started to fall through and Bert's reputation started to take hits. The spiral downward accelerated when his wife, Michelle, tired of his continuous travel and excessive late-night partying, walked out.

As the fall from grace continued, Bert missed engagements and delivered victories less and less frequently. He became unpredictable in his interpersonal dealings. The executives at Sapphire began to exclude Bert from key meetings for fear of what he might say or how he might behave. Eventually, with a six-month severance package, Bert was let go.

*Screw 'em, Bert thought. Their loss. It's time to rise up from the ashes.*

He spent the rest of the day wandering around the wharf, his mind filled with the many tasks in front of him. He needed to find musicians and pitch them on the concept. Would they trust him? Could he rely on them? How was he going to find them all? Then there were the record companies. Could any of his contacts from so long ago still be out there? Would they be happy to hear from him, or would he continue to be shunned?

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Abe hung around the plaza for awhile, thinking about what it might mean if Bert was really serious and telling the truth. Abe dispatched the thoughts.

He had a particularly low tolerance for anything even remotely resembling assistance. Abe had been blind since his childhood, and shuttered himself over the

difficult years which followed, becoming a loner, not able or willing to trust in anyone other than himself.

By noon, hunger set in, so Abe made the short walk back to his low income apartment in the Mission District to get some lunch.

Abe made his way up the concrete steps and into the old brick building through the heavy stairwell door, then up the stairs that served as both the building's main stairs and the fire route. On the third floor, he opened the gray, metal door and made his way to his studio apartment.

An efficiency kitchen occupied the left end of the apartment, and a small, brown faux-wood table with two folding chairs served as the dining table. Abe rarely had visitors, but he always kept both chairs at the table anyway.

Abe's bed occupied the far right end of the apartment, with all the sheets and blankets left strewn. An old wooden desk sat next to the bed, which held a portable compact disc player/stereo system with built-in speakers. The desk was cluttered with CD's, ranging from the Motown sounds he drew on for his subway singing, to blues and jazz.

Abe made himself a ham sandwich, which he ate and washed down with a store brand can of cola. He then transferred the contents of his milk jug to the shoebox in the closet in which he kept his spending money. He also received a monthly check from the state and maintained an account at a bank down the street.

Abe put on a John Lee Hooker CD, propped up a couple of pillows on the bed, and stretched out. He spent the remainder of the early afternoon lying there, listening to music as he did on many days, drifting between sleep and consciousness.

Back at the Montgomery Street Station at 4:30 P.M., Abe fully expected to hear Bert's cheery voice hustling the commuters on their return home. When 4:30 turned into 5:00, and then 5:30, Abe realized that Bert wasn't going to appear.

After years of living hand to mouth, collecting contributions from charitable strangers for a living, Abe was able to estimate the amount of money he received simply from the number and frequency of the interactions with the strangers and the feel of the milk jug. So when 6:30 rolled around, Abe had to admit that his collection for the afternoon was significantly less than it had been when Bert was there. He felt himself in conflict, part of him glad to be rid of Bert for awhile, but another part missing the success Bert brought about. He wondered if he'd see him in the morning.

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That same evening, Bert made his way back to an area south of Market Street, one of San Francisco's poorest sections, composed mostly of row homes in disrepair, industrial warehouses, gutted buildings, and highway overpasses. In a dim alley, he rummaged through an alcove that was piled waist-high with plastic trash bags filled with what looked like the contents of a thrift store. From one of the bags, Bert pulled out a white, yellow, and blue flowered quilt that was grayed with dirt and tattered in several spots, the stuffing showing through.

He walked back to the corner, sat on a steam vent in the sidewalk, pulled a 375ml bottle of Old Granddad from his pants pocket, and took a big swig. Then he wiped his mouth with a broad swipe of his sleeve. He replaced the bottle in his pocket, laid down on the vent, tipped his hat over his eyes, pulled the quilt over himself, and went to sleep.

## Chapter 2 – Charlie

Bert awoke with the sun, as he had since he'd begun living on the streets, the public, outdoor nature of his sleeping location not being particularly conducive to a sound and lengthy rest. He turned over onto his back, rubbed his eyes, and looked up at the sky. The morning offered unusually little fog over the city.

Bert closed his eyes for a moment and thought back to the lazy Sunday mornings he used to spend in the natural wood and brushed chrome, highly stylized bedroom at his house. Propped up on a pillow, he would catch up on world news on CNN while reading the Sunday newspaper and the trade magazines that had accumulated over the past week. Those days seemed like a lifetime ago.

He got up, gathered his blanket into a ball, and returned it to the plastic trash bag in the alley's alcove. He then selected an outfit for the day, trading in his brown ensemble for a pair of light blue polyester pants, a navy dress shirt, gray tie, and gray herringbone sport jacket. It wasn't quite GQ, but at least today the hat matched.

The dole line would be starting to form on 9<sup>th</sup> Street by now. Bert made the six block walk, arriving fifteen minutes before the "soup kitchen" opened where volunteers served meals to the people in need, three times a day, seven days a week. Bert came here frequently; but not surprisingly, the food provided more sustenance than flavor. When his palate needed a break, he used some of his panhandling proceeds to treat himself to meals elsewhere, like at Ted's. He was careful to remain frugal, though, for one day he would need to dip into the reserves to work his way back into society.

These thoughts brought to mind an unsettled matter. Bert had used the crutch of alcohol to cope with both his decline in stature and the discomfort of street living. He made a mental note that he would need to address this issue.

By 7:30, Bert had finished a bland bowl of oatmeal and was on his way to the 16<sup>th</sup> St. Mission Station to see if Abe was serious about a saxophone player being there.

One of the many obstacles in Bert's plan was his inability to recruit musicians in the traditional ways. Placing ads in newspapers and magazines was just too expensive, and using the internet was impractical. Besides, he had no place to conduct tryouts. He was forming a garage band without a garage.

He knew it didn't really matter though. The musicians he was looking for wouldn't be reading the ads anyway. Rather, he would have to scour the streets to find the prospects on his own. The musicians needed to have the soul of the streets within them and the burning passion that comes from a life waiting to be fulfilled.

At a minimum he would need a drummer, keyboardist, guitar player, and bassist to accompany his irritable but talented lead singer. A saxophone player would round out the sound nicely, thought Bert, and legitimize the sound he was after. He envisioned the band as grounded in roots rock, but he wanted the crossover appeal that would come from melding in elements of jazz, R&B, and urban funk.

At street level, the 16<sup>th</sup> St. Mission Station was surprisingly attractive with a circular railing adorned with brightly colored panels surrounding the entryway in the middle of a gray, stone plaza. Inside, the area near the turnstiles and ticket booth was busy as the rush hour crowd moved through. Bert looked around the entryway, its shiny, red-tiled floors, multicolored tiled walls, and arched ceiling providing sharp contrast to



the dinginess above. Sizing up those who appeared to be lingering as opposed to moving with a sense of purpose, he tried to determine if any of them might be this Charlie. When he concluded otherwise, he slipped through a turnstile amidst the crowd and headed down to the subway line.

Bert observed a few people sitting on benches watching the crowds, others milling about near the stairs, and even one person digging through a trash bin, but nowhere did he see a card game taking place, or better still, a guy playing the saxophone.

Bert continued to stroll along the platform for the better part of the morning, but met with no success. When he returned to the station later that afternoon, his search met the same end.

The next day found Bert going through the same routine, pacing up and down each side of the train platform and throughout the station's main concourse. Again, at the day's end, he had yet to find anyone he thought might be the saxophonist. He had consciously avoided going back to Abe for any clarification on the subject, trying to minimize his contact with the unpredictable man until he had made more progress on the band. He didn't want to do anything that might cost him his singer. But, when Bert lay down to sleep that night, he resolved to get some help from Abe if the next day's quest proved fruitless.

The following day, Bert was back at the station by 7:30 A.M. This time he froze as he rounded the corner onto the northbound platform. There, sitting on a folding chair behind a small aluminum folding table, was a man deftly moving around three playing cards on the table's surface.

A small crowd stood by the table. As Bert approached, he could see and hear two school-aged boys razzing each other. “Oh, yeah, watch me smoke this dude,” said one. Bert presumed that these boys were on their way, or at least should be, to school.

The boy who was doing the talking stepped to the table, faced the man with the cards, and slapped a five dollar bill on the table. Bert watched as the man, an athletically built, light-complected African-American in his early thirties, flipped over all three cards. The queen of spades was flanked by the ten of hearts and ten of diamonds. Bert observed that the man at the table was unusually well dressed, wearing a form-fitting short-sleeved, olive knit shirt, brown dress slacks, and brown loafers.

“Keep your eye on the queen,” instructed the man as he flipped the cards over and started moving them around, sometimes leaving them flat on the table and sliding them, and sometimes lifting and dropping them from side to side, but always returning them to a neat alignment.

After about twenty seconds of this, the man stopped and looked up at the boy. “Okay, my friend, where’s the lady?”

The boy gave his friend a cocky smile and pointed to the card on the right. “Right there, sucker.”

The man flipped over the card the boy selected, revealing the queen. “Well done!” he exclaimed as he placed a five-dollar bill from his pocket on top of the boy’s five, which still sat on the table. “You must be a natural. How about giving this old man another chance?”

“Sure,” the boy responded gleefully. “Let it ride.”

The man repeated the process, conspicuously identifying the queen, turning over the cards, and then moving them around, this time a little more quickly. When he stopped, the confident youngster pointed to the card in the middle. Sure enough, when the man flipped over the card, it was the queen again. The man placed a ten dollar bill onto the two fives. "You're taking me to the cleaners, son. But if you feel lucky, we can go once more," the man offered with an encouraging smile.

"You bet! But let's get serious. Here's another five dollars to make it an even twenty-five."

The other boy grabbed his friend's arm. "Hey, let me get in on this action." He looked at the man. "Can I put twenty on this too?"

The man appeared to consider the request for a moment and then nodded. Forty-five dollars now rested on the table next to the cards. The man showed the three cards, but when he placed the queen face down, he had bent the corner of the card ever so slightly. The boys, seeing this, took a quick glance at one another and then watched the action. When the man had finished shifting the cards around, both boys quickly pointed at the rightmost card, which had a small curl on its corner.

"Ten of diamonds," announced the man, flipping over the card and gathering the money off the table. "Tough break."

The boys, who didn't realize what had just transpired, talked it over. Bert smiled. He had seen this a hundred times before. The boys decided to each put up another ten dollars for one more go of it. This time, no corners were bent, but the man moved the cards around so deftly that by the end, neither boy had any idea which card was which.

They argued over which card to guess for the better part of a minute, then ultimately picked the ten of diamonds again.

“Ahh, shit. Our mothers are gonna kill us,” exclaimed the second of the boys.

“Let’s get out of here,” said the first, then whispered, “I think this dude just hustled us.”

The boys picked up the backpacks that lay at their feet and walked away shaking their heads. With the backpacks gone, Bert noticed something: a black, hard-sided case sat on the ground under the table, just about the size of a saxophone.

Several more players tried their luck with a game or two with similar results, and Bert waited patiently for the crowd to disperse. Finally, approaching 9:00, the last of the players walked away, leaving Bert standing there. The man behind the table had noticed Bert earlier and now spoke to him. “Are you just a spectator or are you here to play? Oh wait, let me guess; you’re another undercover cop.”

“No, I’m not with the police,” answered Bert. “I just came here to talk to you. You’re Charlie, right?”

“That’s me. But I’m working here. If you want to play, then let’s see some money. I don’t make any money just talking.” Charlie looked away from Bert, hoping to find another target for his game.

Bert rolled his eyes up to the ceiling, gave an audible sigh, and decided to try another approach. “Fine. Here’s ten dollars. Let’s play.”

“Now that’s what I like to talk about,” said Charlie with a smile, and he showed Bert the three cards and began the rearranging.

When Charlie came to a stop, Bert pointed at the leftmost of the three. It was the queen.

“You have a good eye, my friend. Care for another round?” Charlie placed a ten on Bert’s ten.

“Whatever you like,” replied Bert, going along with Charlie.

Charlie performed the routine again, accelerating his speed this time, but when he was done, Bert again correctly identified the queen. Charlie added another twenty dollars to the pile.

“Another?” asked Charlie, frowning slightly.

Bert shrugged. “It’s your game. Remember, all I wanted was to talk to you for a couple of minutes, but we can continue playing if you wish.”

Charlie played on, now trying the same bent corner routine he had used on the kids earlier. But Bert, having developed a great deal of savvy from living on the streets, was not fooled. He kept his eye the queen.

“One more chance,” entreated Charlie, now clearly agitated. Bert nodded and left the bet on the table, now eighty dollars.

This time Charlie moved the cards as fast as he could, at times picking up two cards in one hand. Sometimes he would drop the bottom one, and other times he would drop the top one but give the impression that it was the bottom one. When he was finished, he stopped and looked up at Bert.

Unfazed, Bert pointed at the middle card: the queen. Then he spoke pointedly to Charlie. “Look. Keep your money.” Bert picked up his original ten dollars from the pile

and pushed the remaining seventy toward Charlie. “I don’t want it. Play something for me on that saxophone there and we’ll call it even.”

Charlie eyed Bert uneasily. “Let me get this straight,” he said. “If I play the saxophone for you, you’ll let me keep the money? Who are you?”

“Abe sent me here to find you. You know Abe, from the Montgomery Street Station?”

Charlie gave a big smile of recognition. “Sure. Sure. I know Abe. I used to play my games over there, until the cops chased me out. Gotta keep moving, you know. How is old Abe these days?”

“Cranky as ever. So is that saxophone just for show or do you really play?”

“Sure, I play. Used to play jazz at Maggie’s in Kansas City, before I moved out here. Now I just play down here when the crowd thins out and there’s no one to play cards with. Plus, it helps keep the cops away if I don’t have the cards out all the time.”

Charlie popped open the saxophone case to reveal a golden saxophone, polished as if it were new. He noticed Bert admiring its condition and answered Bert’s unasked question, “It’s got a lot of years on it, but I take good care of my baby here. It’s all I’ve got left.”

Charlie licked his lips and began to play, starting slowly, then laying out jazz riffs with an intensity and focus that caught Bert by surprise. The wail of the instrument pierced the subway corridor, resonating off the ceramic tiled walls.

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When Charlie closed his eyes and blew into the sax, in his mind he was back on stage in the smoke-filled, dimly lit club on the outskirts of Kansas City, every table in the place full and all eyes upon him.

It had been nearly six years since Charlie had left Kansas City. For two years there, he'd been a member of the house band at Maggie's, a quirky, locals-only type of restaurant that featured live jazz on Wednesday through Saturday nights.

From the outside, Maggie's looked like nothing more than your average local tavern, located in one of Kansas City's aging, middle-class neighborhoods. Inside, the décor was nothing spectacular either, just a large, dark-paneled room with clunky dark wood chairs and tables. The tables were covered with white tablecloths that draped down to the floor. The low light was provided by a combination of tabletop candles and overhead lights that were dimmed whenever the band was on the stage.

Charlie had shown up at Maggie's one day, a few years removed from high school and in need of a job. He landed dishwashing duty and worked in the kitchen earning not much more than minimum wage. A jazz aficionado, Charlie loved the saxophone, and when the weather was accommodating he would spend his breaks at the restaurant sitting out on the back step by the screen door leading to the kitchen, playing the instrument. His apron bunched in his lap and his hands clutching the saxophone, the sounds would drift up into the cool air of the evening, drowning out the noise of the crickets. It didn't take long for the musicians in the house band to notice Charlie while they were out back smoking or getting some fresh air during their breaks.

Charlie's gregarious personality and self-confidence always attracted people to him and the musicians, largely in their forties and fifties, quickly took a paternal interest in him, providing encouragement as well as an honest critique of his playing.

When fortune smiled on Charlie and the house band's saxophonist left a year and a few months after Charlie began working at the club, the remaining members were unanimous on how to replace him.

It didn't take much arm twisting for Charlie to put the drudgery of washing dishes behind him and step onto the stage. He joined the band, and after persevering over the bumpy first few months of learning the music and the tendencies of the other musicians, all while performing for the crowd, Charlie fit into the band very well.

Charlie had never had much of a family life. He grew up in a small town outside Kansas City, the only child of a single mother who, by necessity, spent much of her time working. As a result of this void, the band members quickly became like family. Charlie became particularly close with the band's trumpet player, Johnny Helms, and the two would frequently hang out after the final set of the night was over, toss down a few cold beers, and talk about life.

One day, when Charlie had been with the house band a little over a year, Johnny invited Charlie to accompany him to the local horse track. Johnny loved to play the horses and was happy to find a companion to take with him. For Johnny, the track was a place to go to fill some time once or twice a week when he wasn't performing, and his betting was no more than a few dollars here and there. Even on a bad day, Johnny seldom lost more than twenty-five dollars. Charlie, on the other hand, got sucked in.



On Charlie's first day at the Woodlands, he had what one might call beginner's luck, hitting the daily double and two exactas over the course of the day. He loved the excitement -- the hustle of people to the ticket counters, everyone gathering near the finish line to watch, the screams of encouragement and frustration. And of course it was really fun to walk home with a couple hundred more dollars than he'd started the day with.

Predictably, the luck ran out pretty quickly, and Charlie gave back the couple hundred dollars and more over the next few months. His personal decline gained momentum as he started trying to recoup the losses by placing progressively larger bets. He continued to play saxophone at Maggie's four nights a week, but most weeks, he'd lost his paycheck before the week was out. He was able to get by for a while since he was living at home, but that arrangement was not to last indefinitely.

Several months later and deeper into the abyss, Charlie's obsession starting affecting his concentration at the club. The other band members, well aware of the goings on, tried to help but without success.

Eventually, Charlie became convinced that the races were fixed against him. Unable to rationally call it quits, he decided that the answer lay in Las Vegas, where he could win back what he'd lost by playing cards, a game where his fortune wouldn't be open to any external manipulation. He managed to stay on at Maggie's for a few more months, stayed away from the track, and saved up enough money to make the journey to Nevada.

Once in Las Vegas, Charlie found a job doing landscape work for a company that maintained the grounds at several of the casinos. The work was grueling, laboring in the

dirt and weeds under the hot Las Vegas sun, but it paid Charlie enough money to get a small studio apartment. He also managed to hook up with a small jazz band that played a bar called the Gin Joint on Friday and Saturday nights. The performing wasn't very satisfying, and the pay was only fifty dollars a night, but it offered a little extra income and an outlet for the saxophone, his only passion other than gambling.

Charlie learned to count cards and began playing blackjack regularly at Stardust. Because of his counting skill, he held his own pretty well for a while. But eventually the odds caught up with him. He kept raising his stakes, and most often, by the end of the week, he was back to zero cash and anxiously awaiting his next paycheck.

Charlie's three troublesome years in Las Vegas mercifully neared the end one spring, when he found himself two months late with the rent and threatened with eviction by his landlord. Worse yet, he was close to maxing out the ten-thousand-dollar credit line that his two jobs and frequent gaming had earned him at the casino.

Near the end of June, Charlie got the inevitable eviction notice from the landlord. He also now owed the casino the full ten thousand dollars he had managed to lose at the tables. Desolate, alone, and needing to get out of town, Charlie telephoned his cousin Randy in San Francisco. Charlie didn't want to go back home and face his mother, and besides, he thought the Pacific Coast might be a refreshing change.

Randy and Charlie had been close as children, and even though they kept in touch less regularly as adults, Randy had been happy to hear from Charlie. Randy was in no position to give Charlie much financial support, but after listening to Charlie's predicament, he agreed to wire the bus money for Charlie to make the trip.

Once in San Francisco, Randy agreed to take Charlie in to his apartment if he ultimately contributed toward the rent. Randy worked as the night doorman at one of the city's high-rise apartment buildings, which afforded him a modest apartment in the Hayes Valley section of the city. Thankful to have a roof over his head, Charlie agreed to Randy's terms and moved in.

Not having had much luck on the receiving end of gambling, Charlie came up with a new scheme. He remembered watching games of three-card monte being played on the sidewalks of his neighborhood as a kid and decided to teach himself the technique. He spent days and days practicing the card movements, getting quicker and quicker, and ultimately took to the subway corridors. He kept his saxophone with him to play during breaks from the game, which provided the sole real fulfillment in his life.

\* \* \*

Bert was in awe as Charlie let out the final wail of his saxophone and thrust it downward to conclude the five-minute impromptu jam. "Wow!" he exclaimed, beaming. "You're way better on the sax than you are at cards."

Charlie laughed. "Been doing it a lot longer. It's a lot more satisfying too. Unfortunately, it doesn't pay the bills as well."

"Your luck is about to change, my friend," responded Bert. He went on to tell Charlie his vision of the band and how Abe was already on board.

When Bert finished his plea, Charlie asked him, "How do I know you're not hustling me, like you just hustled me with the cards?"

"I didn't hustle you," Bert reminded him. "I gave you back all your money. Doesn't that count for something?"

Charlie thought about it for a moment, then grinned and extended his hand to shake. “All right. Count me in. What have I got to lose at this point?”

Flushed with his small success, Bert took his leave and made the long walk down to the wharf to fulfill the pledge he had made to himself. The downward spiral was starting to reverse, he thought. As he approached the rail that separated the promenade from the water below, he reached into his pocket and extracted the bottle of Old Granddad, still two-thirds full. He unscrewed the top, took one last swig, and then ceremoniously hurled the bottle into San Francisco Bay. He watched the bottle bob on the waves until it disappeared from view.

### Chapter 3 – Dave

Dave Hollaway effortlessly struck the keys of the piano while the crowd of blue-haired ladies surrounding it belted out, off key, the lyrics of “You Are My Sunshine,” “You’re a Grand Old Flag,” and “God Bless America.” He maintained a forced smile as he delivered his repertoire of moldy standards.

The Cypress Gardens Retirement Community was having its seventeenth annual Summer under the Stars event, and Dave had been hired as the evening’s entertainment. The upright piano from the community clubhouse had been moved outside under a massive white canvas tent. Next to the piano, assembled in the center of the tent, a makeshift dance floor was surrounded by round tables, each accommodating eight of the community’s residents. Dave estimated the crowd at about 120 people.

Dave hated these events. He was a music snob, and for good reason. Beginning at age eight, he had been trained as a classical pianist. He worked tirelessly on his lessons and practiced religiously. He could play any piece of music placed in front of him as if he had been practicing it for weeks. And he could write music.

Dave’s passion was classical music, and he was decidedly intolerant of jazz, rock, soul, and most any other style.

Throughout his younger days, Dave had participated in the school orchestras, and after high school he’d attended Sonoma State University, majoring in music with a performance concentration. Right out of school, he was snatched up by the Monterey Symphony. Dave’s charted course was right on schedule.

The community orchestra performed an annual concert series of eight programs per year in Monterey and Salinas, in local halls that seated a thousand listeners.

Dave thought that life couldn't get much better. He wasn't making much money since the community orchestra paid him less than ten thousand dollars for the season, but he was doing what he'd always wanted, and the money didn't matter much since he was still living with his parents. The Monterey position was sure to be a springboard to his ultimate goal.

The recognition and experience with the symphony allowed Dave to supplement his income and his schedule with other opportunities such as performing at summer concerts in the local parks and playing dinner music at functions. He also filled his time working as the pianist at the Grandview Hotel in Monterey, providing the lounge music on Thursday, Friday, and Saturday nights, sharing the schedule with another pianist in order to keep time in his schedule for the symphony engagements and rehearsals.

Toward the end of his third season, Dave decided that he had ridden his experience with the Monterey Symphony as far as he could and started scouring the trade publications. After several interviews and auditions, he landed a position with the Santa Cruz County Symphony. With improved wages, Dave was excited about the opportunity to leave home and strike out on his own.

The Santa Cruz Symphony was a step up in size from Monterey and routinely played before audiences numbering 2,000. Dave packed his few worldly possessions and moved to Santa Cruz, finding a tiny efficiency apartment in the downtown area. As a gift, his parents generously let Dave keep the baby grand piano that had adorned their living room. It took the movers nearly two hours to get the piano up the narrow hallway and through the door, and when they were done, it took up a full quarter of Dave's living space. But he didn't care. He was chasing the dream.

Dave stuck around in Santa Cruz for the next four years. He enjoyed his time with the orchestra, but since it didn't fully support him either, he continued to supplement his income with a variety of other engagements.

As the years went by, Dave routinely kept one eye on the audition postings for bigger and better opportunities, seeking the next in the series of stepping stones that would lead to one of the nation's top orchestras. As his schedule permitted, he traveled the country, going from audition to audition. But time after time, all that appeared in his mailbox were appreciative, complimentary rejection notices.

Eventually the Santa Cruz gig wore thin. Dave needed a more significant income, so he continued his migration northward, accepting a job teaching piano to aspiring children at the San Francisco School of Music.

Dave found that he enjoyed teaching classical piano, but at the same time, he grew increasingly frustrated by the shift in his musical career from performance to instruction. *Those who can't do, teach*, he thought to himself, letting the old adage become fulfilled.

His musical dreams moved a step farther from his reach when he married Ann Feldman a couple of years later. Ann taught violin at the school and started there at about the same time as Dave. Unlike Dave, however, Ann's first love was teaching, and she never fully understood why Dave derived so little satisfaction from spreading his boundless knowledge to the students. Granted, she understood his disappointment in failing to achieve his goals. And certainly she was supportive. But Ann was the sort who found delight in everything she did and didn't set herself up with a limited, binary measure of success or failure.

One year into the marriage, Ann announced to Dave that she was pregnant. Dave was elated at the news, and the couple was overjoyed when their baby girl, Kate, was delivered several months later. In the ensuing discussions about their financial status, Ann and Dave struggled with whether Ann should return to work and put Kate in some form of child care center. Ann really wanted to be at home and raise Kate full time, at least until she reached school age. Realistically, the cost of child care would have eaten up most of her salary anyway. In the end, the two decided that Dave would look for work outside the school to supplement his income and Ann would stay at home.

One day, a colleague of Dave's at the school approached him with an opportunity to do some writing. A local advertising agency needed someone to create the music for television commercials. Dave's first reaction was violent opposition. *He had worked too hard to sell out, hadn't he?*

After some persuasion, Dave grudgingly stopped by the agency's offices the next day to see the creative director, Harold Himes. Dave took a seat across the desk in Harold's well-appointed office. The walls were covered virtually end to end with advertising images and awards.

"Here is a DVD containing the video for a car commercial we have in the works," Harold began after the two men exchanged pleasantries. "I'd like you to work on the audio track."

Harold went on to explain to Dave how the agency works and how much Dave would be compensated if the agency bought the piece from Dave.

Dave nodded his understanding. Feeling a bit uncomfortable and not having much more to say, Dave stood up to leave.



As they shook hands, Harold asked, “By the way, Dave, what got you interested in writing for commercials?”

“Honestly, Harold, I’m not,” Dave replied matter-of-factly. Dave managed a brief smile and then left the office.

\* \* \*

Two days later, the phone rang at Dave’s house.

“If this is what you can produce when you aren’t interested in writing for commercials, I’d love to see what you could do if you were,” came Harold Himes’ voice over the phone. “You totally nailed it, Dave.”

Dave had dropped off his completed soundtrack at the agency 24 hours after receiving the DVD of the commercial. The Lincoln-Mercury ad had featured a man and a woman in formal wear, driving an elegant, mid-sized black sedan comfortably through city streets, then out on open country roads, and finally making precise turns around a windy mountain road before pulling through iron gates and into the circular driveway in front of a mansion. Guests at the estate were congregating on the front steps of the house and in the adjoining gardens, sipping wine and eating hors d’oeuvres. When the car pulled up, all conversation stopped and attention shifted to the couple in the car.

Dave’s soundtrack now contributed a soft, lilting melody to the opening sequence. As the scene shifted from city to country to mountains, Dave shifted the music along with it, from a choppy strain accompanying the bustling city streets, to a serene, flowing sound for the country, rising to a thunderous, pulsating beat for the mountain scenes, and finally returning to the opening theme as the car entered the estate.

Dave allowed himself a tinge of pride at Harold's comments. He always enjoyed the recognition of his talents, and while money was clearly the driver that had led him to Harold, music for him was always more about appreciation and esteem than anything else.

"Thanks, Harold. I'm happy to hear that. I hate to say it, but it came to me kind of naturally."

"If you're game, I can have our legal folks here write up a contract for us. I'd love to work with you," Harold replied.

Won over by the admiration, Dave agreed to the offer, and thus began Dave's journey into commercial background music.

In the beginning, Dave kept the music true to himself, composing variations on classical themes to support the commercials. As time went on, however, and the agency asked him to work in a broader range, he was forced to let down his guard and craft the music in a variety of styles. It wasn't comfortable, but the additional income Dave derived from the agency supplemented his relatively modest teaching income.

A few years later, in the midst of an economic downturn, the agency was unable to sustain itself and closed its doors.

During this same period, Ann had given birth to Jack, a baby boy. Dave was still teaching and doing some performing at events to support the now expanded family, but he couldn't afford the gap in his income created by the agency's closure.

He continued to play classical music wherever he could, but out of necessity took a job playing piano by the escalators at a shopping mall department store. Next came the sing-along bar. As if playing piano as background shopping music weren't bad enough,

Dave found a new level of humiliation for a classically trained musician when he became the featured pianist at a club called Harmony.

On Friday and Saturday nights, Dave would sit at a grand piano placed on a round, slowly rotating stage at the center of the crowded bar. At nine o'clock, he would start playing pop tunes, and for the first hour or so, for the most part the small but growing crowd let Dave handle the vocalist duties solo. But by 10:30, with a full house and the patrons' singing spirit moved along by a few drinks (or more), the crowd would belt out the pop ditties with him, adding the requisite "Bum-bum-bum" and "So good, so good, so good" to each chorus of Neil Diamond's "Sweet Caroline" and the "Salt, salt, salt" to the chorus of Jimmy Buffett's "Margaritaville."

While the work was decidedly unsatisfying, it certainly helped pay the bills. Dave received a respectable hourly wage as the house entertainment and always pulled in an extra hundred dollars or more each night in tips stuffed into the oversized brandy snifter that sat on the piano lid.

Once Dave started down this path, it was hard to pull back. He welcomed the extra cash and began taking on all sorts of musical engagements, from children's parties to weddings to retirement dinners. Thus was he led to Cypress Gardens.

As the night wore on and the 11:00 ending time finally approached, Dave felt himself sinking into a mid-life crisis. Here he was at age forty-two, his dreams of becoming a concert pianist all but evaporated into the ether. The pressure to support his family was intense. Further adding to the stress was the time strain arising from helping to teach Jack, who a few years earlier had been diagnosed as moderately learning

challenged. But equally intense was Dave's desire to walk away from these meaningless events, where his musical talents were wasted and his artistic integrity was compromised.

That night when he got home, he climbed into bed with Ann, who roused from her sleep just enough to mutter, "How did it go?"

Dave took a deep breath. "We need to talk, Ann."

Ann reached over, turned on the light on her nightstand, propped her pillow up against the headboard, and sat up. "That good, huh? Didn't you enjoy the groupies?" she asked with a knowing smile.

"I don't think the ladies who fawn all over me at these things are quite what a rock star gets treated to," Dave answered with a forced laugh. Then he said resolutely, "I know you've heard me complain before, Ann, but I'm serious about making a change this time. I've decided to take a break from doing these events. I want to play what *I* want to play. I'm tired of this obligation to play this mind-numbing collection of tunes just because that's what everyone expects to hear. I have absolutely no control of my artistic direction anymore."

"And how do you propose going about making this change?"

"I don't know," he answered tentatively, wrestling with the thought. "I'll figure something out. I just want to play for myself for awhile."

A few days passed, until the following bright, comfortable Tuesday. Dave wrapped up his teaching obligations for the day by noon and decided to find a nice outdoorsy spot to relax and play some music. He chose Union Square, the wide open park that featured a mix of concrete and greenery in the perimeter, a granite central plaza, and a lone Corinthian column at its center. The square was flanked by rows of shops and

cafes, and tourists and locals alike flocked to the square to take a break from shopping, to read, or to eat.

Dave found a spot on the park's tiered concrete steps and sat down with his portable keyboard. As he played a variety of music, ranging from his own compositions to those of Mozart and Bach, he received affirming looks from the passersby. He also noticed two men on the steps across the walkway who sat intently watching him, listening, and occasionally speaking to one another without taking their eyes off him.

One was formally dressed in a jacket and tie, albeit clearly not in touch with any recent trends of style. The other was a tall, thin man more casually, but stylishly, attired, who was carrying a saxophone case. After a short while, they took a knowing look at one another and, without a word, walked over to Dave.

\* \* \*

Bert and Charlie had formed a bond. Perhaps it was the hustler in each of them that brought them together, but whatever it was, they clicked right from the start. Bert had become a regular at Charlie's hangout in the 16<sup>th</sup> St. Mission Station, and the two talked frequently about the band. Charlie had offered to help in the search and recruiting of the other members and Bert was more than happy to have some assistance, and just as importantly, some companionship.

Over the few weeks that followed their meeting, Bert and Charlie devoted a portion of their day to riding the BART from station to station and wandering the corridors, looking and listening for musicians.

Some days there were no musicians to be found, but every couple of days or so, the two would come across one of San Francisco's many subterranean performers.

To their increasing frustration, however, Bert and Charlie were finding the search fruitless. There was an elderly, spritelike man with a long gray beard playing “Oh Susannah” over and over on the accordion. There was a three-chord guitarist who appeared unable to handle anything but the most basic of songs. They saw a saxophone player and a couple of singers with talent, but these slots were already filled in the band. And they heard some genuinely skilled musicians, a guitarist and a trumpet player, both of whom Bert refused to pursue, much to Charlie’s consternation. When challenged by Charlie about his lack of interest in these two, Bert offered nothing more than, “I’ll know when it’s right. You’ll have to trust me on this.”

Then one day, Bert and Charlie came across a talented young woman playing acoustic guitar in the open concourse above the Civic Center stop. Her guitar case lay on the floor by her feet, and an impressive collection of money had accumulated in the felt-lined interior. The two men watched from a short distance and observed more than a few admiring passersby dropping coins and bills into the case.

The woman played 1960s folk tunes, not exactly what Bert and Charlie had in mind. However, Bert had a conviction. He strongly believed that it was much easier to teach a great musician a new style than to teach a mediocre musician to be great. The guitarist they watched was extremely skilled, and Bert was most interested in raw talent and passion.

When she took her break, Bert and Charlie approached her. After overcoming her initial reservation about conversing with two strange men in a train station, they got to talking. Her name was Nicole, and she was the guitarist in a folk band that played small venues around the city. Unfortunately for them, while she appreciated Bert and Charlie’s

interest and wished them great success with their band, she was happy with her current musical outfit.

On the way out of the station, Charlie said to Bert, “You know what you need, man? You need some business cards. When we meet these folks, they’ve got no way to reach us.”

“Great idea, Charlie,” answered Bert. “But what’s the card going to say? Bert Ingram, Band Manager. Address: Steam Vent at Sixth & Howard?”

Charlie laughed. Then he stopped suddenly and grabbed Bert’s arm. “Hey, I just had a great idea. Come move in with Randy and me! You can use a sleeping bag on the carpet!”

“I don’t know. I don’t want to be taking advantage of anyone. I promised myself I’d get back on my feet on my own terms.”

“Look. If we’re going to make this work, you’ve got to be a little more flexible. Think about it. You need some way to be reached to be credible. We’re going to have equipment and a bunch of other band stuff. You can’t just leave everything in the alley. Besides,” he smiled, “we’ll let you contribute to the rent.”

“You make a compelling case, my friend. Let’s do it. And I won’t forget this. I really appreciate it.”

And so the two men carried what was left of Bert’s personal belongings over to Charlie’s apartment. Randy, who wasn’t around that much anyway, didn’t really seem to care. He was just as happy to have his rent now split three ways.

A couple of days after making the housing change, the two men were passing by Union Square and heard keyboard music. They entered the park to locate the source of

the sound, and with affirming nods, took up residence on the steps opposite a bookish-looking man, dressed in blue jeans, an argyle sweater vest, and boat shoes.

Bert and Charlie sat patiently watching and listening, while the man, who appeared to be roughly in his forties, played for fully an hour. When the man had stopped long enough so it was clear he was either taking a break or getting ready to leave, Bert and Charlie approached.

“Hi,” began Bert. “Do you mind if we join you for a minute,” he continued, gesturing toward a spot on the steps next to Dave.

\* \* \*

Dave nodded hesitantly, trying to assess the two men, the dapper African-American and the tall, thin Caucasian with leathery skin, which Dave surmised was the result of a lifetime of sun exposure. The two introduced themselves as Bert and Charlie. Dave’s instinct told him he was about to be asked for money. On the other hand, Dave wasn’t quite sure what to make of the saxophone case.

“You’re a great talent,” Charlie said, as the two men sat down next to Dave.

“Thanks,” answered Dave. “I was really just messing around. It feels good to get out here and just play for the sake of playing.”

“Are you with the San Francisco Symphony?” asked Charlie.

“Close,” Dave said with a laugh. “I’m a music teacher.”

“Really? You’re not a performer?” Bert asked. “But you’re amazing!”

“Thanks, but no, I’m really not a performer. I mean, I have performed. Little stuff, you know, like small city and county orchestras. But I’m not even doing that these days. What about you two? Is it a safe guess that there’s a saxophone in that case?”



Dave looked toward Charlie, but Bert answered. "Charlie plays the sax. Do you want to hear him?"

Dave shrugged and said, "Sure."

Charlie took a quick look at Bert and then pulled out the saxophone. As he played a jazz number, the horn looked as if it were on fire, glowing in the midday sun. Bert and Dave watched and listened attentively.

When Charlie finished, Dave spoke first. "I'm not much of a jazz buff, but that was tremendous," he said enthusiastically.

"Thanks," said Charlie with a smile that reflected little humility.

"Listen," said Bert. "Charlie's the sax player in a funk-ed-up rock band we're putting together. I know it's not exactly Beethoven, but we could sure use you." He paused for effect. "We'd be honored if you'd join us."

"Wow! That's quite an offer," responded Dave. "I'm flattered. Really. But I can't. I just quit some music jobs because I needed to take a break and play for myself for awhile. No disrespect intended toward your music, but for me, classical is the only music."

"What kind of jobs were you doing?" asked Charlie.

"You don't want to know," said Dave. "How would you like to find yourself surrounded by retirees begging to hear 'You Are My Sunshine'?"

"Ouch. Sounds painful," said Charlie.

"And it's not just that. I've done the sing-along bar thing. I've recorded television commercials. I've done too many gigs just for the money. I don't want to do that again."

Bert asked, "What commercials did you do?"

"Oh, all sorts of things. Commercials for cars, pharmaceuticals, pet food... pretty much everything." Then Dave smiled sheepishly. "You'll get a kick out of this. Remember the Sparkelene commercial?"

Charlie answered, "Don't tell me that was yours?"

"You got it. Pretty sad, huh?"

"How did that go again?" Charlie asked himself, raising his eyes skyward. In a melodic voice, he sang, "Sparkelene, Sparkelene, makes my toilet nice and clean." Then he gave a long, loud laugh.

"That's the one," said Dave, "and that's why I have to be true to myself now. But I wish you guys a lot of luck with your band. Bert, what's your role?"

"I'm the manager," Bert answered, looking intently at Dave. "Listen, Dave. I appreciate what you're saying. I've had issues myself. But if you find that you've wrestled your demons and change your mind, please come find us." Bert reached into his inside jacket breast pocket and produced one of his recently minted business cards.

"Fair enough," replied Dave.

The three men shook hands and said their good-byes. As they turned and started to exit the park, Charlie sung out, "Sparkelene, Sparkelene, makes my toilet --." He was cut off by a firm elbow to the ribs from Bert.

## Chapter 4 –Bongo Joe

Bert realized Charlie was becoming frustrated with their lack of progress. But Bert, the eternal optimist, felt that they had enough irons in the fire. They were moving and shaking and meeting new musicians, and as long as they kept getting opportunities like they had been, results would come and the band would fall into place.

As they got ready to turn in for the night, Bert reassured Charlie with these thoughts, but he knew that getting a victory soon was important for morale. He also needed to keep Abe on the right path, and it sure would be helpful to be able to tell Abe the band was gaining momentum.

Bert and Charlie spent the next morning at the Sixteenth St. Mission Station, working Charlie's card routine. Bert helped out by attracting players, strolling back and forth along the corridor and challenging the commuters to the game of wits. At lunch time, the two walked down to the wharf. Bert hadn't stopped by Ted's in awhile and was feeling hungry for something other than dole food. Bert and Charlie took spots on wooden stools at the counter. Ted came over, and Bert introduced Charlie.

"Remember when I was here a few weeks ago and I told you things were picking up?" Bert asked Ted, who nodded.

"Well, here's the deal. I'm getting back into the music business," Bert announced. "I'm managing this great band -- that is, I will be, anyway. I'm still putting the band together. Charlie here's the sax player."

Ted clapped Bert on the shoulder. "Sounds good, my friend. You've got a gleam in your eye that I've never seen before. I think you're starting to find your way again. That makes me happy."

Ted took their order; Bert wanted a bowl of chowder and Charlie a shrimp cocktail. In a minute, Ted came back with two bowls of chowder and two shrimp cocktails in their red and white soft cardboard containers, and placed them on the counter. “On me,” he said in response to Bert and Charlie’s puzzled looks.

Bert and Charlie expressed joyful appreciation.

Ted waved off their thanks, then asked, “You don’t happen to be in the market for a drummer, do you?”

Bert practically leapt off of his stool. “You know someone?”

“Don’t get too excited,” cautioned Ted quickly. “I’m not sure. There’s this guy who used to hang out on the wharf down here playing the bongos all day long. Bongo Joe we used to call him. I’m not sure why, maybe he was out of money or something, but he came over to a bunch of the restaurants along this row looking for work. Jake ended up hiring him over at the Wharf House.” He motioned to the blue and white shingle identifying the place a half block away. “He still works there, I’m pretty sure.”

Bert and Charlie looked at one another. “I think we need something more than a bongo player,” said Charlie.

Bert turned toward Ted. “Do you know if he’s, well, is he a real drummer, or was he just goofing around with the bongos?”

“Don’t know. He was pretty good, though. My sense was that he had some type of musical background. It can’t hurt to check him out.”

“I’m game if you are,” Charlie told Bert.

“It never hurts to follow up on a lead,” Bert replied. “Let’s do it.”

Bert and Charlie finished up their meals and thanked Ted once again, both for the excellent repast and the lead on Bongo Joe. Then they walked to the Wharf House. At the counter, a woman wearing a serving apron approached them.

“May I take your order?” she asked in a voice clearly trained on the diner circuit.

“Actually, we’re here to see Bongo Joe,” answered Bert pleasantly, trying to appear confident in his mission. “Is he working today?”

“Hey, Bongo Joe!” The waitress shouted over a display case containing a variety of prepared seafood. “Some guys are here to see you.”

A short, thin young man appeared from behind the display case. He looked to be in his early twenties, with brown hair woven in dreadlocks under a rainbow-colored, knit, Rasta hat, and facial hair some twenty-four hours removed from its most recent shave. He wore a plain white T-shirt. The young man approached Bert and Charlie.

“Do I know you?” he asked with the drawl of a teenager being confronted by his parents.

“Are you Bongo Joe?” asked Bert.

“That’s me,” he answered. “My name’s actually Aaron, but nobody here calls me that. And you are....?”

“I’m Bert and this is Charlie. We’re forming a band and looking for musicians. We got a tip that you might be a drummer.”

Aaron looked surprised. Then he smiled wryly as he considered how to respond. “Wow,” he muttered, “wow, wow, wow.” He uttered these words not excitedly, but as if in shock.

“Are you a drummer?” asked Charlie a little impatiently.

“Yes. I mean no. I mean, well, sort of,” answered Aaron. “I used to be. I haven’t played too much lately.” He sighed. “It’s a long story.”

Charlie jumped on the opening. “We’re looking for guys with long stories. Could we convince you to audition for us?”

“I--I don’t know, dude,” Aaron stammered. “It’s just that....it’s been a long time. That’s all.”

“C’mon,” implored Charlie, “you know it’s like riding a bike. Give it a shot. We’re willing to work with you on it.”

“Hey, Bongo Joe, we need you back here in the kitchen!” came a man’s imperious voice.

“Excuse me a second. I’ll be right back,” Aaron said, then disappeared through a swinging door.

\* \* \*

As Aaron attended to the clean-up work to which he had been summoned, he rolled the offer over in his mind. It had been a long time since any idea of performing had penetrated his thoughts, but the look of hope and sincerity on Charlie’s face made him now think hard about the prospect. Suddenly, a warm glow started to overtake him, as if a long lost friend had mysteriously appeared from out of nowhere. He had his answer.

After depositing the trash bags on the blacktop outside the rear employee entrance, Aaron emerged again.

“You know what guys?” he said to Bert and Charlie. “I’ll give it a shot. Do you want to meet me at my apartment later this week?”

Bert said that would work.

“How’s eight o’clock on Friday?” offered Aaron.

“We’ll be there,” affirmed Bert.

Aaron found a napkin and jotted down his address and telephone number. The three men shook hands, and Aaron vanished back into the kitchen.

\* \* \*

“What do you make of that?” Charlie asked Bert.

“I don’t know. My head tells me that we’re wasting our time on this one. But my gut tells me to give the kid a chance. Who knows? Maybe we’ll be rewarded. I’m going to knock around the city for awhile and then swing by Montgomery Street to check in on Abe. I’ll catch up with you later.”

Late that afternoon, Bert showed up at Abe’s station, right on time to see Abe tapping his cane down the corridor and setting up by the Fresh Cut Flowers sign. Bert approached before Abe had a chance to start singing.

“Abe Jackson! How the hell are you?” Bert exclaimed with excessive cheerfulness.

“Hey, Bert. How’s tricks?” responded Abe huskily, giving Bert a quick nod and then turning back to what he was doing.

“Can’t complain. I’m keeping myself busy. Leading us to salvation. You know, the usual stuff.”

“Heh, heh, heh.” Abe laughed his deep, almost wheeze-like laugh. “You crack me up sometimes. Now, let me see...” He stopped what he was doing and turned his face

toward Bert. “This isn’t a social call, so you’re here to string me along even though you haven’t made any progress on this band of yours. How’d I do?”

“C’mon, Abe. Don’t you know me better than that by now? Of course I’ve made some progress. In fact, I’m paying a visit to close the deal with our drummer later this week. We’ve got Charlie, thanks to you, and we nearly got ourselves a great keyboardist the other day, but you can’t win them all, I guess. By my estimate, a month’s time from now we’ll have the whole band together.”

“Whatever.” Abe shrugged. “Just so you know, you don’t need to come down here to check on me. I mean, I told you to count me in, right? Well, one thing about Abe is his word is his bond. So you can just disappear and show up when you’re ready for me. That is, *if* you’re ever ready for me.”

“Oh, I’ll be ready for you, sooner than you expect. I’m keeping the faith, brother. By the way, just in case you decide you want to reach me, I moved in with Charlie, so you can reach me there. Here’s his phone number.” Bert extended a hand with his business card to Abe, then suddenly realized that Abe couldn’t read it. “I mean, well, I know you can’t--”

“Chill out,” Abe reassured Bert. “I can get someone to read it to me if I need to find you. So I guess you’ll be going now?”

“Yeah, I’ll be going. But don’t worry, I’ll stop back to check in on you. You know I can’t keep away from your sunny disposition.” Bert finished with a warm laugh that turned the sarcasm to humor.



“Whatever,” replied Abe. He picked up his milk jug, cleared his throat a few times, and started singing. Bert listened for a few minutes and then headed up the stairs to the street.

\* \* \*

On Friday evening, Bert and Charlie headed out of the shared apartment. It would take a solid half hour to walk to Aaron’s place over on Divisadero Street, and being on a low budget, both Bert and Charlie walked whenever possible.

The late summer sun was low in the sky, and the residential neighborhoods through which the two men walked were quiet. With school back in session and the carefree days of summer ended, people seemed to be settled indoors.

Bert pulled the napkin from his pocket as they got close and reread the address. “Number 2502, Apartment 3R.” The street was dimly lit, and Bert and Charlie struggled to make out the numbers on the narrow row houses. It wasn’t the best section of the city, but it wasn’t the worst either, just one of the many working class neighborhoods.

The two men finally came upon the brick row house with the 2502 nailed onto the white wooden door frame, the last digit of the number dangling upside down as a result of a missing top nail. The house had obviously been converted into apartments, and inside the small vestibule, Bert pressed the buzzer next to “3R.” No tenant’s name had been filled in on the panel and Bert wasn’t convinced they were even in the right place until he heard Aaron’s static-distorted voice through the intercom.

Bert and Charlie passed through the buzzing door, walked the two flights of stairs to the third floor rear apartment, and knocked.

“I wasn’t sure you were really coming,” said Aaron as he opened the door. “I thought you might be yanking my chain.”

“No. We’re completely serious,” answered Charlie earnestly, as he and Bert surveyed the one-bedroom apartment.

The place was in disarray, and Bert sensed that this was probably the norm. Dishes were stacked high in the kitchen sink. The main living area consisted of a threadbare light-orange sofa whose cushions were permanently depressed, a small, rectangular particle-board-and-veneer dining table with chairs, and a wooden coffee table covered with magazines and CDs in no particular arrangement. In one corner of the room he saw a drum set. Two cymbals sat next to it on the floor. It was clear from the unfinished state of the drum kit that Aaron had not been practicing.

Aaron grabbed a magazine and a flannel shirt off the sofa and offered Bert and Charlie seats. He dropped the magazine onto the table and tossed the shirt through the darkened bedroom entranceway before going over to the drum set.

“Excuse me. This won’t take more than a couple minutes.” He began to attach the two cymbals to their proper locations, extended to the left and right of the bass drum.

“Been here long?” asked Charlie.

“Couple of years.”

“Uh huh. So what’s your background?”

“You mean musically?” Aaron asked, looking up at Charlie. Charlie nodded.

“Like I said, I haven’t played much since I moved back to San Francisco. I used to play a lot though.”

“So...you lived in San Francisco awhile and then moved to...?”

Aaron continued answering Charlie's questions while he worked on the drum set, not looking up as he spoke. "Ohio. Yeah, I grew up here. I started playing music, you know, the drums, when I was ten." He grunted as he twisted the bolt that tightened the last cymbal in place. "Mostly in the school bands in junior high and high school."

"Then you took off for Ohio?"

"Yeah, after high school. I went to a music school there for a couple of years, but I didn't like it much so I came back here." Aaron had finished building the drum set and now sat on the stool behind it with sticks in hand.

"Did you get a scholarship or something?" Charlie persisted.

"Yes, to Oberlin. You know it?"

"Oberlin?" Bert exclaimed. "*The Oberlin Conservatory of Music?*"

"That's right. But like I said, it didn't really work out, so here I am. So, you guys want to hear me play or do you have more questions?"

Charlie started to utter something, but Bert quickly interrupted, not wanting to make Aaron feel like he was being interrogated. "Of course we do. Go ahead!"

Aaron got up from the stool and pressed the play button on his iPod. Instrumental music filled the room, a bit more loudly than Bert guessed the neighbors might enjoy. Bert didn't recognize the music, which he guessed most probably came from an instructional recording, but it had a fusion jazz tone to it. Aaron sat down at the drums and started to accompany the music.

*Boom-boom-boom-ba-boom-boom-pa-tat, boom-boom-boom-ba-boom-boom-pa-tat, boom-boom-boom-ba-boom-boom-pa-tat, rat-a-tat-a-rat-a-tat-a-boom-boom-pa-tat.*

Bert and Charlie looked at one another. Charlie gave a little shrug. “Not bad,” he said to Bert. As the song continued, Aaron continued to accompany the music, occasionally shifting off the ‘*boom-boom-boom-ba-boom-boom-pa-tat*’, but not often.

At one point, a couple of minutes into the audition during one of the few deviations, Aaron hit a cymbal with a loud crash and found his drumstick flying through the air onto the floor behind him. He sheepishly uttered, “Okay, maybe I’m a bit rusty,” but quickly got back into the rhythm.

As he played, Bert and Charlie periodically whispered, or more appropriately, shouted into one another’s ears.

“What do you think,” Bert asked Charlie.

“I don’t know. Kind of rudimentary, don’t you think?”

“Maybe. He did say he hasn’t played in a while.”

“Let’s ask him to improv something when he’s done.”

Bert nodded.

When the music ended, Aaron added a quick flourish across the toms and closed with the requisite cymbal crash. He looked to Bert and Charlie for their reactions.

“Nice work!” began Bert with feigned enthusiasm. “That didn’t sound too rusty. How long did you say it’s been since you’ve played?”

“I don’t know...two, three years. I kind of lost touch with it. But it did feel good to play again.”

“Hey,” Charlie jumped in, “let’s hear you do a solo.”

“Um, sure,” answered Aaron somewhat hesitantly. He paused for a few moments in thought and then started in. *Boom-pa-tat, boom-pa-tat, boom-pa-tat boom boom.* And

on Aaron played, adding a little variation to the beat, occasionally running the sticks across the skins and periodically pausing to let the pounding of the bass drum be heard.

The performance wasn't bad. It was, however, just mediocre, and both Bert and Charlie knew it. Bert whispered to Charlie, "I need you to trust me on this one," preparing Charlie for what he was about to say. The drum solo came to a halt.

Bert started clapping. "Very impressive, I mean, for someone who's been out of action for awhile. What do you think, kid, would you be willing to play with a couple of old geezers like us?"

There was little hesitation from Aaron this time. In the laid back tone of his age, he answered, "Sure. That'd be cool."

A knock sounded on the door. Aaron went to answer it. It was one of the neighbors in the converted house complaining about the racket. Bert quickly came to the rescue and apologized to the woman, explained the situation, and told her that he and Charlie were just about to leave anyway.

Bert slipped Aaron one of his business cards. "We've still got a few musicians to round up, but I'll be in touch with you in a few weeks. I know where to find you. This is going to be great! Thanks."

Charlie and Aaron then exchanged pleasantries and the two visitors took their leave. Out on the street, a misty fog had enveloped the area, adding an eeriness to the neighborhood.

Bert braced himself for the confrontation he saw coming.

"What are you thinking?" started in Charlie. "We can't carry this guy!"

"He's not that bad," countered Bert.

“He’s unproven!”

“He deserves a chance.”

“He’s a kid!”

“He’ll grow.”

“He wasn’t even ready when we showed up! In fact, he knew we were coming and it didn’t even look like he practiced! I don’t know. He seems like a slacker to me.”

“Okay, Charlie. I’ll give you all that. But I have a good feeling on this one, and my radar is seldom wrong. If he doesn’t work out, we’ll find a new drummer. What’s the big deal?”

“The big deal is that if you want a first-rate band, you can’t hold it together with a second-rate drummer,” Charlie said, finally calming down.

“I know. I know. I won’t jeopardize the band. You have my word. If he can’t carry his weight, I’ll personally get rid of him and find a replacement.”

What Bert left unsaid was that he knew he was taking a big risk. He needed to be credible with his judgment of talent and his high aspirations for the band, but right now, what he needed more was a warm body. He needed Bongo Joe in the band to affirm that progress was being made, not just to Abe or to Charlie, but to himself.

## Chapter 5 – Ethan

Nearly a month had gone by since Bert and Charlie had hooked up with Aaron, and Bert didn't have much to show for it. He and Charlie had followed their routine, scouring the subway concourses and corridors, wandering through parks and strolling along busy commercial streets, hoping to happen upon musicians who might fit into the band.

A number of potentials emerged along the way, but all they'd amounted to were false starts and failed hopes. Nonetheless, Bert maintained his cheery demeanor, driven by his faith in the mission. Charlie, on the other hand, sometimes wondered aloud if Bert had a mental imbalance that played a role in his ability to remain confident.

One fall afternoon, Bert and Charlie had hurriedly closed up their card-playing operation and hopped aboard the BART train, folding table in tow, in order to avoid a security officer they had spotted across the platform. They disembarked at the Embarcadero, one station ahead, and at the top of the stairs, across the brightly lit concourse, they saw a young man bent over his acoustic guitar case, fastening the clasps. Bert and Charlie assessed him as he put his arms through the two straps of his brown canvas backpack and then slung the guitar over his left shoulder.

He looked to be in his late teens or early twenties, was dressed in jeans, skateboard sneakers, and a loose-fitting, olive and brown flannel shirt, fully unbuttoned with a beige T-shirt underneath. He had blue eyes and short brown hair, gelled just enough to stay combed upward at the front, as was the current fashion. He was clean shaven and handsome. Bert guessed him to be a student.

The young man started to walk away. Bert and Charlie looked at one another.

“Follow him!” Charlie called out as the young man increased his pace. “I don’t want to slow us down with all this stuff.”

The young man, hearing the loud exchange, looked over his shoulder, evidently unsure whether the two men were conversing about him. He turned back and continued walking. Bert quickly started weaving through the dwindling crowd. The young man looked back, saw Bert coming, and instinctively started to put some distance between the two of them.

Bert caught up to him as the young man slid his pass card through the subway turnstile. “Excuse me. I’m--”

“Sorry, buddy. I can’t help you,” he said, and he passed through the turnstile, which locked back into place with a *thunk*.

Bert realized that the young man must have thought he was a panhandler. He watched through the iron bars momentarily as the guitarist took the stairs toward the northbound train. Bert glanced over each shoulder, and not seeing anyone of authority in the immediate area, vaulted over the turnstile.

Bert scurried down the subway stairs as the sounds of the incoming train rumbled down the tracks. He leapt the final four steps as the cars screeched to a stop and sprinted for the open doors of the train, squeezing inside seconds before they closed.

As the train gathered speed again, Bert looked around to see if he could spot the guitarist. A cursory scan of the car in which Bert rode showed that the young man wasn’t in that car. Unfortunately, Bert had entered the train at a car near the middle and wasn’t sure which way to begin searching. He started walking car by car in the direction



opposite to which the train was moving. In each car, he studied the passengers as he hurried toward the next car in line.

The train eased to a halt in West Oakland. Bert felt a moment of panic! He couldn't lose his quarry. Unsure whether to stay on board or not, he pressed his face against the window, straining to see if he could spot the guitarist on the platform. It was difficult to see through the crowd. Not seeing him, Bert made an instinctive decision to stay on the train. He hoped he hadn't lost him already.

Bert again moved between the cars, unable to find the young man as the train rolled on to each of the next several stations. Each time, when the doors opened, Bert looked out the windows to no avail. Each time Bert stayed put.

Bert reached the end of the train without finding the guitarist and hustled back through the cars until he reached the one in which he had begun. He then continued the search through the cars ahead of his, getting all the way to the other end without success. As he worked his way back, the train came to a stop in Berkeley.

There he was! Looking through the train window, Bert spotted the guitarist making his way toward the subway stairs. He wondered if the guitarist had spotted him on the train and actively evaded him for the entire ride. Bert jumped off the train just before the doors closed again and hustled after him.

Momentarily trapped behind a crowd of people plodding up the subway stairs, Bert kept an eye on the young man as best he could. He emerged into the daylight. There he was! Up ahead waiting for a traffic light to change. Bert broke into a light jog and caught up again as the guitarist was crossing the street onto the University of

California-Berkeley campus. Bert matched him stride for stride, perspiration beading on his face. The young man looked over at Bert, then drew back, startled.

“Listen, buddy. I told you I can’t help you. Stop following me!”

“No, no. You misunderstand. I’m the manager of this rock band that--”

“Leave me alone or I’m going to call the police.” Then he sighed, felt around in his pocket, and pulled out a five-dollar bill. “Here. If I give you this, will you go away?” he said desperately.

Bert stopped walking, deflated. He was trying to leave this life behind him, but the world continued to conspire against him. No. He would hold his ground. Reaching out, he gripped the young man’s fingers, closed them around the bill, and looked him in the eye.

“Look, kid. In thirty seconds, I’m going to walk away. I just want you to listen to me for that long. I’m not here for your money. You have the chance to be part of something special. Something that will change your life. There’s a band forming that will be like no other. I’m here to offer you a chance to audition for it. That’s all.” Then he let go of the hand.

“Are you done?” replied the young man.

“I’m done,” Bert answered, continuing to hold a steady look in the young man’s eyes. “I promised you thirty seconds. Thank you for listening.”

The young man turned his back to Bert and began to walk along the path that cut through the expanse of greenery that stretched across the college campus. Bert watched him walk away until the young man faded into the crowd.

\* \* \*

“So now what?” asked Charlie after Bert returned to the apartment and filled him in on the brief conversation with the guitarist.

“I don’t know. I mean, on the one hand, he was pretty hostile and condescending. On the other hand, he *was* playing in the subway, which makes him one of us. Bert laughed, “I suppose we ought to at least find out if the kid can play before we start crafting any plans to get him.”

“You think he’ll be back?”

“Who knows? I’ve found in life that people tend to stake out their territories and stick with them. Just look at you and me. And Abe. My guess is if we hang around the Embarcadero Station long enough, we’ll see him play.”

Sure enough on Wednesday, two days later, Bert and Charlie found the young guitarist playing in the same spot. This time, having timed their arrival better, they found him still strumming and singing. And the two men now had the answer to their question. The kid could play.

As he belted out the lyrics to Crosby, Stills, and Nash’s “Southern Cross,” a small but enthusiastic crowd created a semi-circle in front of him, stomping along to the music. A couple of onlookers strummed air guitar.

“...as big as the promise, the promise of a comin’ day...” The words of the song echoed through the corridor, the crisp, clear chords filling the cavernous station.

Charlie gave Bert a knowing look. “Okay, my fearless leader. *Now* we need a plan.”

Bert looked back at Charlie, acknowledging the comment, but remained silent in deep thought as the young man’s song ended and he started another. A few minutes later,

Bert said, "Let's stick with Plan A for now -- the direct approach. Let's talk to him when he's done."

When the young man finished his set and packed up his things again, Bert and Charlie were met with the same icy reception. This time, though, on the walk to the turnstiles, Bert was able to fill in the young man on his vision for the band, though it was hard to tell how much was being absorbed. The guitarist kept his gaze fixed forward while Bert and Charlie sidled alongside him, alternately looking at the side of his face and looking forward so as to not collide with anyone else in the corridor.

At the turnstile, the young man turned to address Bert and Charlie. "Look, guys. I appreciate the offer and all that. I'm just not interested. That's all. Now do me a favor, and please, *please* stop following me."

"We can't do that," Bert answered. "You're too good, and you're one of us. I know it."

"One of *who*?" asked the kid, beginning to lose his calm.

"One of *us*. The subway dwellers. The hungry, the cast aside, the unfulfilled..."

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Put it this way. I can see the passion in your music. It drives you. Just like everyone else in the band."

The young man waved his arms. "Look. I'm not a subway dweller, as you call it. I just play here to make a little extra money to put myself through school. That doesn't make me one of you. You guys are vagrants. Bums! I'm doing something with my life. Now stop trying to con me with whatever scheme it is you're working and stop following me!"

The vitriol slid off Bert like Teflon. He smiled slyly. “I like you, kid. You’ve got a lot of spunk. I’ll give you some time to think about our offer. We’ll be in touch. C’mon, Charlie.”

“Now what?” asked Charlie after the young man had disappeared from view. “I’m not getting the feeling that he believes us.”

“Hmmm. You’re right. That could be the problem. Maybe it’s *we* who need to audition for *him*.”

“Could be, but I also get the feeling he doesn’t like us.”

“Not *like* us?” Bert asked in mock disbelief. “Who could be more charming than we are?”

Bert and Charlie walked back to their apartment in virtual silence. The day had been so full of promise that escalated as they listened to the guitarist play. But their hopes had come crashing back to earth with the rejection and Bert had no Plan B.

At the entrance to their apartment, the day made an abrupt right turn. There, taped to the door, was a note folded in half. Charlie took hold of it and tugged carefully. Bert looked over Charlie’s shoulder as Charlie opened the handwritten note:

Bert and Charlie,

Hi guys! Please meet me at Union Square tomorrow at 3:00.  
I’ve got something to show you.

*Dave Hollaway*

The two men looked curiously at one another.

“What do you think he wants to show us?” asked Charlie.

“I don’t know,” Bert answered pensively, and then with customary optimism added, “but I think it means that tomorrow will be better than today.”

\* \* \*

When Bert and Charlie arrived at Union Square the next day, Dave was seated on the same steps as at their previous encounter, looking as if he had just come from his teaching job. He was dressed in khaki pants and a short-sleeved, madras button-down shirt. The legs of the portable piano rested on the concrete stairs on either side of him, supporting the keyboard that was perched inches above his lap.

Dave looked up when Bert and Charlie arrived. “You got my message! That’s great! I wasn’t sure if you would. I tried to call, but the phone just rang and rang.”

“Yeah, sorry,” responded Bert. “We don’t have an answering machine yet,” he offered in apology, then shifted tones. “It’s great to see you again!”

“You too. Thanks for coming.” Dave paused uncomfortably. “Listen, I’ve been thinking. I mean – you haven’t found a keyboard player for your band yet, have you?”

“Nope,” answered Bert. “It’s still yours for the taking.”

“Oh, good!” Dave let out a sigh of relief. “Actually, I wanted to play something for you. I’m not sure I’m much of a rock musician, but I thought it might be fun to try. You see, I’ve composed some classical stuff, but I never really got the chance to perform it, and well I thought, maybe if I could bring myself to drop my pretensions, I’d find another outlet for my music, and so--”

“You never have to justify yourself to us, buddy,” said Charlie, cutting off Dave’s nervous speech. “Let’s hear what you’ve got!”

“Okay. Here’s something I wrote. It’s still a bit of a work in progress, so it’s not fully polished, but--”

“Just *play!*” Charlie entreated loudly.

Dave interlocked his fingers and cracked the knuckles, gave a quick shake of his arms to loosen the tension, and started playing.

Dave’s fingers danced across the keys, and the size of the keyboard belied the sounds emanating from it. When Bert closed his eyes, it seemed as though a full band were accompanying Dave. The electronic keyboard provided the back beat, and the striking of the chords created a wall of sound that formed the backdrop to the melody line. Dave thrust the controls to full volume.

The song was crafted beautifully. It had elements of pop commercialism thrown in, but the song was much deeper than that. The hooks were supplemented by what were obviously orchestrated measures borrowed from Dave’s classical heritage.

Bert and Charlie recognized their good fortune immediately. Not only had they found their keyboardist, but they had a songwriter too. When Dave finished, he looked up anxiously and found the two men beaming.

“Yowwww!” exclaimed Charlie. “That was incredible. I mean, you nailed it! Don’t you think, Bert?”

Bert didn’t answer. He was now lost in his thoughts, beginning to visualize this whole thing coming together.

“Bert?” Charlie prodded.

Bert snapped out of it. “Oh my god, yes! That has got to be our first song. I don’t suppose you’ve written any lyrics for it yet?”

“Baby steps, Bert. Baby steps,” Dave answered. “Remember, I never thought of music as having words.” He shifted looks between the two men. “So what’s next?”

Charlie’s eyes turned toward Bert, and Dave’s followed. “Good question,” Bert mused. “Well, we still need a guitarist. And a bass player, though we haven’t even had the scent of a trail for one of those. The guitarist, on the other hand--”

“Oh, no,” Charlie cut in. “You’re not still thinking about that college kid, are you?”

Bert’s cunning smile answered Charlie’s question. Charlie rolled his eyes. “You know Bert, there are laws against stalking.”

“You know, I never liked those laws,” he answered, chuckling.

“What’s going on?” asked Dave.

Charlie explained how he and Bert had found the young guitarist, but how each of their two encounters with him had been about as successful as if they had asked out a swimsuit model to dinner and a movie.

“So what do you think, guys? Time for another visit with him?” Bert asked.

“How is this time going to be any different?” asked Charlie.

“How about this?” answered Bert. “Let’s bring your sax, and Dave, you bring your keyboard, and we’ll get him to listen to you guys play. When he hears how good the two of you are, I think he’ll realize that we’re serious musicians and not deranged old men.”

Charlie gave Bert a skeptical look.

“Okay, not *completely* deranged.” Bert laughed.

“What have we got to lose?” said Dave.



“I don’t have a better plan,” Charlie acknowledged with a shrug.

The three men debated what they would play for Ethan and decided upon the piece Dave had written. Over the next couple of hours, Charlie worked on his saxophone accompaniment while Bert sat and listened. Periodically, Bert interjected comments on what was working and what wasn’t, and they ultimately had something that, while not quite ready for prime time, was more than adequate for demonstrating their skills to the dubious college student.

The three agreed to meet at the entrance to the Embarcadero Station the next day at 2:00, instruments at the ready. They arrived within a few minutes of one another, and not seeing Ethan in the large hall, they waited. Sporadically, travelers traversed the concourse at an activity level consistent with a typical mid-afternoon weekday. The men’s eyes jumped to each of the points of entry each time they saw movement, anticipating each time that Ethan would be entering the station, but each time they were disappointed. Each time they heard footsteps in the corridor behind them, they turned, but it was always someone else.

As 2:00 stretched into 3:30, they abandoned hope and headed home for the day, agreeing to meet again on Monday. When Monday came and went without success, Charlie began to wonder. “Bert, do you think he’s given up playing here on account of us?”

“Could be. I don’t usually have that effect on people, but...”

“Should we try to find him at the school?” suggested Dave.

“I don’t know,” said Bert. “It’s a pretty big campus. And there are a lot of kids. It could take awhile.”

“Time is one thing we definitely have,” responded Charlie. “Let’s give it a try. If nothing else, we can always check out the college ladies while we’re wandering.”

“All right,” Bert said with a grin. “Just don’t go getting us into trouble.”

\* \* \*

The BART train let Bert, Charlie, and Dave out at the western edge of the University of California-Berkeley campus on the following day. The campus extended over a deceptively large 178 acres, its rolling green fields, wide pathways, and historic buildings seemingly worlds away from the urban feel of its perimeter. Buildings of white stone with red tile roofs dotted the campus. Interspersed between the buildings, amongst the greenery, college students could be found reading books, chatting, throwing frisbees, or engaging in any number of other study-avoiding activities.

Bert looked around. The late morning sun was approaching its apex and it was nearly blinding in the open space nestled between the large buildings. Students dressed in casual autumn wear were going about their business.

“What now?” asked Charlie.

“I guess we wander,” answered Dave.

So the three of them walked around the green, hoping to recognize the guitarist. Dave wasn’t going to be much help, having never met the young man, but he’d come along anyway for moral support. He wasn’t due at the music school that day until 2:00. Dave and Charlie hadn’t brought their instruments along, figuring that it would be a lot of carrying. Their hope was to convince Ethan to hear them play and arrange the time and place with him.

The group wandered through the campus for forty-five minutes. To Charlie's liking, there were indeed plenty of attractive female students to ogle, and he kept up a running assessment to Bert and Dave as they walked. However, there was no sign of the guitarist.

Eventually, they came upon the student union, a bland, concrete and glass structure on the southern edge of the campus. Bert stopped in front, and Charlie and Dave halted with him. "This area seems to draw a lot of traffic," Bert said, observing the crush of college students. "Do you suppose it would be more effective to hang out here and watch for him to wander by?"

But Dave wasn't paying attention. His eyes had been drawn to a yellow flyer stapled to a kiosk in front of the student union. He walked over to it and then motioned to the other two to join him. "This wouldn't happen to be your boy, would it?" he asked hopefully, pointing to the flyer.

Sure enough, though the picture on the flyer was a poorly reproduced photocopy, it was the guitarist from the subway. The text surrounding the picture announced that Ethan Banks would be playing at The Grind, a coffeehouse located on Telegraph Avenue, on Friday nights, from 7 to 10 P.M.

"Paydirt!" exclaimed Bert excitedly.

"Well, what do you know," said Charlie. "We found the needle in the haystack."

\* \* \*

That Friday night, Bert, Charlie, and Dave rode the subway together back to campus. Charlie and Dave had brought along their instruments, hoping to play for Ethan after his show ended. As Bert entered the coffeehouse, which was just across the street

from the campus proper, he felt a tingle of excitement, an incongruous combination of optimism and foreboding. It was that same exhilaration he would get as a child when he was doing something he knew he wasn't supposed to. Bert knew that the three of them would look oddly out of place in the coffee bar and it would be difficult to be inconspicuous, let alone comfortable.

Still, Bert maintained a confident front and led the two others into the square room, which was set up with couches, soft chairs, and small tables. At one end was a coffee counter, manned by a boy and a girl, presumably students at the college. Seated on a high barstool across the room was Ethan Banks, strumming his guitar and singing.

The tables were fairly full, but there were a few open ones. Bert nodded toward one as he spoke to the others. "Go grab that table and I'll get us some coffee." He then went to the counter to purchase three small cups of regular coffee, purposely avoiding the higher-priced lattes, mochas, espressos, and cappuccinos.

The cashier was an attractive young lady with short, jet black hair, a form-fitting black short-sleeved shirt, and low-rise black jeans. A series of progressively larger golden earrings scaled the outside of her left ear, and a matching solitary one pierced her left eyebrow. Bert thought that she'd be more attractive without all the hardware.

He paid her as the young man filled the cups. "Pretty good, isn't he?" Bert said, motioning toward the guitarist.

"Ethan? Yeah, he's the best! Cute too!" she answered in a schoolgirlish manner.

"Well, I wouldn't know about that," responded Bert with a laugh. "Do you know him?"

“No. Well, a little. I’ve spoken to him for a few minutes here and there between sets. Why do you ask?”

“No reason. Just making conversation.”

“You seem a little old to be here,” she said somewhat abruptly.

“Just a little reunion with some of my buddies. Class of ’78,” Bert lied. “Of course, that was before the age of coffee bars.”

She looked at him a bit dubiously, but didn’t say any more. She was interrupted when the other student-waiter placed the three coffees on the counter. Bert thanked them, carefully gathered up the cups, and went over to their table.

“Cream and sugar are over there,” Bert said, pointing behind him. As he sat down, his eyes met the guitarist’s. Did he detect a small jolt of recognition? Bert wasn’t sure if it was real or imagined.

As the set progressed, Bert sensed that Ethan was purposely avoiding looking at their table. When the set ended and Ethan leaned the guitar against the chair, Bert got his answer. Ethan was heading directly toward them.

“What are you doing here?” he demanded, not offering any greeting.

“We’re big fans of yours,” answered Bert, without any return of hostility. “We just came to see the show. Really great so far, by the way.”

“Look,” he said in a whispered scream, “I don’t know why you keep following me, but I already told you. I don’t want any part of you!”

A deep voice called out from another table across the room. “Hey, Ethan. Is that your father?” There was a murmur of giggles. Bert glared in frustration. Despite trying

to clean himself up, and despite moving in from the streets, the years of wear on his body, the old clothing, and the creases on his face betrayed him. He still looked like a vagrant.

Ethan gave the heckler a nasty look, then turned it back toward Bert. “Can’t you see that you’re embarrassing me?”

“Look, Ethan. All we’re asking is a chance for you to hear us play,” continued Bert. “How about when you’re done tonight, you give us just a few minutes.”

“How many ways can I say no? No! No! No! I’m not interested! Now *please* leave me alone! Do I need to call security?”

“Very well, boys,” Bert said turning to Charlie and Dave. “I can take a hint.” He looked back to Ethan and tipped his hat. “Til we meet again.” And with that, Bert, Charlie, and Dave rose from their seats and walked out of the coffee bar.

As they were heading back toward the short stairway that went down to street level, Dave suddenly said, “Guys, I’ll meet you outside in a few minutes.” Without explanation, he turned and went back in.

\* \* \*

Ethan was standing at a table, chatting with some people, when Dave motioned to him. Ethan walked over.

“You know,” Dave started, “those guys aren’t so bad. I was pretty reluctant at first myself. I mean, yeah, they may look like they just wandered in from the streets, but they had a life once, not so different from yours and mine. I truly think they’re on the path to something special. I’m afraid you’ll regret not giving them a chance.”

Ethan frowned. “Look, uh,--”

“Dave. Dave Hollaway.” Dave extended his right hand and Ethan shook it.

“Dave,” Ethan repeated. “You seem different. What are you doing with those guys? Are they friends of yours?”

“No. Well, yes. They are now. But I’m a music instructor. I teach classical piano and music theory at the San Francisco School of Music. I used to perform a lot, but I haven’t performed seriously in quite awhile.”

“That’s funny,” Ethan said thoughtfully. “I almost went to SFSM. You could have been my instructor.”

“So what do you say? Will you give them--us--a chance?”

“I don’t know. I’m still not sure I’m ready to start hanging out with a bunch of derelicts, recovering or otherwise.”

“Think about it, okay?” Dave asked.

Ethan looked at him. He didn’t nod yes, but he didn’t nod no. Dave smiled, placed Bert’s card in Ethan’s hand, and walked away.

Outside, Bert asked Dave what he had gone back for. Dave recounted the brief conversation.

“Any hope, you think?” asked Charlie.

“I don’t know,” answered Dave. “Maybe.”

\* \* \*

The following Friday, Bert, Charlie, and Dave were back at work implementing Plan C. Charlie and Dave had voted to give up on Ethan and return to square one in looking for a guitarist, but Bert wanted to keep at it. The pursuit of Ethan had become personal. Reluctantly, and with the promise that it would be the final attempt, win or lose, the other two went along.

At Bert's direction, Charlie and Dave had spent the week between their last encounter with Ethan playing music together. They worked on the arrangement of the song Dave had written, as well as some other funk-ed-up instrumental pieces from Charlie's past. Bert would have preferred to bring Aaron, and maybe even Abe, into the sessions, but time was too tight. Also, Bert knew that Charlie and Dave were his two best musicians and he wanted his A-team out there.

Ethan was scheduled to play The Grind at 7:00 again. At 5:30, the three pursuers were out in front on the narrow sidewalk, Dave seated on a bench with his keyboard standing on its legs before him, Charlie with his saxophone, standing to Dave's right, and Bert about twenty feet away, leaning on the plate glass window front of the music store next door. As the two musicians wailed away, Bert smiled, observing the onlookers who walked between them, pausing to listen to the music.

Charlie and Dave sounded great. As the minutes passed by, more and more students stayed on to listen, forming a semi-circle in front of the two performers that was two or three deep, effectively blocking the flow of pedestrians.

Bert was relaxing and enjoying the music when he suddenly snapped to attention. With guitar case in hand, Ethan was heading toward him. Without a word, Bert caught Ethan's eye and casually nodded in the direction of the crowd.

Ethan, looking curious, craned his neck over the people gathered in front of him, to observe what was going on. He turned away from the crowd momentarily, looking as if he was going to continue past them and on into the building, but he stopped in his tracks and turned back.



Minutes passed, and Ethan stayed in place watching the performance. Bert had sneaked up behind him, and catching Dave's eye, Bert signaled Dave to play the tune he had written. Dave caught the signal, nodded to Charlie, and the two executed a smooth transition.

"This is our first song."

Ethan, not realizing that Bert was right behind him, jumped at the sound of Bert's voice, but then recovered and looked at him long and hard. "All right. I'm in," Ethan said at last.

"Yes!" Bert exclaimed, pumping his fist, unable to contain his excitement. "You won't regret it."

"A few caveats though."

"Whatever you say."

"First, school comes first for me. Second, I want to keep my solo gig here on Friday nights. And third, and most importantly, you need to understand that I'm joining you for the music. We're not buddies. We're not going to be hanging out together." He paused. "I'm not 'one of you' and I never will be."

"Fair enough," responded Bert, the elation of the moment overwhelming Ethan's slights. Like a salesman who had closed the deal, he would work out the difficult details later.

"Here's how to reach me," Ethan said, writing his number on a scrap of paper and handing it to Bert. "I need to go now."

Ethan headed for the doorway into The Grind.

“By the way,” Bert shouted to him, causing Ethan to look back over his shoulder before the door swung closed. “That girl who works in the coffee bar thinks you’re cute.” Ethan gave a surprised smile, turned, and walked into the lounge as Bert stood there chuckling, feeling pretty pleased with himself.

## Chapter 6 – Gene

Bert needed a few days off. He wasn't used to working such a vigorous schedule - or at least relatively vigorous. It had been years since the days of being in the office by 7:00 A.M. and leaving at 7:00 P.M. That was on a good night. On many nights Bert left the office even later, and frequently had business dinners or cocktail parties or was on the road.

But now things were different; his stamina was gone. Bert was reminded of a time in his youth when his doctor had finally removed the cast from a broken arm. Expecting to be at full strength, Bert had been surprised to find that the muscles had atrophied and that he had difficulty lifting even light objects in any repetition. But in time, with some regular therapy and repeated exercise, Bert's arm returned to its original strength.

That's how Bert felt now. He realized that the days of meandering aimlessly around the city had taken their toll on his body and his endurance. These last two months he had operated on the adrenaline that came from the vision before him, but that power was now sapped. He would regain his old form, he knew, but it would take time.

The weekend had passed since the last encounter with Ethan, and Bert had done little more than relax at the apartment. On Tuesday morning, he decided to walk down to the wharf. He always found the area by the bay invigorating.

He stopped at Ted's for a cup of coffee.

"Bert Ingram, how the hell are you!" came Ted's cheery voice. "Still rounding up that band?"

Bert came to life a little more. “Almost there, buddy. Just need a bass player. I don’t suppose you’ve got one lurking in the back somewhere?”

“I just sold my last one,” Ted answered with a hearty laugh. “I wish you had told me. I’d have held one for you. By the way, did you ever find that Bongo Joe kid?”

“I sure did, Ted. In fact, I owe you one. He’s our drummer.”

“Pretty good, is he?”

“A bit rusty, but he’ll come around.”

Ted waited on a stray customer and then returned. “About this bass player, Bert, you haven’t stumbled across any around the city?”

“No. Unfortunately, it’s not the type of instrument you see a lot of soloists playing. I don’t mind scouring the streets of the city, but my gut tells me I’d be years waiting to happen upon one.”

“Have you considered placing an ad in the newspaper?”

“Yeah. That might work, but it just doesn’t have the right feel to it. Seems too conventional.”

“Oh, yeah. I forgot. Essence of the city. Wretched refuse, huddled masses, all that stuff.”

Bert laughed. “Something like that.”

“Want me to put up a sign here? Would that help?”

“Maybe. Let me think about it.”

“What about your past, Bert? Didn’t you say you used to be well connected in the music industry? Anyone out there from your former life?”

“Hmmm. That’s a thought,” Bert mentally logged the idea for later.

The two men conversed a few minutes longer, with traffic at the restaurant pretty slow at the mid-morning hour. In another hour or so, the place would begin to buzz with lunchtime activity. Bert paid Ted for the coffee and said his farewell.

Down at the wharf, Bert wandered along the edge and sipped the coffee through the small opening in the plastic lid.

*Someone from the past. Someone from the past. Think, Bert.* Bert strained to get clarity in his mind, mentally traveling back in time through the haze of the recent years. *Where to start?* There were so many bands, so many musicians. Would there be someone from one of the bands he'd managed who'd be interested? And if they were, how would he find them? Bert's industry ties were now separated from him by a wall of relationship neglect.

*Wait a minute. There was that one guy.* Bert was suddenly struck with the memory of a bass player who had worked in the background on a handful of albums by the bands Bert was managing at the time. *A studio musician. What was his name?*

Another thought struck him, a cold bucket of reality to the face. That guy had been no spring chicken back during the recording sessions, and they were at least twelve years ago, maybe even fifteen. Still, he wondered. He could still be around. *Think, Bert, think. What was his name? John? Jerry? George? Something like that.*

Bert swallowed the last drops of coffee, crushed the Styrofoam cup in his hand, and slam-dunked it into a nearby trash can. He needed to get back to the apartment to make some phone calls. Maybe someone at one of the studios would remember.

Bert walked home briskly, rejuvenated with the prospect, albeit a slim one, of locating the long lost bassist. He fumbled with the lock in his excitement to get started.

Once inside, he threw his jacket over the couch and sat down at the kitchen table with the cordless phone.

Bert's rolodex of contacts from years ago was long gone. He had tried to take it with him the day he was asked to clear out his desk, but someone had wisely made sure to take it and all the necessary files out of the office before Bert was allowed back in to claim his personal belongings. It was of small consolation to him to know that he probably would have lost it by now anyway.

Bert's first call was to Backwoods Studios, a place that was anything but backwoods, located on Cahuenga Boulevard in one of the busiest areas of Los Angeles.

"Backwoods Studios, can I help you?" came the polished feminine voice.

"Uh, actually," Bert started, not really having laid out his thoughts in his mind. Then, regaining the composure built from years of salesmanship, he continued, "I'm trying to locate a musician who used to work there."

"Name?"

"Bert Ingram."

"I don't know of anyone by that name."

"Oh, sorry," Bert laughed. "I thought you meant my name."

"What's the musician's name?" she responded impatiently.

"Well, here's the thing, Miss--"

"Candice."

"Here's the thing, Candice. I don't know his name. You see, I manage bands, and I'm looking for a fellow we did some work with there several years back. Could I try to describe him to you?"

“You can try, but I’ve only been here a few years.”

Bert went on to describe, as best as his memory would allow, the distinguishing characteristics of the bassist. When he had finished describing the rail-thin, African-American with the narrow beard that looked like someone had run a magic marker from one ear to his chin and back up to the other, and the teeth with the pronounced overbite, Candice gave him the answer he expected. She had no recollection of anyone fitting that description.

Bert thanked her and hung up the phone. Undeterred, he spent the better part of the afternoon telephoning studio after studio. It occurred to him that perhaps one of the producers might know of the bassist. He continued the calls, doubling back to those he hadn’t asked about producers.

Each time, Bert would first run through the names of all the producers he could recollect. And each time he met a dead end, he would ask who was currently producing recordings there. He then logged the producer’s name, the studio, and the producer’s phone number.

When Bert had exhausted all the studios, he found himself left with a list of seventeen record producers, along with telephone numbers for eleven of them. Having put in a good day’s work, and noting that it was getting late in the afternoon, Bert decided to quit for the day and pick back up in the morning.

At 10:30 A.M., feeling that he had given the producers sufficient time to be out of bed and working, accounting for their lifestyles, Bert began making calls. He reached voice mailboxes for the first two, and the third, whom Bert reached on his cell phone, couldn’t recall anyone fitting Bert’s description.

But the fourth call that morning, to what turned out to be the cell phone of a record producer by the name of Chelton Matlock, hit paydirt.

“Hmmm. Tall, thin, crooked teeth? Black fella, right?” he asked.

“That’s right,” Bert answered. “Know anyone like that?”

“Receding hairline?”

“I’m not sure, really. It’s been awhile since I’ve seen him.”

“Always dressed in black?”

It hadn’t occurred to Bert, probably because he had only seen him a handful of times, but now that the man had mentioned it, Bert did recollect that he always wore black. “Yes! He did always dress that way!” Bert said excitedly.

“Then you must mean Gene Thomason,” said the producer.

“Gene! That’s it. Do you know where I can find him? Tell me he’s still alive.”

“Well, I can’t tell you that for sure. I haven’t been in touch with him for awhile myself. But I can give you the last address and phone number I have for him.”

Bert eagerly took down the information on a piece of paper. After thanking the producer profusely, Bert hung up and dialed directory assistance in San Rafael. He asked the operator to confirm that there was indeed a Thomason listed at the San Rafael address given to him. There was! Bert hung up the phone elated. Now he needed to pay Gene a visit. It had been too long, and the relationship was too distant for a phone call to be sufficient.

Bert had never gotten used to not having a car and was frequently frustrated by the need to get to most places on foot or via the bus or subway system. Public transit was fine for the heart of San Francisco, but outside that central area, transportation was a



nightmare of inefficiency. It seemed to him a lifetime ago that he had whatever resources he needed at his disposal. But over the last twelve years, almost exclusively due to the transportation issue, Bert had spent virtually all his time confined, prisonlike, within the perimeter of the city by the bay.

He mapped out in his mind the absurd amount of effort it would take to get to the San Rafael address just thirty minutes outside the city. He could take a bus to the town, which would turn the thirty-minute trip into one of probably triple that length with all the stops en route. And who knew how long he'd have to wait for the bus on the return route if he didn't time it well? Then he'd have to pay an exorbitant fare for taxis to and from the bus station in San Rafael, assuming that one could find a taxi in the suburb. Either that, or he'd have to go find a local street map and then navigate his way on foot. Ugh!

After thinking through this painful option, Bert decided that it might be best to impose upon Dave for a ride. Dave was the only member of the band in sufficiently adequate financial stead to afford a car. Maybe he'd be willing to be chauffeur for a day. Bert made the call to Dave, who agreed to do the trip on Friday, when his class schedule was blank.

When Friday arrived, Dave picked up Bert in his bright blue Ford Escort at 9:30 A.M. Bert figured that if he arrived at 10:00 or so, that would be early enough that he might find someone home at the address, but not so early as to be completely intrusive.

The roads north out of San Francisco were relatively uncongested, the vast majority of the morning commuter rush having cleared out already. It didn't really matter though, since they were driving against the commute. They crossed the Golden

Gate Bridge with the morning fog obscuring the water below, making it look as if the bridge stretched over the clouds.

In San Rafael they stopped in the downtown area and asked in the post office for directions to the house address, which Bert had scrawled on a piece of paper. They followed the verbally given directions, entering a suburban community that slowly rose up a hill. Finally, they turned right into a quiet cul-de-sac containing ranch-style homes side by side around the perimeter.

Dave stopped the car along the curb outside number six. "It's all yours, buddy," he said to Bert.

Along the way, the two men had strategized about how best to approach the bass player. They had decided that rather than double-team him with a complete stranger and a near stranger, it would be best for Bert to speak with him alone. It was also their best hope for some recognition of Bert. It had been a long time since the two had worked together, and even then, their interactions had been occasional and few. Bert had also aged, and the time had not been altogether kind to him. Still, those in the biz tended to keep a mental library of others in the biz. After all, it was a business that more than almost any other depended upon relationships.

Bert strode confidently up the driveway and along the cement walk to the front door. He rang the bell and waited, beginning to fidget a little. Through the small window panels that surrounded the door frame, Bert could see a young African-American woman approaching. She opened the door just a crack. "Yes?" she asked.

“Hi. I’m Bert Ingram,” began Bert. “I was told a Gene Thomason lives here. Or maybe used to,” he added, aware that this woman, who appeared to be in her mid-twenties, might be too young even to be Gene’s daughter.

“I’m sorry. He doesn’t live here any longer. Why are you looking for him?”

“You know him?” Bert responded, ignoring her question for the moment.

“I’m his granddaughter. And you--”

“I used to work with your grandfather. One of the finest studio musicians I ever had the pleasure of knowing. I was hoping I could maybe persuade him to join my band. We’re still in need of a premier bass player.” Bert was trying hard to turn on the charm, but he feared it didn’t come quite as readily as it used to.

“Oh, I see,” the young woman responded, trailing off in thought. She didn’t speak for a few moments, presumably unsure of how much to tell the stranger. Then she spoke again. “My grandfather, is, well...he doesn’t play anymore. He’s retired.”

“Is he okay?” Bert asked.

“Yes,” she answered quickly, sensing Bert’s concern. “He’s fine. In fact, he’s in a retirement community just up the road. I imagine you could visit him there, if you want.”

Bert told her that would be great and got the name of the community and the simple directions. He then thanked her warmly and returned to the car.

“Whispering Forest Retirement Community?” Dave asked. “Sounds like one happening place.”

“Full speed ahead,” instructed Bert.

Whispering Forest Retirement Community was just that. The woods along the main roadway opened briefly to reveal a flagstone marking the entrance and a narrow, meandering road leading into the community. The road was flanked by more woods, which finally gave way to a sprawling complex of two-story buildings, each one stretching over the equivalent of two city blocks. Dave followed the signs to the main building and parked the car.

This time, they both got out. Dave would wait in the lobby while Bert met with Gene, assuming he was there.

Inside the swinging glass doors, Bert and Dave were met by a middle-aged receptionist sitting behind a desk off to the left side. Straight ahead, the white tiled floor gave way to an expanse of cream colored carpet which defined a sitting area, complete with sofas, armchairs, and coffee tables. An elderly gentlemen sat reading quietly in one of the armchairs, but otherwise, there was no activity.

Bert asked at the desk for Gene. The receptionist looked up the phone number in the faux leather bound residence directory and dialed. Bert and Dave waited anxiously for the woman to start speaking, but she continued to hold the phone to her ear in silence. After what seemed to be more time than was reasonable for someone to make their way to the phone, she placed the handset down.

“He’s not answering,” she said, stating the obvious. Then she added, more helpfully, “You may want to try the clubhouse. I know he spends a lot of time there.”

The clubhouse was tastefully decorated in wood with gilded accents. It wasn’t Bert’s taste, but it offered a sense of casual elegance. Both men were immediately struck,

though, by its eerie quiet. There was something sterile and uncomfortable about the place.

They wandered along, listening as the sound of their own footsteps clattered on the tiled floor. Eventually, they heard some noise and entered a large sitting room that held a piano, couches and chairs, an unlit fireplace, and a buffet table with danish and coffee. There was a cluster of elderly ladies chattering away and Bert could discern ‘Can you top this?’ stories about one another’s grandchildren.

Off to one side, a smaller room contained three card tables, one of which was occupied by a group of men playing poker. Almost immediately, Bert recognized Gene and signaled to Dave to wait in the larger room for him.

Bert walked over to the card table. The men were in the middle of a game of seven-card stud, and the five men still in the game had two cards face down and three cards face up in front of each of them. Gene was showing the two of clubs, six of spades, and nine of hearts. It didn’t look good.

Gene looked up at Bert. “You look familiar.”

Surprised, Bert answered, “We’ve worked together. The music business.”

Looking at his cards, Gene thought for a minute, nodded with a self-satisfied smile, and then proclaimed flatly, “Fried Monkey Spleen.”

“Excuse me?” Bert responded as Gene folded his hand.

“Fried Monkey Spleen,” Gene stated again, as if this were a perfectly normal course of conversation.

Then it registered and Bert let out a laugh. He and Gene had worked together on a handful of projects, some of which had been moderately successful. But the one that

had stuck with Gene was the comically disastrous Fried Monkey Spleen incident. Bert had almost completely forgotten about it.

Fried Monkey Spleen was a band for which Bert had taken on management responsibility. He would have described the appointment as a lapse in judgment if not for the fact that he had tried as hard as he could to steer clear of the band. The four-member band, if you could call it that, was a collection of nineteen and twenty-year-olds from Omaha, Nebraska. Bert had often wondered if they had been kicked in the head by mules a few too many times.

The bunch of wild, hillbilly rockers could barely play their instruments. But they had somehow captured the spirit of America's youth and become worshipped poster children for anti-establishment teenage rage. An independent single had received some airplay locally and the attention became national when their antics started making headlines.

By the time Bert got involved with them, they were on their third label and fourth manager, and they still hadn't completed their first album. It was almost becoming a battle of personal pride for the band to see how many of each they could wear out.

When the band booted out their fourth manager--their first while under contract with Sapphire Records--the recording company had turned to Bert. He protested, begged, and pleaded, but to no avail. He was seasoned, and Sapphire thought that if anyone could tame the band, Bert could.

Bert inherited the partially complete recording and had brought in Gene and a bunch of other studio musicians to try to enhance the album with something

approximating music. His strategy was to use the Fried Monkey Spleen members to lay down the basic tracks and then fill in around them.

It wasn't a bad strategy until the lead singer found the drummer having sex with the singer's girlfriend in the equipment room during a break. As the girl scrambled to dress and get out, the two boys took turns hurling musical equipment at one another -- guitars, microphone stands, amplifiers, whatever they could get their hands on.

The violence spilled out into the studio and continued until virtually every piece of recording equipment had been smashed, several windows had been shattered, and both boys had ended up in the hospital for treatment of their cuts and bruises.

The band never mended after that incident and Sapphire ended up releasing a mini-album of five of the tracks, which was greeted with respectable, if not overwhelming, enthusiasm.

Bert laughed hard, a deeper and more natural laugh than he had had in quite some time.

Gene rose while addressing the other players. "Deal me out for a bit."

"That's quite a hand you had there," Bert said to him in jest as they walked away from the table. "I hate to pull you away from it."

"Yeah, that's how it's been running all day. But it's better to have lousy hands like that than hands that are just good enough to lose. That's when it gets expensive." He winked at the wisdom of his own commentary. "So what brings you out here, uh--I'm sorry, I've forgotten your name."

"Bert Ingram."

“Ah, yes. Bert. What brings you out here, Bert? You’re not ready for a retirement community, are you?”

“Just the opposite, actually. My activity level hasn’t been this high in years.”

Bert went on to tell him about the band.

“... and so,” Bert concluded hopefully, “I’m here to coax you out of retirement. What do you say? All we need is a bass player.”

“Wow,” Gene mused, “that’s quite an offer.” He chuckled to himself. “I can just imagine the look on my granddaughter’s face if I told her I was working again.”

“Why wouldn’t she want you to?”

“Oh, you know, the usual stuff, my health, my age. And she always felt that I was taken advantage of. You know, she and I are pretty close, and she’s always tried to look out for me. I think she thinks that I could have been some famous musician, but that I got relegated to the background, helping other musicians make the big time while my contributions remained virtually nameless on the fine print of the album sleeves.”

“Could you have been?” asked Bert.

“What? Famous?” Gene asked. Bert nodded. “Sure, I mean, I was always confident of my talent. But it just never happened for me. So that’s what she’d be concerned about. More of the same. I guess that’s my reservation too.”

“It wouldn’t be like that this time. You’d be a permanent and equal member of the band. Creative input and everything. Just a bunch of guys chasing the same dream.”

“I have to admit, it does get a little dull around here. There’s only so much poker, bingo, pool, and stories about grandchildren a man can take.”

“You’ll give us a shot?” Bert asked.



“Let me think about it. Can I give you a call in a day or two?”

“Of course,” answered Bert warmly, removing a business card from his jacket pocket. “Here’s how to reach me. I look forward to the call.”

\* \* \*

Rather than return to the card game, Gene took a detour to his apartment. He needed to know more about Bert. He placed a call to Sherman Mack, his former agent. Sherman, who was on his way to a client, didn’t have any recollection of Bert Ingram, but he told Gene he’d make a few calls and see what he could find out.

Gene returned to the card game, but he couldn’t concentrate. All he could focus on was Bert’s proposal. After awhile, he returned to the apartment and spent the remainder of the day mulling over the offer. *One more try. Should I give it one more try?* Gene liked what Bert had said about being a permanent and equal partner in the band. He had always felt that his awkward appearance had played some role in his inability to become a permanent member of a band. Bert was looking beyond that. He always had. The more Gene thought back, the more he remembered his time spent working with Bert. Bert had always treated Gene well.

Gene’s thoughts were finally interrupted by the sound of his telephone ringing. It was Sherman.

“Okay, Gene, here’s what I found. This guy, Bert Ingram, was a pretty successful guy at Sapphire Records awhile back. You probably knew that already, though. He rose through the ranks pretty quickly, but then he flamed out.

“But here’s the real kicker. No one in the industry has heard anything from him or about him in at least ten years. Word is that there was a big falling out over at

Sapphire and the execs there lost faith in him. It sounds like whatever it was turned out to be a career ender. Seems he just disappeared after that. Can I ask you why you're asking about him?"

Gene told him about the conversation earlier that day.

"I don't know, Gene. Sounds a little peculiar if you ask me," Sherman said after Gene finished. "Listen, I need to run. I've got someone here waiting for me. Give me a call if you need any help."

Gene thanked him.

"Anytime," Sherman replied. "Just be careful with this guy."

Gene hung up the phone and thought some more. He felt like a jilted lover who couldn't stop returning to the cheating partner. He continued deep in thought until he drifted off to sleep for the night. The next morning, his gut told him the answer that his head had tried to convince it of the night before. He took a deep breath and made the call to Bert.

"Give me some good news!" Bert said after Gene announced himself.

"I'm in," Gene stated firmly.

Sounding jubilant, Bert told Gene that he would be in touch for their first rehearsal shortly.

The band had been born.

## Chapter 7 – The Garage

Bert looked at the faces of the men assembled before him: a motley group. He chuckled at the contrasts between young and old, black and white, and large and small, as well as the range in social strata, from desolate at one end to borderline comfortable at the other.

The men sat in the living area of Charlie's small apartment, with Bert's sleeping bag rolled up and tucked neatly into a corner. Abe sat next to Gene on the couch that doubled as Charlie's bed, the huge singer dwarfing the elderly bassist. Aaron, his dreadlocks bouncing, leaned on the armrest at one end, while Charlie perched on the other end, managing to look elegant. Dave stood behind the couch, surveying the room as if ready to teach a music class. Ethan sat off to himself on the floor, leaning against a small side table and looking sullen, his legs fully extended in front of him in his usual student's jeans. The musicians eyed one another awkwardly, uncertain what they had gotten themselves into.

Four days had passed since the late October trip to San Rafael that had landed Gene. In that time, Bert had contacted each of the band members and instructed them – yes, instructed, for he was now their manager -- to meet at the apartment to kick things off.

With everyone gathered, Bert performed the introductions and asked each of the members to give a little background information about himself. One by one, the members spoke.

Throughout the bios, Ethan sat alternately staring at his shoes and tilting his head up toward the ceiling. Eventually, Charlie reached the point where he could no longer ignore Ethan's body language. "What's bothering you?" Charlie asked him.

"Nothing," replied Ethan flatly. "This just isn't really my scene."

"Oh, I get it," responded Charlie, "You're a college man. Born into a life of privilege--"

Ethan cut him off. "Look, it's not that I think I'm better than you." He paused in thought for a moment. "Just diff--"

"Let's talk about our musical style," Bert cut in before Charlie could escalate the confrontation. "We need to feel like we're a rock n roll band with the soul of the streets in us. We'll be heavy on the saxophone and the bass line, so we'll cross over into R&B and funk. Sound good?"

"Works for me, dude," replied Aaron.

A few of the others nodded, while the rest just looked at Bert, signaling they were with him.

Bert continued, "To get us started, I have a CD for each of you of some songs that I'd like you to practice so we can learn to play together."

Over the last couple of days, with the assistance of Dave and his computer equipment, Bert had scraped together a basic collection of soulful rock music from Abe's collection, making CDs for each of the band members. It had taken some convincing for Abe to let the strangers into the sightless, organized world of his little apartment, but Bert had reminded him that his word was his bond and that he had come through on his end of the deal by finding the other band members. Part of being in this band was sharing

resources, and Bert knew that Abe's collection would be a great source for music from the industry's legends.

Bert continued to address the assembly as he distributed the discs. "The purpose of these is to establish a common ground so we can start learning each other's strengths, weaknesses, and tendencies. Dave here has a gift for writing and he's already put one song together, which is also on the CD. We still need to come up with the lyrics, but the music will get us started."

Abe spoke for the first time outside of his exceedingly brief bio when he had said, "I'm the singer. I sing. I'm not here to give a history lesson." Now he motioned in Ethan's direction. "I have an idea. Why don't we let our little scholar here write the words for us?"

Ethan responded, his abrasiveness rising. "I don't know that I can put together the word from the streets. I'm that 'child of privilege,' remember?"

"Heh, heh, the college boy can't write," laughed Abe.

"At least I have some personal pride, unlike some of you. Do you really think anyone is ever going to invite us to go on stage one day looking like this?"

Bert cut in again. "All right, ease up everybody. Here's what we're going to do. We don't need to love one another. Lots of bands have survived and even thrived with internal conflict. But just so we all know, this is not a five-year development plan. Everybody's hungry. We don't know each other that well. We'll get restless quickly, I know, so I want us to move forward with a sense of urgency. Keep your focus on the band and your role and leave the rest to me. Okay?"

Bert looked at each member. No one spoke, so Bert raised his voice. “*Okay?*” Heads nodded. “Okay, then. Today’s Tuesday. Let’s meet at Dave’s house for our first practice session two weeks from today, say three o’clock? It’s okay if we use your place, isn’t it, Dave?”

Bert had been unable to come up with another practical location for the band to practice. He’d ultimately decided that by asking Dave in front of the others, Dave would have difficulty turning him down.

Dave’s face turned pale. “B-b-but, Bert,” he said, “I haven’t, I mean, I need to clear this with, you know, my wife. I’m not sure how keen she’s going to be to use our house as a rehearsal studio.”

“You have a garage, right?”

“Yeah.”

“There. So we don’t even need to go in the house.”

“That’s not the point. She already thinks I’m half crazy with this band. Once the neighbors start complaining and ...” Dave caught the crushed look on Bert’s face. “Oh, all right,” he said in surrender. “I’ll work it out.”

\* \* \*

Ethan waited until each of the other band members had filtered out of the apartment, and then approached Bert. He looked uncomfortable. “Listen, maybe I shouldn’t have come here,” he said.

Bert desperately needed a way to lock in Ethan until the band got some traction. “Ethan, I know we can work through this,” he said earnestly. “Let me make you a deal. Give me until the end of the school year. If you still don’t want to be here then, you can

walk away and you have my word. No more stalking.” He smiled at the word, thinking back to his travails in getting Ethan here in the first place.

“How do I know I can trust your word?” Ethan asked.

“It’s all I’ve got,” replied Bert with a fixed gaze.

Ethan thought for another moment and then answered, “All right. That’s fair. I’ll give you until then. But no longer.”

\* \* \*

Dave had cleared out his one car garage as much as he was able. He lived in Bernal Heights, south of the city’s downtown area. His home was modest in size and painted pale blue with white trim. Both the blue and white paint showed signs of aging and cracking, but for the most part, the house gave the impression of a firmly middle class family taking pride in what they owned.

The split-level house itself was already cramped with Ann and the two children. Between the three bedrooms, the family room/living room with attached small dining room, the tight kitchen that wasn’t large enough to accommodate even a small table, and the one and a half baths, Dave and his family were using all the available space. Now Dave had needed to clear out much of the detached garage and find places for the years of accumulation somewhere inside the house. Much of it made the trash pile, but what didn’t, Dave piled onto the top shelves of virtually every closet in the house.

He wasn’t sure what to expect when the band arrived, or even if they would arrive. At some level, he felt that this whole experience bordered on the surreal, and that he would one day awaken to find that it had all been a dream. After all, here he was, a

forty-two year old suburban music teacher, aligned with downtrodden strangers in the hopes of rekindling his lifelong pursuit of musical accomplishment.

*But am I chasing accomplishment or merely acknowledgment?* he wondered. He couldn't deny his deep-seated need for external recognition of his musical skills and a justification for the years spent practicing. It wasn't about the fame or money. It was about self-worth. *Or is this what a midlife crisis feels like?*

Realizing that time was running short, his attention returned to the garage, with its oil-stained cement floor, walls of exposed 2x4's revealing the dry wall attached to their far side, and two bare bulb industrial light fixtures mounted on the ceiling. He'd left a few items on the shelves, mostly gardening and automotive supplies, but the rest of the garage, and in particular the floor, had been cleared out.

The band would be arriving in a few minutes, and he imagined where each person and piece of equipment would be set up. It would be tight. He wondered if they would even be able to close the garage door.

Aaron was the first to arrive. He emerged from the passenger seat of a well-worn Chevrolet Cavalier, the rear seats and trunk filled with his disassembled drum kit. Dave helped Aaron unload the equipment onto the grass near the curb while Aaron's friend who had driven him waited, the car idling. Aaron yelled out a quick thank-you as the car pulled away and he and Dave began carrying the kit to the garage.

"Not a very portable instrument, the drums, are they?" said Dave, making conversation with the young drummer.



“Nope. Makes it a little tricky to practice, dude. You can’t take them outside easily, they take up a lot of space at home, and pretty much everyone complains no matter where you play.”

“I’ll help you set up,” Dave offered, having seen enough equipment in his time to be able to adequately lend a hand. While they were working, attaching cymbals, moving pedals, and twisting clamp bolts, Dave’s son Jack came into the garage.

Jack stood a little more than four feet tall with curly, sandy hair. He looked very much the school kid in his high-top canvas sneakers, baggy pants, and pocket T-shirt.

Dave noticed him first. “Jack, go back into the house, please.”

“Dad, can’t I stay and watch? Pleeese!” Jack pleaded.

Jack trotted across the garage to watch the two men.

Dave shook a finger before Jack could whack the cymbals with a raised palm.

“Jack, this is Aaron, I mean, uh--”

Aaron cut in. “Hi, little dude! My friends call me Bongo Joe. How old are you?”

Jack ignored the question. “That’s a funny name.”

Aaron started to answer, but Dave cut in firmly. “Jack, I need you to go inside with Mom. We’ve got a lot of work to do out here.”

“Okay,” Jack answered in a disheartened tone, then slumped his way back through the garage side door, across the short walkway, and into the house.

“He’s a great kid,” Dave said to Aaron in explanation, “but he would have trouble staying out of the way if I let him watch. He’s somewhat learning challenged, so we have to be a little extra careful with him.”

“How old is he?” Aaron asked.

“Just turned nine last week. He goes to Howell Elementary. My wife and I wanted to send him to a special education facility, but Jack really wanted to stay in the regular schools. We agreed to let him as long as he showed he could keep up.”

“How’s he doing?”

“So far, so good. I mean, he works twice as hard as any other kid and that’s just to get ‘C’s’, but he’s handling it.”

Their conversation was cut short by Ethan’s arrival, guitar case in hand. “I see our leader hasn’t arrived yet,” he said scornfully.

“They’ll be here, dude,” Aaron responded quickly. “It wouldn’t hurt for you to cut them a little slack.”

“Well, maybe you have time to waste sitting around, but I have a life outside of this,” Ethan returned.

Aaron pointed to Bert and Charlie, who were coming up the driveway, followed by Abe who swept his cane in front of him. “See? Nothing to worry about,” Aaron said.

“All right. Let’s get set up,” barked Bert eagerly as he strolled into the garage. “Who’s missing?” He looked around. “Ah, Gene. Well, let’s get set up and hopefully he’ll be here in a few minutes.”

Sure enough, by the time everyone had unpacked and plugged in their instruments, Gene had arrived and joined them. “Sorry I’m late, fellas,” he said. “I’m not yet adjusted to having to depend on the buses.”

It was cramped in the garage, but it worked. Aaron put his drum set in the rear of the garage, facing out, with the side door immediately to his right. Gene sat to his left, his amplifier wedged behind him, between the drum set and the wall.

Ethan stood in front of the drum set, with Dave to his left. Dave positioned his keyboard parallel to the side wall of the garage so he could sit with his back to the wall and not block Gene's view outward. Out in front, just where the inside met the outside, stood Abe, with Charlie to his right.

Bert addressed them. "Close your eyes now and burn this moment into your memories. Think about it as we strike the first notes. When we've reached our destiny, you can think back and remember this as the moment when it all began." He paused to let each of the band members contemplate what he said. Then he shouted, "Let's start with 'Dock of the Bay.' Bongo Joe! Give us a four count and then everyone come in."

Aaron held his drum sticks aloft so they were visible over the drum set and struck them together, simultaneously counting off, "One, two, three, four!"

And the music began.

Well, it was something approximating music, Dave thought as he winced. The sound fell somewhere midway on the spectrum between music and white noise. Not as bad as some of his students' beginning efforts...but chaotic. Though the tune was clearly recognizable, it sounded as if each musician was locked in a separate room, each told to begin playing at a specific time, but just off enough from one another to produce a sound consistently out of phase.

It didn't help that Aaron's drum tempo was inconsistent, the pace quickening and slowing sporadically throughout the song. But that was clearly not the only issue. As the members tried to adjust to one another, they simply created different out-of-phase sequences. When the song ended, they looked to Bert for reaction.

“Okay, let’s try it again now that we’ve had a chance to run through it together. Bongo Joe, keep the drumbeat steady. Gene, turn up your amp just a touch. Dave, you’re getting ahead of everyone. Remember, this is an expressive, thoughtful, reflective song. Play to the mood. Bongo Joe! Four count!”

And so it continued. The second rendition was a slight improvement from the first, and when it was over, Bert had the band go through it a third time. Over the course of the next hour and a half, Bert dragged the band through this song and a couple of others from the CD he had provided. Each time, he added some instruction and some words of encouragement. Dave was impressed. He usually taught individual students and admired Bert’s ability to orchestrate the ensemble.

Several times, the band members verbally sparred over who was throwing off whom, who was too quick, too slow, who was making mistakes, who was too loud, who was too soft. Perhaps struggling the most was Abe, who did yeoman’s work, holding his melody despite the conflicting timing behind him.

About half an hour into the practice session, Dave had noticed a crack of light emanating from the doorway that led outside from the garage. The door would slowly open wider until it got just wide enough to reveal a pair of eyes peeking through and then close again whenever he looked over in that direction. After a couple of tries, Aaron was able to catch Jack’s eyes and signal him with a head nod to come into the garage and join them. Jack opened the door and hesitatingly walked into the garage. Aaron gave him a big smile and motioned to him to take a seat on a crate along the wall.

Dave started to send a glare Jack’s way, but Aaron caught his eye and gave him a comforting nod that conveyed that Jack was fine where he was.

Jack sat quietly through the remainder of the practice, a behavior that surprised Dave. While Jack had always been a good-hearted kid with the best of intentions, his learning disability frequently manifested itself as an inability to focus on any one thing for long and a compulsion to start wandering and exploring. Dave liked to deal with him in a quiet environment whenever he could, to help Jack with his control and learning issues and not have them out in the open.

When the practice session ended, under Bert's direction the band worked out a practice schedule, factoring in both the commitments of the working members of the band and Ethan and Dave's class schedules. Bert had made a modest and unsuccessful effort to convince Dave to take a leave from his job and Aaron to quit his in order to devote themselves entirely to the band, but he didn't push too hard. It was too early, and he knew that the band's credibility didn't justify it yet. He had steered clear of asking any time concessions of Ethan. The group finally agreed to meet on Tuesday and Thursday afternoons and Saturday morning each week.

When the band members dispersed, Aaron hung around for a few minutes to talk to Jack. "So, Jack, what do you think of your dad's band?" he asked.

Jack looked up at him, and in a reserved, quiet way, commented, "Dad's CD's sound better."

Aaron laughed. "You know something? I think you're right. You had fun watching us, though, didn't you?"

Jack nodded.

Aaron continued with a genuine warmth in his tone. "Do you like music?"

Jack nodded again.

Aaron put his hand on Jack's shoulder. "Well, dude, I need to get going. But it was really nice meeting you. I hope you'll come watch us again on Thursday. Maybe one day we'll sound as good as your father's CD's." Aaron smiled and shook Jack's hand.

"Hey, Dave!" Aaron called while Dave was straightening out the garage a bit, "Do you mind if I leave my drum set here?"

"Not at all, Aaron," came the answer. "See you Thursday."

Aaron gave Jack a wink, waved a goodbye to Dave, and headed out of the garage and up the street.

## Chapter 8 – The Lesson

“I don’t know, Ted.” Bert sighed. “I’m starting to become concerned that the band won’t ever blossom.”

Three weeks had passed since the first practice session at Dave’s house. Dave had continued to churn out songs, creating the instrumentation for three new ones since the day he’d debuted his first one for Bert and Charlie in the park two months back. And the songs were fabulous.

But on the performance side, while the band had improved upon the cacophony of their initial jam session, they had quickly reached a plateau. At each of the practices over the last week, the band had sounded flat and uninspired--as if they were mechanically producing each note rather than having the music stream through their senses. It was stiff and businesslike, not fluid and natural. Like the manager of a baseball team in the middle of a losing streak, Bert was finding that the more he and the members pressed, the more tense and error-prone they became.

“How long have you been at it now?” Ted asked. “A few weeks?”

“I know,” responded Bert, “patience, patience.”

Ted smiled at Bert, silently acknowledging that Bert had accurately predicted his advice. “How’s that drummer kid I helped you out with?”

“To tell you the truth, he’s been part of the problem. Good kid, don’t get me wrong,” Bert quickly added, knowing that Ted would be embarrassed if Aaron had been a source of anxiety for Bert. “In fact, everyone in the band loves him. Well, maybe everyone but Ethan. Ethan doesn’t seem to like anyone.

“It’s just that Aaron--you know, Bongo Joe--needs to unify the band with his drum beat. But he’s erratic and inconsistent and I think that makes it harder for the others.”

“Are you thinking about replacing him?”

“I think about it a lot, but something inside keeps telling me he’s the real deal. I just need to find a way to reach him.”

“I admire your faith. What about Ethan?” asked Ted, shifting gears. “You say he doesn’t like anyone?”

“Yeah. Well, maybe Dave. I think he thinks Dave is on his perceived level. The kid has a chip on his shoulder. I’m thankful that we have Dave there to help mediate.”

“How does the band feel about Ethan?”

“They keep their distance from him for the most part. Ethan isn’t too subtle or reserved with his feelings, so the band members pretty much know where they stand with him.”

“Thinking about maybe making a change there?”

“No,” Bert answered without hesitation. “He’s probably the best musician we have after Dave. Ironic, huh? I wish I could combine Aaron’s easygoing manner with Ethan’s ability. Then I’d have something.” He laughed and took a long drink from the coffee that sat on the counter in front of him. “Then again, it could be that easygoing manner that’s getting in Aaron’s way.”

“Need a refill?”



“Sure,” Bert said gladly, pushing the coffee cup forward on the bar. He adjusted his position so that his crossed arms now rested on the near edge of the bar, and he leaned forward on the stool, eager to hear Ted’s thoughts.

“What kind of songs have you been playing?” Ted asked.

“Mostly classics -- Otis Redding, Otis Blackwell, Faces. We also started on the songs Dave wrote, you know, filling in the instrumentation behind the melody. Good tunes, but they still need a lot of work. The guys are having some difficulty with them. Right now, it’s been a little easier to work with the songs they know.”

Ted went to wait on another customer and returned a few minutes later. “So what kind of music do you envision your band playing, I mean once you hit your stride?”

Bert described his vision of a unique, not easily categorized sound with a rock n roll foundation, heavy bass line, saxophone accompaniment, and a big, full texture with elements of R&B and funk.

“Street thump,” said Ted matter-of-factly.

“What?”

“Street thump. That’s what I call the music that blasts out of those boom boxes the kids set up when they’re hanging out down here on the wharf. You know, when the music is so loud that all you can pick up is the bass line.”

“I love it!” exclaimed Bert.

“You love that noise?” Ted’s eyebrows shot up.

“No--well, I do like that sound, though it’s obviously not being played with the right balance. I mean, I love the name ‘street thump.’ Can I steal it for our identity?”

“Of course.” Ted laughed. “It’s just something I made up. Just remember to acknowledge me on your first gold record.”

Bert finished his coffee, thanked Ted for the inspiration, and feeling renewed with energy and focus, headed off.

\* \* \*

The band continued to rehearse and improve, not in leaps and bounds, but little by little. At one of the sessions shortly after his talk with Ted, Bert addressed the band. “Gentlemen,” he said, “I have a musical direction for us. Are you ready?” He looked around at the expectant faces. “It’s called ‘street thump.’”

“What the hell is that?” asked Abe derisively.

Bert gave the band members a wide smile to acknowledge their confused looks. “We need a style that separates us from the thousands of other bands jamming away in garages all over the country. And that style is ‘street thump.’ What does it mean, Abe? It means what we feel it should mean.

“Create a sound in your mind. Think about roots rock, add in a strong base line, toss in Charlie’s saxophone, a funk-ed-up drum beat. Make it fun. Hip. Vibrant. Let it flow through you. That, my friends, is street thump.”

“I like it,” said Dave.

“Me too,” chimed in Charlie. “It’s got a certain panache.” Around the room, the band members nodded heads.

“Speaking of naming things,” said Dave, “when do we give ourselves one?”

All faces turned toward Bert. “Any ideas?” he asked the group at large.

Abe piped up. “How about Abe and the Wanderers?” A murmur of dissent went through the group.

“What about an antiestablishment name like the heavy metal bands use? Like ‘Alcatraz’ or ‘Biohazard?’” suggested Aaron.

“Or a punk name like ‘Exploding Mucus,” offered Dave jokingly.

Several moments passed in silence as the musicians thought, trying to conjure the right name for their collective of misfits. At last, Gene broke the silence in his quiet voice. “The Redeemers,” he said.

A hush went around the garage as each of the members knew that the soft-spoken bassist had just taken a fastball and pounded it into the upper deck.

“The Redeemers,” echoed Charlie in a whisper.

“Wow. That’s it. That’s the one,” said Aaron emphatically.

Bert could almost hear the heavenly trumpets announcing their approval: The Redeemers.

\* \* \*

The band was taking a break an hour into the next rehearsal session. To Dave’s surprise, Ethan approached.

“Hey,” said Ethan.

“Hey, what’s up?”

“Can I talk to you about something?”

“Sure.”

“You know, I’ve been assessing the band, and I think that your friend Bongo Joe is killing us. I mean, we’re starting to come together and he’s the only one not getting

any better. I know I criticize a lot of things, but I do really want this band to work out. If we're all going to invest this kind of time and effort, we might as well do it right."

"Aaron's just as much a member of this band as you and I are, Ethan," responded Dave.

"No, he's not," Ethan countered. "Aren't you watching him? There's no passion, no fire. He's a slacker!"

Aaron had finished adjusting his drum kit and had come up behind Ethan as he continued to rail. "Until he decides he wants to win, he's going to be a loser and drag us down with him!"

"We need to stick together. He'll get there," Dave replied calmly, and then watched as a dissatisfied Ethan abruptly turned and walked away, bumping Aaron's shoulder as he stormed off. Dave wasn't so sure about Aaron either, but he wasn't ready to give in just yet. Besides, he really liked Aaron and so did Jack.

Right from the first encounter, a bond had formed between Aaron and Jack. Jack would come out to the garage and listen to the practice sessions, always sitting quietly on the crate near the drum set. Aaron was always the last to leave, taking the time to check in with Jack on what he had been up to: school, his friends, the skateboarding that Jack loved. On a couple of occasions, Aaron had brought his own board to Dave's and shown Jack a few moves.

When Bert dismissed the band, Jack came running over to Aaron, but Aaron explained that he couldn't stay. Dave observed Aaron's unusually downbeat demeanor. "Everything okay?" he asked.

Aaron paused. "Yes, fine, it's just...no, well--" The frustration was evident in Aaron's face and his eyes were glassy, not quite teary, but teetering on the edge. "It's just that I can't believe it's happening again," he managed to get out.

"What is?"

"Oberlin."

"What does Oberlin have to do with this?"

"I heard what Ethan said to you, you know, about me dragging down the band. It's just like what happened at Oberlin."

Dave sent Jack into the house.

"So you went to Oberlin?" he asked of Aaron.

"Yes, believe it or not. But I never finished. The instructors said I wasn't taking it seriously enough. That I didn't work hard enough. But I was practicing! They just didn't believe me."

"What happened?"

"Early in my second semester there, I got a call to come to the dean's office. Evidently several of my instructors had questioned whether I had the mettle to be there."

"Go on."

"They told me that I needed to work harder. My first semester scores weren't that good, but I had attributed it to being a freshmen. I guess they hadn't. Anyway, I was told that I had until the end of the second semester to get my scores up."

"And?"

"And it didn't happen. I was asked to pack my bags. So I came home and started working down on the wharf, washing dishes. That's where Bert found me."

“Wow,” Dave whispered, “that’s a disturbing story.”

“Yeah, so now I feel like it’s déjà vu. It’s just a matter of time until you guys give me the pink slip.”

Dave nodded and pressed Aaron’s shoulder. “I wouldn’t start worrying about that yet. I think the guys like you. You can’t worry about what Ethan says. I don’t think he’s had a kind word about anyone.” Then he held up a finger. “However, I’m not sure that you’re giving it your all.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, be frank with me. How much are you practicing?”

“I practice!” exclaimed Aaron defensively.

“Do you have a drum set at your apartment?”

“No, you know my drum set’s here. I can’t take it back and forth all the time. I use my drum pad in the apartment.”

“Look, Aaron. I’ll give you a key to the garage. You can come here whenever you like. The garage is far enough both from my house and the neighbors that I don’t think you’ll bother anyone. Do yourself a favor. Just come and play. No excuses.”

Dave let the exasperation he was feeling show. He knew deep down that once he stripped away the wonderful relationship Aaron was building with his son, what he was left with was an underachiever. A slacker, just as Ethan had said. “You know, Aaron,” Dave concluded, “I wish that Jack had half of your God-given ability.”

“Aaron!” The conversation was cut short by the shout from Jack, who had tired of waiting and had returned. “You said you’d help me with my homework today.” The prior week, Dave had told Aaron that Jack was struggling mightily in his social studies

class work. They were studying U.S. geography. Aaron had asked Dave if he could tutor the boy. Dave didn't see any harm in Aaron trying so he had agreed.

“Okay, okay,” Aaron said to Jack. He rubbed Jack's hair playfully. He turned on the spry tone that adults often use when conversing with children. “Let's go in the house and you can show me what you're supposed to be learning.”

Escorted by Dave, Aaron and Jack set up at the small, rectangular dining room table. Ann was preparing dinner on the kitchen counter nearby.

“Let me see your assignments,” Aaron began.

Jack pulled a folder from the backpack that lay under his chair and handed a stack of slightly wrinkled papers to Aaron. With few exceptions, the papers had checkmarks indicating that the work was correct. On several pages, there were little notes such as ‘Nice work!’ or a smiley face. One of the sheets had a line drawing of the United States and Jack had written in all the state names. Another had asked for the capitals of ten states and Jack had filled in nine of the ten blanks correctly.

Aaron caught Dave's eye. “I don't get it.”

“Come with me,” Dave said. “Jack, could you start working on tonight's homework, please? I need to speak to Aaron for another minute.”

Aaron rose from the table and joined Dave in the hallway. Dave spoke in a quiet tone. “You see, Jack can do the work. It just takes him much longer. He's incredibly determined and methodical. Did you see that map?”

Aaron nodded.

“He used his textbook to copy the state names, one by one, onto that paper. And it took him well over an hour to do it. We try to help him, but he really wants to do it and

learn it on his own. The problem is that he has difficulty absorbing the material. Once the exercise is complete, he is unable to spit it back out on the exams. He seems excited about you helping him, so maybe you'll have some luck."

"Okay, now I understand. I'll see what I can do," responded Aaron who then returned to the table.

\* \* \*

"Let me see your test results," Aaron said to Jack.

Sure enough, the papers which Jack handed Aaron were marked with F's and D's and occasionally a D+ or C-. Jack had evidently made it this far on the strength of his homework assignments, Aaron concluded.

"You like music, right?" he asked Jack.

"Yes," Jack answered.

"Let's start with a little song. This is one I learned when I was your age." He started singing, "Alabama, Alaska..." and continued through all the states. All the while, Jack sat there attentive and smiling. "...Wyoming." Aaron finished. "See? I've remembered that for my whole life. Now this time, you sing with me."

Aaron wrote out the names of all the states in alphabetical order and the two sat there, singing together. "Now the country music version," Aaron instructed and sang it with a southern twang, eliciting giggles from Jack. "Now the hip hop version," Aaron shouted and shifted styles, motioning his hands like a rapper while Jack made beat box noises. When they finished, Dave and Ann clapped.

It was getting to be near dinner time, so Aaron wrapped up the lesson. He instructed Jack to work on the song and told him he wanted to hear it after the next



practice session. He also told him he'd teach him some cool tricks about remembering things about the states.

Over the course of the next several weeks, the two continued to work together. Aaron would remain after the practices and coach Jack through his homework. Aaron had been an only child, and often wondered what it would be like to have a little brother. With Jack, he began to realize what it was like to emotionally invest in someone.

Aaron used mnemonics to help Jack remember things like Dogs Play Near Golf Courses, My Mother Says New Violins Never Need Repairs to remember that the thirteen original colonies were Delaware, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Georgia, Connecticut, Massachusetts, Maryland, South Carolina, New Hampshire, Virginia, New York, North Carolina, and Rhode Island. And through the songs, the word associations, and other learning tricks, it seemed as if Jack was making some progress. In any case, it was obvious that he took Aaron's approach seriously as he worked to absorb the teachings.

\* \* \*

In the band, Aaron's drumming continued to be a sore spot. He had made a few trips to the garage as Dave had suggested, but only for an hour here and there. During a break in one of the sessions a few weeks after Aaron had overheard Ethan, Bert approached him. "Can I talk to you outside for a few minutes, Bongo Joe?"

This was the one part of the business world that Bert surely didn't miss. He enjoyed the creating – discovering talent, placing managers, working with producers. He despised the destroying.

The two walked outside, behind the garage. The bright sun shone on them, and both squinted as they waited for their eyes to adjust to the light.

“Bongo Joe, this is hard for me to say, so I’m just going to say it straight out.” Bert took a deep breath. “I really like you personally. The band really likes you. But you’re not cutting it.” In the back of Bert’s mind, he could hear the pledge he had made to Charlie, what seemed like a lifetime ago, that he would address Aaron’s skill level if it came to impact the band. And it had.

“Are you saying you’re kicking me out?” Aaron was visibly shaken.

“No. Not yet, anyway. But we’re going to have to start looking at other drummers if you can’t pick it up. I know in the beginning that you told us you hadn’t played in awhile, so we hoped that with time and practice, you’d come around. After all, the audition in your apartment wasn’t spectacular. You know that.”

Aaron nodded.

Bert continued. “I just don’t see any significant progress being made. Everyone else is making strides. As the manager, these are the types of things I need to address. You know, as they say, it’s business, nothing personal.”

“I understand,” said Aaron, pulling himself together. “I’ll work harder. Don’t worry. You don’t have to start looking yet. Can you give me a little more time? I really like being part of the band.”

“I’m happy to hear that, Bongo Joe, but you need to realize that it’s not all about having fun. There’s work – serious, hard work – that needs to be done here.”

Aaron returned Bert’s gaze solemnly.

“Look, I can give you a little more time. That’s fair. I just don’t want it to come out of the blue if we have to make the hard decision. Consider this your friendly

warning.” Then Bert gave him a smile and extended his hand. Aaron took his hand and shook it, and the two strolled back around and into the garage.

That wasn’t the only conversation Bert needed to have that day. As the band members were packing up their instruments and saying their good-byes for the day, Bert approached Gene. “Can I walk you to the bus stop? There’s something I wanted to ask you about,” he said.

The bus stop was a half mile away, and the two men started walking toward it along the neighborhood streets.

“Gene. You haven’t said a lot, but I know you’ve got some thoughts. You’ve been in this business a long time. You’ve seen bands come and go. My question is, well, what’s missing here?”

“You don’t think it’s going well?” Gene asked.

“Do you?” Bert countered.

“I’m not sure yet,” Gene responded in his soft-spoken, earnest voice. “You’ve cobbled together a pretty diverse group here, Bert. It’s gonna take some time to get everyone in harmony, to break down the barriers, to get chemistry.”

“Go on.”

“But there’s a lot of heart and soul in these guys. My gut still tells me you’re onto something.”

“What about Bongo Joe? How much of our trouble is his drumming?”

Gene gave a half-smile. “That’s a piece of it, to be sure, but I don’t think that’s the main issue.” The men waited at a traffic light, then crossed the street and headed north.

“What *is* the main issue?”

“I think we’ve got to get these boys out of the garage.”

“What do you mean?”

“I *mean*,” Gene said, “where did you find Abe?”

“Singing in the Montgomery Street subway station.”

“How about Charlie?”

“The subway at Sixteenth & Mission.”

“Ethan?”

“Okay,” Bert said, beginning to see the light. “I get it. But what about the others?”

The two men had reached the bus stop. Gene halted. “Dave has spent his whole life in front of people,” he continued. “The subway ain’t exactly Lincoln Center, but it beats the hell out of playing in some garage for him.”

The bus arrived, and people were stepping out and maneuvering around Bert and Gene. When the riders were done exiting, Gene stepped onto the first step of the bus and turned back toward Bert. “Think about it, Bert,” he said. “I think it’s time for a change in venue. These guys like to be in front of an audience.” The bus doors closed. Bert watched Gene give the fare to the driver and walk toward his seat as the bus pulled away.

## Chapter 9 – The Subway

Gene's message echoed in Bert's head on his long walk home and all through the night. *Is this the time to make a radical change, or is it better to patiently grind it out as we've been doing? How long can I keep the band together without a light at the end of the tunnel?* He had asked Ethan to give him until the end of the school year to have something to show for his efforts. He knew how long he had there. *But the others?* There weren't any rumblings of dissension yet, but Bert had learned long ago to anticipate problems and make course corrections along the way. If you waited until your ship sprung leaks, sometimes you couldn't bail water fast enough. *And what about Bongo Joe? Will our talk have any impact? Or do I need to find a new drummer?*

It felt great to have his mind fully engaged again, Bert thought to himself. He'd trade the troubles of his life on the streets for these new troubles any day.

When he awoke the next morning, he had arrived at a decision and felt renewed with energy. He would follow Gene's counsel. It was Sunday, an off day for the band, so he went down to the Powell Street BART station to scout out a spot. He had his eye on a large open space inside the main entrance, with the chrome and glass entrance to the San Francisco Shopping Centre, a massive indoor mall, just across the tiled concourse floor. All week long the area bustled with activity.

Bert had some logistical issues to address there, and in short order, located electrical outlets used for the cleaning equipment that the band would be able to utilize for the instruments. He also arranged for the use of a storage closet in the mall to stow the band's equipment.

When Bert returned home, he called the band members to tell them to meet at the new location on the coming Tuesday. He called Dave first. “Dave, I’ve got some good news for your wife. She can have the garage back. We’re going underground!”

“Underground?” Dave asked.

“Yes. I’ve got it all arranged already. Gene and I thought that the band needed a change of scenery. Nothing against your garage, of course, but we thought it might help the band to get back to its roots by playing in the subway corridors. What do you think?”

“Do you think we’re really ready to play in public?”

Bert hesitated. “Truthfully, Dave, no, I don’t.” But you know what? I think these guys kind of enjoy being out there in public. Hell, you do too. And it’s not like we’re at some major arena. It’s just the subway. We can practice there in full public view.”

“That would work for me,” Dave said. “And it will help keep the peace here with Ann, though I know Jack will be disappointed to not have the band here.”

“Okay, then I’ll see you there Tuesday.”

Bert made the round of phone calls to the others. Aaron was the only one with practical concerns, explaining to Bert that he couldn’t just leave his drum set disassembled in some storage room if Bert wanted him to keep practicing.

“Hmmm,” mused Bert. “I have an idea. Why don’t you go ahead and get yourself a second set that you can keep near the subway?”

“Buying a second instrument might be easy for some of the guys, but remember, I’m just a lowly dishwasher.”

“All right. Tell you what, and this will show you how much confidence I have in you after our talk. How about if I front you half the money and you can pay me back out of your first few paychecks once we start playing paid gigs? You could get a used set.”

“And if we don’t ever get those gigs?”

“We will,” Bert replied confidently. “But just to ease your mind, you won’t owe me anything if that doesn’t happen. Consider it a cost of the band for me.”

Bert made the offer not without worry. He had scraped together enough money to keep the band afloat for a little while, but he had to keep these unexpected contingencies to a minimum. As much as his head told him to cut bait with Bongo Joe, his gut told him to keep the faith. And Bert always followed his gut.

Aaron agreed to split the cost with Bert, who hoped the arrangement would help the drummer make a stronger commitment to the band. Sure enough, by day’s end, Aaron called Bert to say he was in possession of a perfectly serviceable, albeit slightly dinged and dirty, drum set he’d found advertised in one of San Francisco’s alternative weekly newspapers. It was amazing how effective Aaron could be when he applied himself, Bert thought.

The band convened on Tuesday just as Bert had envisioned, setting up inside the main entrance between two large cylindrical support columns. To their right was the entrance to the mall. To their left, the outside world. The enormous face of a man on a backlit indoor billboard advertising cologne seemed to look on.

“Look around, everyone,” said Bert. “See all the faces watching us with curiosity as they pass?”

Sure enough, the mass transit riders all turned their heads as they passed the band's set-up, no doubt curious at seeing a full ensemble rather than the more common solitary performer.

Bert continued his sermon. "They are your audience for now. And believe me, they'll let us know how we're doing. If we're doing well, you'll see it in the smiles on their faces as they pass. You'll see it as they linger and maybe stop and listen for awhile. So play to the crowd. They are our barometer."

Bert called to the drummer, "Bongo Joe, you ready? 'Whipping Post!' Four count!"

Aaron smacked his sticks together and the band all joined in on cue for the Allman Brothers' song. Ethan's electric guitar work was deft, as usual, and filled the subway's open space beautifully. Dave's keyboard supported the melody and Gene's pulsating base line bounced off the ceramic tiles. Charlie's sax wailed. Abe crooned from deep within his soul. "*Sometimes I feel....sometimes I feeeeeel.*"

"Wow!" thought Bert, struck by how great the band sounded. They were *on*. The band looked almost giddy: something was starting to come together.

"*Good lord, I feel like I'm dy-in'.*" When Abe, a cappella, pounded out the final stanza of the song, the band looked elated. A chorus of cheers rang out from passersby and Bert applauded.

The band played on, running through the repertoire of songs. The Redeemers were grooving. Even Aaron was keeping the rhythm well.

Bert didn't want to push things too far and give back any of the ground the band had made that day, so he ended the practice session early, sending everyone off in the



best spirits he'd ever seen them. Bert had not allowed doubts to creep into his consciousness, but until that moment, he knew that buried deep within himself, clawing to get out, was an uneasiness, a fear that the band would never flourish. He didn't fully realize it was there until the moment it was gone.

\* \* \*

Dissention returned at the following practice session. Bert had called for the band to play one of Dave's songs, but shortly into it, it was obvious that Aaron hadn't worked on it.

Ethan stopped playing suddenly and banged his guitar on the tile floor in frustration. "Jesus Christ, Bongo Joe! What are you doing?"

The music screeched to a halt as the band members, one by one, stopped playing. "I-I'm still working on this one," Aaron stammered. "Give me some time. I'll get there."

"Not at this rate!" returned Ethan. "It doesn't even sound like you've practiced it. I don't know about these other guys. Maybe they're okay with mediocrity, but I'm getting pretty tired of carrying you along."

"Ethan's right," said Abe, "and believe me, I don't like saying that. But man, you've got to get with the program. You're dragging us down."

Aaron flushed. "I just haven't had the time, that's all."

"Come on, man. You need to *make* the time," Charlie said to Aaron. "You know that." He looked at Aaron imploringly. "Just get your act together. We need a drummer who works as hard as the rest of us do."

Bert and Gene observed in silence, Bert wanting to let the band work things out on its own, and Gene, as was his trademark, staying in the background unless something needed to be said. But the things that had needed to be said, had been.

Bert spoke crisply. "All right, everyone. We'll work more on that next time. Bongo Joe, can you work on that one, please? Let's run through the cover list."

The band played, but the damage had been done. The words to Aaron stung and there was a palpable tension in the air. Not only could Bert feel it, but it was visible in the faces of the passersby. They stopped to listen, but not for as long, and not with the same radiating appreciation. The band had reverted to its mechanical, rigid state.

Abe approached Bert during a break. "Hey, mister hot shot manager," he started in. His tone connoted scorn, not humor. "It's time for you to show me something. If you want to manage this band, you need to manage it."

"What do you mean?" Bert asked.

"You know damn well what I mean. That is, if you're really what you say you are. A seasoned manager wouldn't let his band be crippled by a musician who can't pull his weight."

"Bongo Joe, you mean?"

"Yeah, of course I mean Bongo Joe," Abe snapped. "I'm getting tired of busting my butt while he just cruises along."

Bert wasn't happy listening to Abe's diatribe, but there was a silver lining. At least Abe was starting to communicate with him. Up until then, Abe had quickly cut Bert off anytime he tried to have a conversation of any substance with him. Maybe in some twisted way, Abe was starting to feel like he could open up to Bert.

“Listen, Abe. I hear you. You have my word. I won’t let it stay this way.” He paused for a moment. “Thanks for sharing your feelings with me.”

“Yeah,” grumbled Abe. “Well, don’t read anything into it.”

\* \* \*

Toward the end of the session, Aaron noticed that Jack had arrived with Dave’s wife, Ann. “Oh, no,” he thought, “I don’t want him to see me this way.” But there wasn’t much Aaron could do about it. He bravely put on a smile for Jack, the boy who accepted him unconditionally.

When Bert called the practice session to a halt and the band members started to quickly and quietly pack up their equipment, Jack came running over to Aaron. Ann strode up behind Jack and stood over Aaron, who was now kneeling down and holding Jack in his arms.

“Guess what, guess what!” Jack squealed.

“I give up,” said Aaron.

“Look!” gushed Jack, thrusting a white sheet of paper in front of Aaron’s face. Aaron saw the A- on Jack’s social studies test and looked up at Ann, who had tears forming in the corners of her eyes as she looked on.

“Aaron,” Ann began, “you don’t know how much this means to him. And to us. He’s never received higher than a C+ before. But you really inspired him. He’s worked so hard and believed in himself, and you’ve come along and done what none of us could. He’s so excited because he really, really didn’t want to let you down.”

Aaron moved Jack gently away from his chest and put his hands on Jack’s shoulders. He looked into Jack’s eyes. “Jack, I am so proud of you,” he said. Then he

looked up at Ann ashamedly and said to her, “He’s the one who’s the inspiration, not me.”

\* \* \*

Charlie buzzed around Bert as the two men headed out of the station toward their home. “Bert, you promised. You said if Bongo Joe wasn’t up to the task, you’d find us a new drummer. It’s time for you to surrender, man.”

Bert had had enough. The sniping was coming at him from all directions. He bit his lip and accepted the realization that he couldn’t delay any longer, lest the band lose faith in his leadership. “All right. You win,” he conceded quietly.

Something still troubled Bert about the decision and he felt no relief in having made it. He just couldn’t put his finger on what was bothering him.

\* \* \*

Aaron was serious this time. Jack had inspired him, and after taking Jack out for a celebratory pizza, Aaron stopped home and retrieved his iPod and speakers. He then walked briskly to Dave’s garage with a single thought in his mind. It was time to search inside himself and find the drummer with all the promise that was in there.

It was close to 6:00 P.M. and the mid-winter sun had already set when Aaron arrived at Dave’s garage. He let himself in, flipped on the lights, and closed the door. The silence and emptiness were a little spooky and disconcerting at night, but he shook off the feeling. There was the drum set, sitting silently near the back of the garage. It seemed to be facing him in some sort of Wild West showdown. Aaron found an outlet, plugged in the iPod and docking speakers, and pressed ‘Play.’

Music filled the garage as Aaron took a deep breath, walked over to the drum kit, and took his seat on the stool behind it. He picked up the drum sticks and then, summoning all the latent energy inside himself, he let loose, holding back nothing as he pounded the skins and cymbals. He practiced and re-practiced the rhythms and maneuvers with a determined discipline like he had never done before. This time, it was not just a quick once over and then on to the next thing. No, tonight it was different.

Aaron realized that for the first time, he wasn't forcing himself to practice. It was what he wanted to do. He visualized himself up on stage, sweat dripping all over, pounding rhythms as the crowd roared. And he liked what he saw.

He worked through section after section of the songs on the iPod, determinedly going back over and over the same track until he felt comfortable enough to move on. Throughout the night he pressed on, taking breaks just long enough to sip the Red Bull he had brought and to switch songs.

At 4:15 A.M., his arms sore and becoming jellylike, Aaron took a look at his watch. He was surprised how quickly it seemed to have gotten so late, and knowing that he needed to be at the restaurant in fewer than six hours, he decided to go home and get a few hours of sleep. He resolved, though, that he'd be back at it again that afternoon right after work.

\* \* \*

With Charlie's incessant prodding, Bert was forced to focus on finding a new drummer. "We don't have the time to wander the city now, waiting for the karma to be just right," Charlie told him. "Let's just run an ad in the Guardian."

Somewhat reluctantly, Bert agreed. Charlie was right. They didn't have the time or energy to start scouring the city all over again. He called an ad into the weekly newspaper to run the next Wednesday and put a false contact name in, just on the off-chance that Aaron or one of the other band members noticed. Not that the other members wouldn't endorse the change.

\* \* \*

Aaron had virtually moved into Dave's garage. Day and night he banged the drums, stopping only to go to the bathroom, eat the brown-bag meal he had brought, or rest his weary arms. He was exhausted, sleeping no more than five hours per night, but he was on a mission.

On one occasion, Dave had yelled out to him and come running up. "Here's the key to the house," he said, placing a key in Aaron's palm and closing Aaron's fingers around it. Aaron raised his eyebrows. Dave then said, "In case you need to use the bathroom, or need a drink of water or something." That was all he had said.

Aaron nodded his understanding and gave a one-word response. "Thanks." Dave had turned and walked back into the house. The two had an unspoken understanding: Aaron needed the space to find himself.

At the practices over the next week, Aaron didn't engage in much conversation. His drumming had improved somewhat and the flare-ups had subsided. The band was playing at a respectable level, nothing spectacular, but passable. And bland. The chemistry was still off, not having recovered from the big falling-out over Aaron's drum work, and the grumbling continued.

\* \* \*

Another week went by, Bert's ad had run, and the phone calls had started coming in. Bert asked a few questions of the respondents, was able to weed out a few, and had arranged two full days of tryouts over the forthcoming weekend. He and Charlie alone would evaluate the drummers. Once they had selected one, they would break the news to Aaron and then tell the rest of the band. Bert was dreading the discussion with Aaron, but he could justify it to himself. He had given Aaron every opportunity. He had stuck his neck out for him and even financed him, but Aaron hadn't delivered.

\* \* \*

At the practice session that Saturday morning, Aaron was tired, but ready. By his count, he had probably practiced more hours in the last two weeks than he had in the whole time he was at Oberlin. And it showed. The formal training, combined with his natural ability and the better-late-than-never dedication had taken his confidence to new heights. He was eager to show the band what he could do now.

The band went through its normal progression of cover songs, and Aaron's increased energy level was apparent. The band was sounding pretty good. Then Aaron suggested to Bert that they play one of Dave's songs. They hadn't been practicing it much due to Aaron's struggles, but Bert said, "Why not?"

This time Aaron's drumming was tight and crisp, and the other musicians carried out their parts flawlessly. The new song was really sounding like something. Then midway through the tune, Aaron shifted into high gear and started racing the drum sticks across the skins. *Boom-pah-ta-boom-boom*. The rest of the band stopped playing, at first confused, and then realized that Aaron was going off into a solo. *Rat-tat-a-tat-tat*.

The sounds echoed loudly off the ceramic tiled subway walls. *Boom-crash-ta-boom-crash*. Aaron was in the zone. For a full five minutes, he pounded the drum set expertly as the band members stood there, mouths agape. The crowd that had been there listening to the music started to swell, at first curious at the noise, and then taken in by the virtuosic percussion. Arms flailing, sweat pouring over him, Aaron continued to pound out the rhythms. He felt great.

Gene made the pivotal next move. He laid out a bass guitar riff over Aaron's drums, nodding to Aaron to continue the groove. Gene played a few more lines and then Ethan's electric guitar wail entered. Dave jumped in with a keyboard accompaniment, and finally Charlie started blowing the sax.

It was the band's first impromptu jam, and the musicians were loving it. Smiles passed from one member to the other. Abe stood there pounding his right arm to the beat. Bert watched with enormous pride and beamed smiles at the crowd.

Several minutes later, Aaron decided it was time to rein things back in, and taking the lead, signaled to the band to resume Dave's song where they had left off. They seamlessly transitioned back from the jam and finished the tune with a flourish beyond which the Redeemers had thought themselves capable. When Aaron marked the end of the song with the cymbal crash, the crowd roared.

In those ten minutes, the band had gelled. Finally feeding off one another, the volatile mix had become good chemistry.

\* \* \*

Off to the side, Charlie approached Bert. "Bert," he whispered.



“I know.” Bert finished Charlie’s thought for him. “Cancel the auditions.” He smiled at Charlie.

Charlie smiled back.

## Chapter 10 – The School

“Great news, everyone!” Charlie announced to the band. “I’ve got our first lyrics written.”

Bert beamed like a proud new papa as Charlie waved the stack of paper he clutched. The band was just finishing its set-up for a practice session. The members reached out curiously as Charlie handed each of them but Abe a photocopy of the hand-scrawled lyrics he had created.

The musicians took a moment to read through them as Charlie quietly read them to Abe. Ethan was the first to speak.

“These are terrible!” he said incredulously, looking at the others.

Bert winced. Ethan and Charlie’s relationship had started off icily in Bert and Charlie’s apartment and had not thawed at all since. In fact, outside of Dave, Ethan had kept his distance from his band mates and from Bert, always trying to ensure that he not be catalogued as “one of them.”

Stifled giggles from other members quickly abated as Charlie walked purposefully toward Ethan. “You know, man, I’m getting tired of you putting everything down!” He stood now toe to toe with Ethan, their faces just inches apart.

“Hey, I’m just being honest,” Ethan replied with mock innocence.

“You think you could do better?” Charlie yelled.

“I think a kindergartner could do better,” replied Ethan, now becoming irritated himself.

Without warning, Charlie shoved Ethan, who tumbled backwards over his guitar case. Ethan was just able to use his hands to break the fall. He scrambled to get up and

lunged at Charlie, but Bert and Dave stepped between them. Charlie didn't struggle as Bert wrapped his arms around him and pushed him some distance away. Dave did the same with Ethan as the others looked on.

"All right, all right. That's enough," announced Bert.

"Dude, you really need some tact," a newly confident Aaron said to Ethan.

"Oh, listen now. The dishwasher boy is getting involved," said Ethan. "I suppose you think we could actually be taken seriously with these insipid lyrics?"

"No," answered Aaron, who walked over to Charlie and put his arm around his shoulder. "They're terrible, all right." He laughed and gave Charlie a friendly shake. Charlie managed a smile. "But we should be more encouraging and supportive. At least Charlie's come forward with something."

Bert stepped in and sent everyone to their instruments in order to quickly put the incident past them. He had found that, like with children, sometimes the best tactic for breaking up skirmishes was to distract the combatants. He had wanted to talk to Ethan privately after the practice anyway, and this altercation would play in perfectly.

"Ethan," Bert began, after the others had gone. "I had another vision."

"Yeah?" responded Ethan warily.

"I had this vision that the Redeemers were playing their first formal performance. Imagine it." Bert held his hands out as if he were molding the image in front of Ethan. "We're at the front of a room. The place is packed. The Redeemers are jamming away. The boisterous crowd is cheering our every song."

Ethan continued to watch Bert curiously. "Sounds good so far."

Bert looked Ethan in the eye. “Do you know where this performance takes place?”

Ethan shook his head.

“At Berkeley! At The Grind!” Bert answered excitedly.

Ethan looked aghast. “No! No way! I’m sorry, Bert. I can’t do that. I can’t just show up with a whole band one night. Besides, what makes you think the kids at Berkeley would want to see us play?”

“Why wouldn’t they?”

“The Grind draws hip, college kids. They wouldn’t be interested in watching our band of misfits. Honestly, we look more like vagrants than a band.”

“Once the kids hear us, they’ll be impressed.”

“Yeah, maybe. But what about Charlie? I can just imagine him hitting on someone’s girlfriend. This has disaster written all over it.”

“I promise. We’ll all be on our best behavior,” Bert replied, calmly placing a hand on Ethan’s shoulder. “Look what you did to these guys today. You don’t really want to keep fighting with everyone in the band, do you? Here’s a chance to throw them a bone.”

Ethan pondered the question for a few moments. Then reluctantly, he replied, “Oh, all right. I know I’ll live to regret this, but okay. The band can play with me next Friday. Just this one time.”

The band was stoked when Bert announced that they’d be playing on the Berkeley campus a week from Friday. They worked hard over the next week in preparation for the big event. Aaron continued to advance his skills by practicing in Dave’s garage. At the

practice sessions leading up to the show, the band exchanged feedback, worked on timing, and orchestrated the transitions into and out of each song. Bert had crafted a play list, and the band ran through it in a flawless dress rehearsal on Thursday afternoon.

Finally, the day that had once seemed so far away arrived. Their first real performance. As the band set up its equipment in the coffee bar, Bert could feel the excitement and anticipation amongst the performers. That is, among all of them other than Ethan, who wore a look of dread and foreboding.

Ethan's expression turned to a frown as he noticed Charlie standing at a table of four female students. Charlie was smooth, Bert thought with admiration, as the girls smiled and laughed while they conversed with the sax player. Nevertheless, Ethan felt compelled to jump in.

"Charlie," he said, grabbing the handsome black man lightly by the arm. "Bert needs to speak with you." He nudged him back toward the instruments.

Charlie gave the girls a quick wave and walked with Ethan. "What's this all about?"

"Come on, man," Ethan answered. "I can't have you wandering the room. You're going to get us kicked out."

Charlie rolled his eyes. "College boy, you are *way* too uptight. You really need to relax." Charlie angrily pulled his arm away from Ethan's hand and strode over to get his saxophone.

When Ethan played solo, he normally sat on a barstool along the paneled side wall of the room, but tonight the band set up in a corner to allow for more space.

At 7:00 P.M., the tables were about two-thirds full, and a few people hovered near the back of the room by the service counter. Ethan was scheduled to play until 10:00, an hour before closing time. On Bert's signal, he approached the microphone as Abe moved a step away from it and waited.

Ethan tapped the mic, sending a thumping noise through the room, followed by a loud screech of feedback. "Hi," he began shifting nervously. "I'd like to introduce some, er, friends that I brought along tonight. I hope you don't mind." Managing a smile, he said, only slightly more enthused, "Ladies and gentlemen, the Redeemers!"

"One, two, three, four!" came Aaron's count from the back.

The music began, and the band grooved for forty-five minutes. The set of cover songs started out tentatively, but the confidence and energy grew as the patrons cheered enthusiastically after each tune. Bert stood in the back, watching with paternal pride.

At the first break, Bert brought over a tray of coffee, and the band members gathered chairs to form something approximating a small circle to the side of the equipment.

"Great set, guys!" said a male student, giving a thumbs-up as he strolled by.

"He's right," said Bert, placing the tray on a small side table and handing out the coffees one by one. "You guys were terrific!"

"This is interesting," Ethan said, looking back over his shoulder.

"What is?" asked Dave.

"Usually after my first set, there's a big exodus. A lot of people head out to get ready to go to the bars or to parties or whatever. There's usually a lull, where the crowd thins out, and then other folks start trickling in around 9:30 or so."

“But no one seems to be leaving,” observed Aaron.

“Exactly,” said Ethan. “I think people are sticking around to hear us some more.”

“Cool,” said Abe.

“Very cool,” said Dave.

Gene, meanwhile, soaked it all in. He had been here before, as had Bert. There would be a rush of exhilaration, a feeling of buoyancy as a band started to feel it was beginning its ascent to stardom. It was always the same. In a band’s infancy, there was limitless possibility.

For Gene, Bert knew, success had been elusive, always finding a means to sneak away before he could wrap his hands around it. Hopefully this time would be different.

The second set picked up right where the first one had left off. By now, the coffee house tables and chairs were all full. Students had taken the leftover chairs from individual tables and created their own little enclaves, clearing room for a few uninhibited dancers.

The play list for the second set called for the Redeemers to play two of the four songs Dave had written. Prior to launching into them, Charlie, the self-appointed onstage leader of the band, approached the microphone. “Thanks, everyone!” he called to the crowd over the ebbing applause. “We’d like to play a couple of our own tunes for you now. Let us know what you think.” He nodded in Aaron’s direction, and Aaron got the band going.

Bert had elected a straight run of funk-ed-up cover songs for the first set to get the band comfortable and get the crowd engaged. But he and everyone in the band knew the

score. Their success would ultimately depend on their ability to create and execute their own material.

The crowd response to the back-to-back Redeemers songs, though, could best be characterized as polite. For the most part, the roomful of students sat and listened. A few more conversations took place over the music than during the cover songs. Clearly the energy level had subsided, and the feedback from the audience was like what a lone piano player in a cocktail lounge might receive as he took his break.

The band recovered the crowd's energy by performing a couple of fast moving cover songs and closing the set with a soulful, saxophone-wailing version of the Temptations' "(I Know) I'm Losing You," but Bert saw obvious concern on their faces as they gathered during the break.

"I guess I should stick with classical music." Dave chuckled uneasily, but his expression gave away his disappointment as he tried to slough off the crowd reaction.

"Why do you say that?" asked Bert.

"You heard it. The crowd was decidedly blasé about the songs I wrote. They cheered all the other ones enthusiastically, but our originals got nothing more than respectful applause."

"It wasn't that obvious, dude," Aaron chimed in. And besides, it's pretty normal that they'd be more excited by the tunes they know."

"I realize that," answered Dave, "but it was more than that."

"You're focusing on the negative," responded Aaron. "Look how much they love us and how crowded it is here."



Dave shrugged. “Sure, but in the long run, it won’t matter how much fun we are as a cover band, unless we want to start playing weddings and bar mitzvahs. It’s the originals that will make or break us.”

Gene delivered an observation in his soft-spoken, but brief and direct way. “The songs need lyrics.”

Eyes shifted toward Charlie. “Don’t look at me!” he laughed.

“Don’t sweat it,” Bert said to the group. “I think Gene’s right, and we’ll figure out something. Stay focused on tonight’s show. You still have one set left.” Then Bert addressed Dave directly. “This is still an improvement on playing the old folks’ home, right?”

Dave laughed, remembering the story he had told Bert and Charlie in the park. “Yeah. You got me there.”

Bert took up a post to one side of the band this time. As Dave made his way back to his keyboard, Gene approached him.

“You okay?” Gene asked.

Dave smiled wryly at the elderly bassist. “Yeah. I think so. Thanks,” he answered. Gene started to walk away, but Dave’s voice froze him. “Gene, what made you come out of retirement?”

Gene turned slowly back to face Dave. “That’s easy. Did you ever go out there on stage and look out onto a frenzied crowd? I’m not talking about some little coffee house or nightclub. I’m talking about a sea of humanity stretching out in all directions, all eyes upon you, everyone cheering wildly, anxiously waiting for you to strike that first note. Do you know what that’s like?”

“No. I really don’t,” answered Dave earnestly.

“Neither do I,” the old man answered somberly, stroking his narrow beard. “But I want to more than anything in the world.”

With his spirits uplifted by Bert’s reassurance and Gene’s inspirational words, Dave took his place back at his keyboard.

By the time the third set was underway, the coffee house was standing room only and it was obvious that word of the band had spread through the campus as students changed their evening plans and headed over. The band had exhausted its library of material save for Dave’s other songs, so Bert had constructed a song list from tunes they had played earlier in the evening. He had originally thought there would be enough turnover in the coffee house that few patrons would hear the repeats, but the night had played out differently. It didn’t really matter, though. Everyone was having fun.

At 10:15, when the third set ended, the manager of the coffee house rushed over to talk to the band. “You guys were fantastic! This had to be our most successful night ever in here.”

“Thanks for giving us the opportunity,” responded Bert humbly.

“My pleasure. You guys can play here anytime. What do you think, Ethan? Will you be bringing your band here on Fridays from now on?”

Ethan looked straight ahead, away from Bert’s penetrating eyes. He nodded to the manager. “Um, yeah, sure, I guess that would be all right.” He turned toward Bert. “What do you--?”

“We’d be thrilled!” Bert answered before Ethan could even get out the full question.

When the manager had walked away, Ethan said to Bert, “My god. What have you gotten me into?”

Bert smiled deviously. “This is just the beginning. We still have your campus radio station and newspaper to get to know.” Bert turned to take his coat off the back of a chair.

“That’s what I was afraid of,” Ethan replied just audibly.

\* \* \*

On the following Thursday, about an hour before he needed to leave for the practice session, Bert was in the apartment relaxing and watching television, when he heard a knock on the door. Opening it, Bert was surprised to find Ethan standing there.

“Can I talk to you for a few minutes?” Ethan asked.

“I’m always here for you,” answered Bert. “Come on in.” Bert showed Ethan into the living area, and this time Ethan took a seat on the far end of the three-cushion sofa rather than the floor. Bert sat at the opposite end of the sofa and faced the young student.

“Did you have fun playing on Friday night?” asked Bert.

“Yeah. Unexpectedly, I did,” answered Ethan.

“You’re starting to believe in us, aren’t you?” Bert said with a knowing smile.

“Maybe,” answered Ethan, a little uneasily. “Actually, the reason I’m here,” he said as he fumbled through his backpack, “is that I have a present for you.” Ethan pulled a spiral notebook out of the backpack, opened it to a page, and handed the notebook to Bert.

“Lyrics,” Bert whispered.

“Yeah. It seemed like the band could really use them.”

Bert took a few minutes to read through them while Ethan looked on in silence. “*Stepping from the shadows, into the light,*” Bert murmured to the tune of Dave’s first song as he read. “Wow!” he declared with an exhalation of relief as he closed the notebook and placed it on his knees. “I knew you had it in you.”

“Thanks, but don’t get too excited about it. I just wanted to shut Charlie up.”

“People find motivation in different ways. Whatever works for you, works for me.” Bert laughed. “Hey, can I hold onto this and bring it to practice today? I want to record the lyrics so Abe can have something to take home and learn.”

“Sure. That’s fine,” said Ethan as he zipped his backpack, stood, and slung it over one arm.

“See you in a bit,” said Bert as Ethan stepped out the door. “Great work!” he called after him.

At that afternoon’s practice session, everyone in the band seemed excited when Bert announced that Ethan had written lyrics for one of Dave’s songs. That is, everyone but Charlie, who seized the opportunity to exclaim, “Let me take a look at this garbage” and grabbed the notebook from Bert’s hand before Bert could show it to the group.

As he read, the look on Charlie’s face, which evolved from smug, to curious, to stunned, told the other band members all they needed to know. Charlie liked Ethan’s handiwork. Dave hurried over to Charlie and raised up the notebook, with Charlie’s hand still grasping it, so he could read the words to “Shadows” over Charlie’s shoulder. Gene and Aaron gathered around as well. When the band members were done reading, they rushed up to Ethan and congratulated him.

Bert sang through the lyrics for Abe in his thin tenor, then passed along the digital recorder and instructed Abe to memorize the words so that they could immediately get to work on the song. After all, Bert announced, it was now time to do some recording.

Bert was moving quickly, and the band members knew it. But to a man, they all understood Bert's motives. There was a group held together by a thin thread, and Bert needed to take action and show results on an almost daily basis. Progress for the band equaled affirmation of their mission. And such reassurance was critical for a bunch of guys who had failed in some significant way, some other time in their life.

So far, Bert had done everything he had said he could and would. Privately, he knew, many of the band members wondered how long he could sustain the ride.

\* \* \*

Ethan entered the ratty offices, or what passed for offices, of the Daily Californian, the Berkeley school newspaper. He couldn't believe he was doing this. Bert had approached him after the last practice session and told him that the band needed coverage in the school paper. They had now played three times in the coffee house, and the band's first original song, "Shadows," was getting a much improved response with Ethan's lyrics.

With the positive feedback, Dave had re-energized and gotten back to writing more music, and Ethan himself was putting the finishing touches on the lyrics for the second of Dave's tunes, an uplifting song tentatively titled "Streets of Shame." But with Bert, it was always more, more, more. It wasn't enough that Ethan had agreed to play in the band. He had to let the band perform a show at the school. Then he had to let the band become the regular act on Friday nights. Now here he was, trying to pitch the

features editor of the school newspaper to cover the band. *Sheesh! When is it going to stop?*

The office held a series of tables and computers along the perimeter and a hodgepodge of office chairs, most with exposed stuffing, at each table. Several timeworn desks stood in the middle of the room. A handful of students were talking about stories or other matters, and a couple of others tapped away at the computers.

Ethan walked over to a computer table where two students were sitting, one in the chair and the other on the table, legs dangling in front. “Excuse me,” Ethan interrupted, “Could you please tell me where I can find Paul Langston?” Paul was listed as the features editor in the box on the second page of the Daily Californian.

“I’m Paul,” said the student on the table as he hopped down. “What can I do for you?”

“Hi. Ethan Banks.” Ethan smiled. “Can I speak to you for a few minutes?”

“Sure. Are you a student here?” Paul asked as the two walked over to one of the desks. Paul took a seat behind it and gestured to Ethan to sit in the chair on its opposite side.

“Yes, I’m a junior here.”

“And you’re interested in writing for the paper, I’m guessing.”

“No, not that,” returned Ethan, feeling a little unsure of himself. “Actually, I’m here to pitch a story to you.”

“Shoot!” Paul leaned back in the chair and crossed his hands behind his head.

“Well, I play guitar in this band that plays at The Grind on Friday nights, and the manager, I mean, we--” Ethan fumbled for the words. “We thought it would be great to get some coverage in the school paper.”

“I see,” Paul responded. “What do you guys play?”

“Mostly covers so far, but we’ve started doing some of our own material.”

“You know there are a lot of bands that play on campus and in the bars all around the campus.”

“Uh huh.”

“So why should we write about your band?”

Ethan hemmed and hawed. “Well, I guess I thought that since I’m a student here, it might be an interesting angle for you,” he answered lamely.

“Listen, Ethan,” Paul stated as he sat upright in the chair and leaned forward onto the desk. “I’m sure your band is really good, and you seem like a nice guy. But, we have a limited amount of space in the paper and we need to make sure there’s some journalistic angle to what we write. I don’t mean any offense, but if you want to be in the paper, I’d recommend placing an ad.” Paul stood and extended his right hand. “I’m sorry.”

“I understand,” answered Ethan, feeling relieved that he could remove himself from this awkward encounter. He thanked Paul for his time, shook his hand, and departed.

Back out in the cool air, Ethan thought about what he’d tell Bert. Sure, he had failed, but so what? Look how much he had already helped the band, a band he didn’t even want to be part of in the first place. In some ways, he was glad he hadn’t pulled off

the newspaper article. Maybe Bert would start to see that not everything he envisioned was so easy to execute.

Ethan pulled his cell phone from the breast pocket of his coat and punched in Bert's phone number. It rang three times. Ethan had just started feeling relieved that Bert wasn't available when Bert picked up. Ethan relayed the encounter at the school paper to him. He was braced for Bert's reaction of disappointment, but Bert surprised him. All he said was, "That's all right, Ethan. Thanks for trying. I'll take care of it tomorrow."

*Take care of it tomorrow?* Ethan thought after he disconnected. *What does he mean by that?*

Ethan got his answer the next day when he and Bert bumped into one another on their way to the subway station.

"Great news, Ethan!" said Bert. "Paul Langston agreed to do an article on us. He's going to send someone to Friday's show to see us play."

Ethan wasn't sure which was more profound, his surprise that Bert had been successful or his fear of what Bert might have said or done at the newspaper that might humiliate him. "You went to see him?" he asked cautiously.

"Sure. Nice guy, that Paul," replied Bert.

"What did you say to convince him? You didn't do anything I'm going to regret, did you?"

"Who, me?" Bert responded with a laugh. "Of course not. I simply pitched him a story about a bunch of downtrodden guys who got together to form a band, and how a



young Berkeley student was their guardian angel, helping to get them back on their feet. Kind of inspirational, wouldn't you say?"

"You know that's not the way it is," snapped Ethan.

"What do you mean? Look how much you've done for the band. You've written lyrics. You've gotten us a regular gig. Like it or not, we wouldn't be nearly this far without you." He paused. "Hey, maybe I embellished your role a bit and took some liberties with your attitude, but that's my job, marketing the band. Marketing is just packaging the product the way the consumer wants to see it."

"Maybe so, but I still wish you had checked with me before saying that."

Ethan paused, uncomfortable about bringing up the next subject, one he had been thinking about a lot lately. He braced himself. "You know, Bert. My commitment ends in a few weeks. Remember, I agreed to give you until the end of the school year?" Bert raised his eyebrows but didn't say anything, so Ethan continued. "Just letting you know." Bert nodded silently.

The next few weeks came to be a revelation for the young student. It began with the school newspaper. A writer came to The Grind for the Friday night show, stayed for the entire performance, and interviewed the band members between sets. As the Wednesday distribution of the school paper neared, Ethan had found himself surprisingly anxious to see the article. Anxious in a good way.

When the day arrived, he had raced out of his 9:00 class the moment it ended and hurried over to the bookstore, which was the closest place that distributed the publication. Ethan had thrown open the glass door, dropped his book bag on the ground, and grabbed the paper from the rack. Flipping quickly through the pages, he found on page eighteen a

photograph of the band and an article headlined “Redeemers Groove the Grind.” His heart raced with excitement as read the effusive article.

The Redeemers are undoubtedly a band on the move. One thing is for certain. We should enjoy this campus sensation while we can. This band will quickly outgrow Berkeley. Led by a self-described missionary...

The article went on to tell the tale of the Redeemers, or at least Bert’s version of it, which now bordered on folklore. *Was that a tinge of pride Ethan felt?*

Ethan just stood there, shaking his head and laughing to himself. This pedigreed student of Berkeley was able to learn something from Bert, a man who, until recently, had made his home on the street.

\* \* \*

During these same few weeks, the band had also recorded the two completed songs. Bert had made some calls to recording studios in the Bay Area, but the costs were prohibitive, even at the small ones. Trying to think of a way to do it on the cheap, Bert realized that Dave might have some resources available to the band.

Sure enough, Dave said that the school did, in fact, have a basic recording studio. Dave had warned Bert that it was pretty minimal. The studio was generally used to allow students to hear how they sounded to others, as well as for the teachers to provide specific instruction on how the students approached certain aspects of their play. Bert had concluded that it would suffice, beggars not being choosers, as the adage went.

When the band had arrived to do their recording, they had found the studio to be sparse but serviceable, just as Dave had described. There was a main room with beige

vinyl flooring and microphones hanging from the drop ceiling. One wall had a large, Plexiglas window that exposed the room containing the recording equipment. There was no mixing board, but that was okay. They didn't have a producer anyway.

Without the benefit of a producer or the appropriate equipment, the band would not be able to splice into or out of the songs. Bert had assured them, in his typically motivational way, that recording the songs straight through would better capture the natural, unfiltered spirit of the band anyway.

The Redeemers did multiple takes of each song, just to have some options. At the end of several exhausting hours, the band came away with a perfectly well-executed promotional CD.

With the band basking in the glow from the article in the school newspaper, Bert wanted to keep the momentum strong. He now broached an idea that would benefit the band directly as well as continue his "education" of Ethan.

"Ethan," Bert had said to him one night after finishing up the show on campus. "You seem like the type of kid who learns quickly. You know that CD we made at Dave's school?"

"Yeah," Ethan answered, and then noticed the gleam in Bert's eye. "Wait," he said, "let me guess this time. You want me to talk to the school radio station."

"You *are* a quick study. I knew it. What do you say? There's nothing like airplay on a college radio station to pull a band out of obscurity. Many a band has started out with an underground collegiate following. We'll start a grass roots buzz that spreads to campuses all over the country."

“There’s a big difference between getting a coffee house to feature a cover band and getting a radio station to play our originals,” Ethan replied.

“Only because you let it be that way.” Bert grinned.

Ethan looked to the sky and shrugged in surrender. “All right. I’ll see what I can do.”

“I know what you can do, Ethan. And I think you know what you can do. You’re going to be our angel, just like the newspaper said.” Bert gave Ethan a reassuring pat on the shoulder.

Over the weekend, Ethan made a few calls to KBRK, the campus radio station, to find out with whom he needed to speak. A Monday call to Alice Trammel, the station manager, resulted in an invitation for Ethan to stop by the station on Tuesday morning.

Shortly after 9:30 a.m. on Tuesday, Ethan appeared at the station carrying the issue of the school paper that contained the article on the Redeemers.

The station was housed in the basement of a gray, six-story building not far from the student center. Ethan was buzzed in through the main entrance, then made his way down the narrow stairway and over its carpeted, but threadbare steps to the basement. He peeked in the doorways until he found Alice’s office.

Alice was a fortyish looking woman who was probably very attractive in her youth. The Aeropostale clothes told observers that she was still trying to be college hip, even though it was obvious that her hipper days were behind her. The casual outfit and the not fully brushed hair left her without a strong feminine presence. Ethan noticed her UC Berkeley diploma on the wall as he entered her office and observed that she had graduated from the school twenty years earlier.

Once they were seated and pleasantries had been exchanged, Alice looked expectantly at Ethan. Feeling more confident than he had on his visit to the paper, Ethan thrust the newspaper, which was folded open to the Redeemers article, across the desk. "Have you seen this?" he asked.

"Yes, I have," she answered without further elaboration.

"So you know about the Redeemers," Ethan concluded. "I'm the--"

Alice cut him off. "The guitarist. Yes, I know. You mentioned it on the phone."

"Right," Ethan answered, reaching into his jacket pocket and pulling out a CD. "I've got this demo of our first two songs." Ethan paused and looked her confidently in the eyes. "I was hoping you'd consider giving them some airplay on K-Berk."

Alice sat upright in her seat and leaned toward Ethan, as if she were about to discuss something candidly. "Ethan," she said, "do you know how many bands have come through the campus? If we played every song by every wannabe band, there'd be no time left for the established music."

Ethan didn't let up this time. "We're not just any band," he said emphatically. "In fact, we're not even a campus band. I'm the only Berkeley student in it. You read the article. We're a bunch of street urchins in need of a break." Alice continued to listen to him attentively. "There might come a time when I can do you a favor. What do you say? I'll take care of you when we're big enough to play the Oakland Arena."

Alice leaned back more relaxed. "You don't much look like a street urchin to me," she said, eyeing Ethan's trendy clothing. He started to object, but Alice stopped him. She gave him a wry smile. "I saw your band play at The Grind this past Friday."

"Really?"

“Yes, really. And you’re right. You’re not just another garage band. Your musical style almost defies categorization. I like it. It’s got a rock ‘n’ roll foundation, but the R&B and funk overtones --” She paused, searching for a description. “Even the cover songs. You’ve reworked them and injected them with a beat that --”

Ethan stopped her mid sentence with a two word response. “Street thump.”

“Is that what you’re calling it?” she asked rhetorically. “That’s a good name. It suits your music.” She paused pensively. “I’ll tell you what. I think you guys are onto something. I’ll get you on the air.”

Ethan’s face lit up. “Thank you!” he gushed. He stood up and gave Alice a firm handshake and handed her the disc. As he walked out the door, she called after him with a laugh, “Just don’t forget about us when you’re famous!”

Ethan couldn’t wait to tell Bert the good news. He swung by Bert’s house that very afternoon and recounted the entire conversation. When he got to the part about the favor, Bert chuckled. “Kind of godfatherlike, but it worked. Very well done.” Then Bert took on a serious expression. “I have to ask you this, Ethan. Are you ready to commit yourself to this band now?”

Ethan’s perspective on the world had been turned upside down. Never did he imagine that he could be schooled so completely by this street hustler. But Bert had shown him a lesson in persistence, perseverance, salesmanship, and faith. Ethan felt both humbled and inspired.

“I am,” he answered without hesitation.

## Chapter 11 – The Record Company

In the weeks that ensued, the band started to develop an underground, almost cultlike following on the Berkeley campus. Alice, true to her word, had gotten the two Redeemers songs into heavy rotation and it wasn't long before the band became the rage amongst the musical cognoscenti of the university.

Bert had dropped in on Alice one day at the station and had begun cultivating a relationship with her. The two had instantly bonded, sitting around for hours swapping stories from their music industry pasts. Alice became a regular at The Grind on Friday nights and she, Bert, and members of the Redeemers would often hang out after the shows until the staff asked them to leave so they could close up for the night.

One night Bert and Alice had remained after all the others had left for the evening. Bert was seated rather rigidly on a synthetic suede sofa, while Alice sat slumped down with her feet resting on a small table and her head tilted back on the top of the sofa cushion. She was staring up at the ceiling.

“So here we are,” Alice started, “an old lady who can't let go of her college days and an old man trying to latch onto a music scene that's long passed him by.” She laughed in a self-deprecating way. “Kind of amusing, isn't it?” She rolled her head to the right to look at Bert without lifting it off the cushion.

Bert didn't answer at first. Then he responded earnestly, “Do you enjoy what you're doing?”

“Yeah, sure, I guess. I never really thought about doing anything different.”

“Then what does it matter?”

Alice went quiet for a long time. When she spoke, she surprised Bert with her question. “What do you think of me?”

Bert had grown fond of Alice over the last few weeks. There was a warmth between them, a casual comfort usually reserved for old friends, that he hadn’t felt since the days with Michelle. He could sense that Alice was fishing for some type of affirmation to ease an insecurity.

“I think you’re great,” he answered.

“Really?”

“Yeah. Really.”

Alice was quiet again. “Would you come home with me?” she blurted out suddenly.

Bert’s eyes fixed on hers as he struggled to give an answer in conflict with his desire. “Alice, I would love to. I really would. But I can’t.”

“Oh, I see,” she said, looking saddened.

“No. I don’t think you do. It’s just that I can’t afford to lose my focus. I’ve already seen what happens when I take my eye off the ball. Besides, it wouldn’t be fair to you. I won’t be in Berkeley forever. As soon as the Redeemers find the next stepping stone, I need to climb to it with them. This band is my number one priority. My only priority.”

“And if I said I understand that and accept it, would you come then?” Her eyes twinkled.

Bert smiled at her. She really was great. “Okay,” he said. “I’d love to.”



\* \* \*

Bert felt his optimism about the band more and more justified. Dave continued to write songs, the frustration inside him now uncorked, with song after song gushing out. He told Bert he hadn't been this happy in a long time. A committed Ethan matched Dave, crafting lyric upon lyric to meld perfectly with Dave's instrumentation.

The Redeemers had been recruited to play frat parties, campus bars, and other campus events, finding that while they still needed to meet in the subways to practice from time to time, they could often use these external performances as their practice sessions. While they couldn't work and rework sections over and over again at these performances, Bert never thought twice about interrupting a song midway and announcing that the band had misfired and needed to replay it with a particular change or emphasis. It was a unique approach, but the audiences came to expect it and enjoyed being able to see the internal machinery of the Redeemers as the band grew up, leaving its cover-band childhood behind.

The performances also provided a small amount of income, which Bert used to help offset some of his costs. To date, the band hadn't discussed money much, largely because there wasn't much of it to discuss. Bert had told them that, as their manager and founder, he would handle their finances. He would split any income equally among the six musicians and himself after deducting expenses. The band members had agreed to the arrangement without debate, most thinking that they were a long way from having to worry about having a real income. Of the musicians, only Dave and Gene had really ever had anything approximating a reasonable, steady income anyway.

At the practice sessions, Bert used the time for the band to work on the new material in a more structured way.

The band still wasn't bonding as much as Bert would have liked, however. Dave continued to be the one who could go either way with the band members, as comfortable with Charlie and Aaron as he was with Ethan. Abe continued to be a surly loner and Gene continued to quietly soak it all in. Ethan, despite his newfound commitment, still kept his distance from some of the band members, and his relationships with Charlie, Abe, and Aaron stayed cool at best. Bert saw that Ethan was not yet ready to accept them as they were. The inroads he'd made had only weakened, not destroyed, Ethan's shield of elitism.

As all the gears clicked into place and the band was hitting on all cylinders, Bert confronted the decision he had been avoiding. "Gentlemen," he announced, "I think we're outgrowing our roots here. Berkeley has been wonderful to us, but our aspirations are higher. I think it's time to take our act to L.A."

"Los Angeles?!" Abe exclaimed. "Oh, no, man. That city will eat us alive."

"Yeah, Bert," joined in Aaron. "We're not really ready for that, are we?"

Charlie looked surprised by Bert's pronouncement, but he had given up second-guessing Bert. As Bert's de facto right hand man, Charlie felt it his role to provide support for Bert's decisions. Bert hadn't steered them wrong yet.

As far as Ethan was concerned, Bert thought the timing was good. It was now late April, and by the time the band got on the road, the May final exams would have come and gone, and Ethan had told him he hadn't had much luck landing a summer job anyway.

Dave looked pale. Bert noticed immediately and was not the least bit surprised. “You’re wondering what to tell your family, Dave?” he asked.

“Oh my god,” was all Dave could manage in acknowledgment.

“You knew it would one day come to this,” Bert continued. “The dream isn’t free. There are sacrifices each of us needs to make, obstacles to overcome.”

“I know, I know,” answered Dave, holding his forehead in his hands. “It doesn’t mean that I prepared for it though.”

“Can you bring them with us?” offered Aaron who walked over and put his arm on Dave’s shoulder. “I could help entertain Jack.”

“Thanks for the offer, Aaron, but it’s not really possible. Jack needs to prepare for next year’s classes over the summer. It helps him keep pace with the other students. My own work slows down in the summer, but Ann works now. I can’t ask her to quit her job. Not yet, anyway. We couldn’t even support ourselves on what we’re making so far. Besides, they’d be in the way. I think we all know that.”

As the band talked more about the impending trip, the uneasiness about the prospect of leaving San Francisco transformed slowly into anticipation of the opportunity ahead. Even Dave’s reservations began to give way.

“What do we need to bring with us?” asked Aaron, looking around at the other band members. “And how are we going to get there with all our equipment and stuff?”

Bert was at the ready. “I’ll go down ahead, find a place for us to stay, and start making the necessary arrangements. We’ll need to travel there by Greyhound, so bring as little as you can--just your equipment and whatever clothes you can get by with. We

can ship down the larger equipment like the amps and drums. With regard to clothes, remember to keep it basic. We're a blue collar band, after all.

"You guys should prepare yourselves to leave in a couple of weeks. There's a bus that leaves at 9:10 A.M. and gets into L.A. at 5:15 in the afternoon. I'm going to head out this Monday. Charlie will coordinate things here while I'm gone. Is that okay for everyone?" The band members nodded.

Bert continued. "It's going to be a little rough, I'll warn you. This won't exactly be luxury living." His eyes fixed on each musician, one by one, as he assessed their resolve. "Is there anything else we need to talk about?" No one responded. "Okay, then. I'll call Charlie when I'm ready for you to join me and he'll let everyone know."

Silence ensued for a few moments. Then Abe spoke up. "What is it exactly that we're going to do in Los Angeles?"

Bert wasn't really sure just yet. He just knew that he needed to get to the hub of the music industry and quickly, while the band was still riding its wave. He'd have time to work out what to do in L.A. on the long bus ride. "I've got some contacts in the industry who can help us," Bert answered, purposely vague.

"Uh huh," Abe responded skeptically.

\* \* \*

After the band members headed off in their separate directions, Charlie approached Bert. "Bert, I thought that you and I were sort of, like, a team within the team. Why can't I come with you to L.A.?"

“I wish you could, Charlie, but I need you to hold things together here. Keep the band practicing, and make sure everyone stays together and gets down to L.A. when I call. I need you here more than I need you there.”

Charlie felt a warm glow. Bert was entrusting him to be the caretaker of the band.

\* \* \*

Bert arrived in Los Angeles on Monday afternoon after a long and tedious bus ride. He used to come down to L.A. regularly on business, since the Sapphire Record Company headquarters and executive offices were located here. It had been twelve long years since his last trip, but he still remembered his way around. *I wonder how much has changed*, he thought. He sure had.

Bert spent his first two days back in the City of Angels making logistical arrangements. He knew he was putting off the visit to Sapphire Records, feeling anxious over whom and what he would find there after all these years.

He had found a hostel in Leimert Park, where he managed to negotiate a low per-day rate with the owner by committing for the band to reside there for a month. The hostel owner also agreed to allow the Redeemers the usage of a large storage closet for their equipment. Over the years of panhandling, and without much in the way of fixed expenses, Bert had managed to scrape together enough money to keep the band afloat for awhile. Nonetheless, he needed to keep expenses to the bare minimum.

Bert had also used part of the two days to acclimate himself to the big city once again. Several times throughout his wanderings, he found himself strolling past the twenty story mirrored glass building that was home to Sapphire Records, almost hoping that by chance, something magical would happen. It didn't. After the fourth pass on

Wednesday, Bert took up residence on a bench in a park along Wilshire Boulevard, just across from the building.

*Tomorrow needs to be the day*, he thought to himself. He fished a folded piece of scrap paper from his pocket on which he had jotted down all the names from the company he could think of during the bus journey. Hopefully at least one of the six would still be there and of a mind to talk to him.

At 10:00 the following morning, dressed in his finest attire--navy blue dress pants, a blue and white striped dress shirt slightly wrinkled, a maroon tie without pattern, black shoes that had just been shined on the streets that morning, and the gray fedora--and not without a little trepidation, Bert entered the offices of Sapphire Records.

He approached the young, overly made-up woman seated at the circular desk in the center of the building's lobby. "Excuse me, ma'am," he started, taking the piece of paper from his breast pocket, unfolding it, and handing it to the woman. "I'm trying to locate some former colleagues of mine. Would it be possible to tell me if they still work at this office location?"

"Sure," answered the receptionist, taking the paper. "Did you used to work here?"

"Actually, I worked in the San Francisco office. But I've been down here a few times previously. Is the hall of gold records still up there on the seventh floor?" Bert asked, hoping to add some legitimacy to his story. From his past life, he had remembered an almost shrinelike display of the company's gold records.

"Sure is," she answered cheerfully. She gave the paper a quick scan and then looked up at Bert. "Mr. James's office is on the sixth floor," she said, referring to Edgar

James who Bert remembered all too well. “I don’t recognize any of the others. Do you want me to look them up in the corporate directory?”

“That would be really nice of you,” Bert answered.

Another man approached the desk and waited to the side of Bert. The receptionist took a few minutes, typing key strokes into the computer in front of her. “John Stapleton is coming up, but it says he’s located in the London office. Is that possible?”

“I suppose so,” Bert responded. He really had no idea where anyone might or might not be.

“I’m coming up with nothing on the other four. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry,” replied Bert. “You’ve been a tremendous help to me. Thank you.”

“My pleasure.”

As Bert walked away, she turned to help the other man. Bert wandered over to the elevators, wondering if she would call out to stop him, but she didn’t.

\* \* \*

*Bing.* The elevator doors opened on the sixth floor and Bert emerged into a small foyer with glass doors to one side. He approached the receptionist, looking to his left and right, both to see if there was anyone walking about whom he recognized as well as to gape at the well-appointed offices.

“Hold on please,” said the receptionist into the telephone, pressing a button and placing the phone in its cradle. She looked at Bert curiously. “Can I help you?”

“Yes, ma’am. My name is Bert Ingram. I’m an old friend of Edgar James. Is he in today?”

“He’s in, but he’s tied up in meetings all day. Is he expecting you, Mr. Ingram?”

“No. I was just –”

“Is it something urgent?”

Bert smiled. “Oh, no. Thanks for asking. We used to work together and I’m back in the business now, so I wanted to reconnect with Edgar.”

“I could leave him a message to call you, if you’d like,” responded the receptionist, who seemed to be trying to be helpful without being too helpful. Bert wondered if she had been trained to screen out any meetings not initiated directly by Edgar or one of his superiors.

Bert was sure Edgar would remember him--after all, his departure from the company would be hard to forget. On the other hand, the nature of the split made Bert fairly certain that Edgar would not return a casual phone call from him, or possibly any other kind. He didn’t seem to have a choice at the moment, though. “Sure,” he said finally, and gave her the number of the cell phone he had recently purchased.

Back out on the street, Bert thought about his next steps. He really needed to see Edgar James. He needed someone to hear the Redeemers play and take a personal, emotional stake in the band. Edgar was well connected, and with just a word could set all the machinery Bert needed into motion.

Bert spent the remainder of the morning and the early part of the afternoon killing time around the city, impatiently waiting for his phone to ring. Periodically, he took it from his breast pocket just to make sure he hadn’t missed a call. Nothing. Around 3:00, Bert’s impatience got the best of him and he placed a call to Edgar’s office. He asked the receptionist for Edgar’s voicemail, and once connected, left a more specific message,



describing the band and the great opportunity he would like to present to him. He again left his cell phone number.

Over the course of the next two days, Bert obsessively checked his cell phone as he traveled around the city. At one point, his hopes jumped as a call came in, but it was merely Charlie checking in to see how Bert was doing. The two spoke briefly, and Bert didn't let on of his difficulties in reaching his former colleagues. Bert continued to place calls to Edgar's office every few hours on that Friday and the following Monday, but he was consistently greeted with the response that Edgar wasn't available and the receptionist would see to it that he received Bert's message.

By the third day of this, Bert was ready for a new approach and decided to try to catch Edgar walking into the building. He took up residence in front of the Sapphire Records headquarters at 6:30 A.M. to make sure he'd be there first, even if Edgar was an early riser. For the better part of an hour, Bert paced in front of the building, sizing up the pedestrians to make sure that Edgar didn't slip by him. He didn't think that Edgar would necessarily recognize him right away, but the reverse was also true.

Nearing 7:30 A.M., Bert spotted a broad-shouldered, distinguished-looking man with a graying beard and mustache walking south along the street toward the building. He wore what appeared to be an Italian cut, gray pinstripe suit, with a white shirt and yellow silk tie. *Bingo!* Bert thought. That's got to be him. The man Bert was looking at was a little heavier than Bert remembered, and certainly more gray, but the strong jaw line, deep set eyes, and athletic build had not changed. And he still dressed sharply. He was accompanied by a younger man, dressed in a crisp, navy pinstripe suit, royal blue

shirt and gray tie. The two were talking as they walked purposefully toward the building. Bert stepped in their path as they approached the glass doors.

Holding open the door for them, Bert addressed Edgar as he was about to pass in front of him. "Hello, Edgar," Bert said, extending his right hand while holding back the door with his left. "It's me. Bert Ingram." Bert flashed a wide smile.

Edgar's puzzled expression turned into a smile of recognition as he stepped through the door while Bert followed. Edgar then halted and faced Bert. "Bert, my god, it's been a long time. I got some messages that you called, but I haven't had time to call you back yet."

Bert suspected that Edgar had no genuine intention to call him, but it didn't really matter now. Edgar looked toward his companion, who had continued walking, and called out to him. "Jim, I'll give you a call in a few minutes." Jim gave a quick wave and headed toward the elevator bank.

"How've you been, Bert?"

"I'm terrific. You seem to be doing well for yourself."

"Thanks. It's a living," Edgar said in obvious understatement. "Listen, I've got to run to a meeting. It was good to see you." Edgar tried to move away, but Bert put his hand on his shoulder.

"Edgar, I need a few minutes of your time. I've got this great band and --"

Edgar laughed. "I know, I know. You always have this great band. You know I can't do business with you anymore."

"Please, Edgar, hear me out."

Edgar hesitated for a moment. He then pulled a Blackberry from his breast pocket and checked his calendar. “Okay, tell you what. Can you stop up today at 2:30? I can squeeze you in for half an hour.”

“That would be great,” said Bert beaming. “You won’t regret it.”

“Somehow I doubt that.” Edgar laughed uneasily, gave Bert a light slap on the shoulder, and headed over to the elevators.

Bert and Edgar had once been peers, scouting and managing bands, Bert based in Northern California and Edgar in the Phoenix area. A competitive thread had run through their relationship, but there was an animosity beyond that. It was largely a matter of style. Edgar was the slick, highly polished mover and shaker. Bert was the working class, grind-it-out, street hustler. Eventually, a run of successes led Edgar to the corporate headquarters as the Director of A&R responsible for finding new acts in the Western U.S. This group included Bert.

As Bert’s fortunes began to tumble some time later, Edgar had repeatedly pulled Bert aside and given him warnings regarding the path down which he was heading. When the day arrived that Bert had finally exhausted his chances, it was Edgar who had called Bert in to tell him the news.

Bert had pleaded for a reprieve, but Edgar had held firm. Bert’s behavior, he was told, was becoming too costly and embarrassing for the company. Bert threatened to sue and ultimately settled for a six-month severance package. He hadn’t spoken to anyone at Sapphire since. Until today.

\* \* \*

Bert arrived a few minutes early for the 2:30 appointment and absentmindedly flipped through one of the Billboard magazines that sat on a table in the reception area. At 2:35, he was summoned.

“Okay, Bert,” began Edgar, skipping the conventional pleasantries. “What brings you back here?”

“Like I said on the message, Edgar, I’ve got a great band that I think you ought to hear. Seeing as you and I used to work together, I wanted to give you the first opportunity to --”

“Let me cut you off,” interrupted Edgar. “You know that when you left before, you signed an agreement to stay away from Sapphire Records. I couldn’t work with you even if I wanted to.”

“You wouldn’t be employing me. I just happen to be the manager of an act that you could sign onto your label. This is an act that can’t miss.”

Edgar gave a long, hard laugh. “Can’t miss. Can’t miss. C’mon, Bert. You know that you and I never saw eye to eye. And after what happened, how could I feel comfortable working a deal with you?”

“This isn’t about me any longer. It’s about this band --”

“No, Bert. I’m afraid it still is about you. Too many of your deals crashed and burned. I can’t take that chance.” He paused and lowered his voice which had steadily crept louder. “I’m sorry, Bert. I just can’t help you.”

Bert started to object further, but caught himself, realizing that this line of discussion was not going to yield anything positive. He decided to pursue another

avenue. “What about the others? Tom? Linda? Sebastian? Are any of them still around?”

“Tom’s over at EMI. Linda went to Arista. I’m pretty sure she’s still there. Sebastian retired a few months back. I heard he left the area. I don’t think he’s stayed connected. But I’d be surprised if any of them told you anything different from what I have.”

“I’d like to give them a shot anyway. One of them might remember some of the good things I’ve done.” Bert was now testing the depth of Edgar’s animosity.

Edgar bit. “Look, Bert. I remember the good things too. They’re just more than offset by the bad things. You know this industry. Image is everything. I really wish I could help you more.”

“That’s okay. I appreciate your being forthright with me. And your time. I know you’re a busy man.” Bert stood up and extended his hand. With a genuine smile, knowing that he might still need Edgar’s assistance before it was all over, he said “Edgar, it was good to see you again.”

“Good luck to you, Bert,” returned Edgar, and the two men parted ways.

Bert’s meetings with Tom and Linda produced similar results. He hadn’t expected otherwise, given that his previous relationship with Edgar, albeit strained, was deeper than his relationship with the others. Tom and Linda were the two most likely second-tier hopes, but Bert’s dealings with them had been less frequent.

It was clear from his discussions with them that his past had followed him and that he had been labeled: Difficult. Unpredictable. Erratic. Linda, now a talent scout at Arista, had been willing to hear out Bert’s story and actually seemed to find it interesting.

However, between his personal reputation and the band's small and concentrated fan base, she wasn't willing to take a flyer on it. "Give me a call once you've created more of a following," she had told him. She was probably just keeping an entrée in the unlikely event, in her mind, that the Redeemers ever started to make a name for themselves, he thought. Nonetheless, she had given him her business card, which was more than Tom had offered.

Frustrated, and truth be told, feeling a bit lonesome, Bert wandered the streets evaluating his next move. While he had been on his own for many years and developed a shield against the effects of solitude, the recent companionship from the other band members had created a new warmth. He needed that warmth now. And he had an idea, though it was kind of a long shot. He would summon the band to Los Angeles.

## Chapter 12 – The Posse

When the Redeemers piled off the bus in L.A., looking ragged and pleased to have arrived, Bert was waiting for them at the depot. He hailed a couple of taxis and gave the drivers the address of the hostel. Bert rode with Dave, Charlie, and Abe.

“How did Ann and the kids handle it when you told them about our trip, Dave?” he asked as they headed out.

“Ann’s pretty supportive,” answered Dave. “She wasn’t crazy about the idea, and she thinks I’m chasing rainbows, but she understands. She knows I haven’t been happy in awhile and she sees the positive change you guys have brought out in me. It’ll be tougher for the kids, but I’ll call every day.”

The hostel was a two-story whitewashed building that had been converted from a recreation center several years back. It featured a small reception and common area in the front, with a dining area off to the right, consisting of nothing more than a few long tables and a couple of vending machines. A hallway behind led to the guest rooms and the stairway to the second floor. The room Bert had let contained eight cots (one more than the Redeemers needed), a small table with four chairs, and a bathroom. The floors were covered with gray vinyl tile. The walls were devoid of decoration.

That night, when everyone was settled into their squalid accommodations, Bert pulled Charlie and Gene aside. He had told the band members that afternoon that he had connections at three of the major record labels. However, he chose to omit the specific details of his conversations in favor of telling the band that there was a level of interest, but the record company executives would need some more persuading. Bert assured the band members that Los Angeles was exactly where they needed to be right then. The city

was ripe with the opportunity to be discovered. They just needed to make their presence known.

Bert felt he could confide in Charlie and he wanted Gene's counsel, so he had asked each of them to meet him in the hostel's common area once the others were in bed. Gathered on couches which had long lost their spring, Bert filled in Gene and Charlie. He limited the detail of his travails in L.A., but through the whispered conversation, Bert made it obvious that things hadn't gone as well as he had hoped. Over the course of the next hour, the three men sat quietly and devised a plan of action.

\* \* \*

In the early morning hours, two days after the Redeemers arrived in Los Angeles, they found themselves setting up their equipment right on Wilshire Boulevard, in front of the glass-lined walls of Sapphire Records.

The day before, Bert had left a cryptic voicemail message for Edgar that the Redeemers marketing campaign was underway. It rankled him beyond anything imaginable to think that once again, Edgar's whims would influence his fate. He would have liked nothing more than to climb all the way back up while Edgar watched jealously on the sidelines, having missed the opportunity of a lifetime. But Bert had no one else to reach out to, so his path and Edgar's, at least for the moment, were hopelessly intertwined.

The Redeemers busied themselves building a drum set, setting up wireless microphones, and removing instruments from cases. They were taking a chance, but they hoped that in a city with as many law enforcement opportunities as Los Angeles, the police wouldn't bother them for playing music out on the sidewalk.



Sure enough, the band performed without confrontation. They were met with smiles and nods from the passersby and no shortage of curious stares. Nearly an hour into it, Edgar arrived. He paused for a moment and appeared to be enjoying the sounds. A small smile formed on his lips as he looked from player to player until his gaze met Bert's and the penny dropped. Edgar's smile suddenly gave way to a long and profound glare. Then he pivoted and walked into the building.

The band played for a while longer, until Bert called them to a halt at 9:00. "That should do it, boys," he said, not mentioning the silent communication between Edgar and himself. "That was good exposure to the record company, and we probably ought to get going before we're asked to move. Great set, everyone!"

"So that's it? That's the plan?" asked Abe. "We're just going to play in front of record companies and hope to attract attention?"

"Well, yes and no," Bert answered. "It's worked before. Many a band has resorted to publicity stunts to grab the attention of a record label. It's all about the exposure. Stick with me. I've got a plan that's sure to get some attention."

"Yeah, until we end up at the courthouse," muttered Abe.

The next day, the band set up in Hancock Park, across the street from Sapphire, and played through the lunch hour. Bert noticed Edgar, who was accompanied by two colleagues as he passed along the park. Edgar's eyes were riveted forward, but it was obvious to Bert from Edgar's body language and his hurried gait that he damn well knew they were there.

On Monday of the following week, Bert asked to be connected to Edgar's voicemail. He then played the band's adrenalin-infused "Finding the Way" into the phone until the beep came after a full minute signaling the automatic message cutoff.

Perhaps Bert's favorite stunt took place later that same day. Bert had Charlie go over to the outdoor parking lot Edgar used and slip the attendant twenty dollars to put the Redeemers' CD into the car stereo of Edgar's silver Audi A4. Bert wished he could have seen Edgar's face when he turned the ignition key and the music began to play.

It was the stunt pulled on the following day, however, that Edgar couldn't ignore. Under the pretense of delivering musical equipment, Bert and the Redeemers managed to get past the building's security and make their way to the top floor and out through an emergency exit onto the roof.

With a light wind in their faces, hair blowing gently in the breeze, a bright sun beaming down on them, the Redeemers began playing their tunes against the backdrop of Los Angeles rooftops and high rises.

As crazy as it seemed, to a man, the band members felt alive up there. There wasn't a formal path to their musical success. Bert had done his best to warn them about that, but they all knew it anyway. They weren't even sure whether the road down which Bert led them would lead to salvation or if they were just blindly following a dreamer. But at that moment, what they were doing was absolute, unadulterated fun. The musical energy flowed like blood through their veins, and it was hard for most of them to argue that what they were doing wasn't better than the drudgery they had left behind in Northern California.

The band members were just beginning to wonder how much attention they were attracting, which was the point, of course, when the steel rooftop door burst open and three security guards clad in brown uniforms stepped out.

“Uh oh,” uttered Aaron as the music ground to a halt.

“This is not good,” added Dave.

The apparent leader of the guards spoke as his eyes moved from member to member, sizing up the band. “You boys are trespassing. How did you get up here?”

Bert addressed him, but didn’t answer his question directly. “Sir, we didn’t mean any harm. We’re just getting some publicity for our band.”

“So I imagined. You’re not the first band to pull this type of stunt.” He paused and looked at the other two guards and then back at Bert, who had stepped forward. “I’m sorry, but the police are on their way. Standard procedure. I’d suggest you start packing up your things.”

“What’s going to happen then?” asked Charlie, more curious than concerned.

“They’ll ask you some questions, escort you out, and probably issue a citation,” answered the lead guard.

Just then, a few professionally dressed men and women came out onto the roof, including Edgar, who probably had taken no more than a few seconds to figure out what was going on once he heard that a band was up there.

“The police are on the way, sir,” the security guard told him.

Edgar groaned as he stepped onto the concrete surface and spotted Bert.

The woman striding next to Edgar, dressed in a maroon suit and black heels, looked at him in surprise. “Do you know these guys?”

Edgar rolled his eyes and nodded in aggravation. “I know one of them. He used to work here.”

“So we meet again,” said Bert in mock surprise as Edgar and the others approached him. “We seem to keep crossing paths.”

Edgar didn’t respond. Instead, he conferred quietly with the woman in maroon. He then spoke to Bert. “Let’s talk for a minute,” he said and gently led Bert by the arm away from the three distinct groups of people and over toward the edge of the roof.

“You’re not going to push me off the building, are you?” Bert asked.

“No. Too many witnesses,” Edgar answered. “Seriously, though, what do I need to do, Bert?” he entreated. “Do I need to get a restraining order for you? Should I just have you arrested now?”

“You wouldn’t do that to your old pal, would you?” Bert responded. “You know we can’t afford a citation. Besides, we were just trying to get your attention, you know that. Wouldn’t it be easier to just sign us?”

“Well you got my attention, all right. But there’s nothing I can do for you. You’ve got no following! I have a reputation here. I can’t just take a chance on some band because I used to work with their manager. Look,” he said pointing to the woman with whom he had come onto the roof. “Do you know who she is?”

Bert shook his head no.

“She’s my boss. She’s in charge of A&R for all of Sapphire Records. I happened to be in a meeting with her when I heard what was going on up here and put two and two together.”

“Then she’d understand my proposal. I’m giving you the opportunity to sign us cheap. Once we’re really popular, we’ll be a lot more expensive.”

Edgar laughed. “My god, Bert. Do you really believe your own sales pitches?”

From the corner of his eye, Bert could see the others looking on as he and Edgar gestured wildly, mouthing words that were undoubtedly carried off in the wind before they could reach them.

“I believe in the Redeemers, Edgar. That’s all I believe in. I’m asking you to give us some kind of chance.”

Edgar looked up toward the sky and then around the rooftop as he thought silently. Then he looked Bert in the eye. “Okay, I’ll make you an offer, and it’s take it or leave it. I won’t negotiate with you.”

“Go on.”

“My brother-in-law owns a club not too far from here on Santa Monica Boulevard. He has bands there every night, and he’s always looking for something new and fresh. I’m sure I could get you an audition, and if he likes you he would set you up with a regular schedule. In return, you have to, and I mean this, *have to* stop stalking me.”

Bert gave him a look reflecting the inadequacy of the offer and started to respond, but Edgar cut him off.

“That’s it, Bert. That’s the best I can do right now, and frankly, I think you’d be wise to take me up on it,” he said firmly.

Bert had always considered himself an expert on reading people and knowing when to hold ’em and when to fold ’em, as the song said. This was a time to fold ’em.

“All right, Edgar,” he conceded. “I accept your offer and I thank you for going out on a limb for us with your brother-in-law.”

“Well, it’s not really that big a risk. I don’t care for him much, to tell you the truth, but he and I keep it pleasant and help each other out for my wife’s benefit.”

“Nonetheless, you have my thanks. Promise me you’ll come see us there sometime?” Bert said as the two men started walking back toward the others.

Edgar laughed. “That’s one thing I always did like about you, Bert. You were never afraid to ask for more. I’ll try.”

Edgar explained to security that they could call off the police and that Bert and the band would leave cooperatively. He and Bert made arrangements for Bert to contact Edgar’s brother-in-law, and then Edgar and his colleagues disappeared through the roof door. The security guards, however, stuck around until the Redeemers and all their equipment were fully out of the building.

\* \* \*

It was quickly apparent after the Redeemers’ audition at The Crossroads that Edgar had borrowed a favor from his brother-in-law. The band had played for the club’s manager, Pete Wilson, who without so much as a telephone call afterward, immediately offered the Redeemers the opportunity to play Tuesday and Wednesday nights at the club.

The Crossroads was a medium-size club with a long bar running along the left side. The bar area was long and narrow and separated from the entertainment side by a dark brick wall with four arched cutaways. Bert crossed to the elevated stage, which was set along the front wall, and looked out onto a beige tiled dance floor flanked by tables on

both sides. More tables extended beyond the dance floor to the back of the building. The brick walls were minimally decorated, and the club gave off a homey feel. Bert would reserve judgment, though, until he saw it with people inside.

Once Tuesday night arrived, it was evident that the club did not draw a great midweek crowd.

“It’s a little quiet in here,” Charlie had said as the Redeemers set up their equipment on the first night.

“Maybe it draws a late crowd,” suggested Aaron. The band was scheduled to go on at 9:00.

But it didn’t draw a late crowd that night, the following night, or Tuesday or Wednesday night the following week. The club wasn’t empty, but at any point in time, open tables could be readily found and patrons could move freely around the bar area, sure indications that they weren’t packing them in.

Meanwhile, Charlie found himself some new friends in Los Angeles. On the night of the second show at the club, he was drawn into a cluster of African-American men and women who were carrying on loudly at the bar. One of the men had waved Charlie over as the band exited the stage. He introduced himself as Eric.

“Man, you guys are awesome! Where are you from?” Eric had asked as the others looked on.

“We’re from the Bay Area,” answered Charlie with a smile and an extension of his hand. “We came down to L.A. to be discovered. How do you like our chances?”

“Like them? I don’t see how you can miss!” Eric called to one of the others, “Hey, Leon, grab a beer for my friend Charlie here.”

Leon obediently turned to the bartender to order the beverage while Eric made introductions. “Charlie, this is Serena, George, Alicia, Claire, Randall, and that’s Leon over there,” he said pointing to the bar. Leon waved.

Charlie greeted each, noticing that they were a group that valued style. The men were all clad in handsome leather jackets over their lightweight sweaters or dress shirts, which were complemented by their neatly pressed slacks and leather shoes. The women’s outfits were uniformly snug, and each had obviously spent a fair amount of time getting their hair just so.

Leon returned from the bar and handed Charlie the beer. Charlie shook his hand and thanked him.

The group chatted together for awhile, asking Charlie about himself and the band. They enjoyed the stories about how the band had come together and how they ultimately ended up at The Crossroads that night.

Bert listened distractedly as he watched the other Redeemers pack up their equipment. When they were done, Bert walked over.

“Hey guys,” Charlie addressed the group, “let me introduce you to the founder and leader of the Redeemers. This is Bert Ingram.”

Bert politely said hello to each, but he had an uneasy feeling. “Very nice to meet you all. Thanks for coming out to see us.” Then he turned to Charlie. “We’re heading out now. Are you coming?”

Charlie started to answer, but Eric quickly leapt in. “Charlie, we’re heading out to another club after this, if you want to join us.”



“I could stand to get out and see some of Los Angeles.” He looked at Bert. “You go ahead, Bert. I’ll catch up with you guys later.”

Bert uttered a forced good night to the group, and with a nod to Charlie, walked back to the band. He could feel a pull at his heart. Was it jealousy? No, Bert resolved. It wasn’t that. Well, maybe a little, but Bert’s instincts told him that this was the beginning of some trouble.

Charlie didn’t make it back to the hostel that night until 4:00 A.M. Bert awoke briefly, just enough to feel the relief that he had returned.

Things seemed back to normal the next day and stayed that way until late that Saturday afternoon, when Charlie announced to Bert that he was going out with Eric and the gang that evening.

Bert started to object, but then he caught himself. After all, Charlie wasn’t doing anything wrong. He didn’t want to show how badly it pained him to have to share his closest friend in the world.

Charlie didn’t return until the sun was already up the following morning.

“Where were you?” asked Aaron curiously as the other band mates looked on.

“Just out with some friends,” Charlie replied, a smile creeping across his lips.

“One of the ladies and I hit it off and the night just kind of got away from us.” He winked at Aaron who gave a short laugh.

“Well, well,” said Abe. “Sounds like the blind squirrel finally found an acorn.”

It had been a running joke with the band that every night at Berkeley ended with Charlie chatting up a different college student, trying in vain to get her to come home with him. Even Ethan, who had at first fretted over any and every interaction between his

band mates and his classmates, had ultimately found Charlie's hopeless attempts amusing.

But Bert was not amused. Things were different in L.A. This wasn't a bunch of playful college students who were entertained by, but sufficiently wary of, the thirty-something street hustler. No, the situation here had the makings of a distraction for the band. But Bert resolved to be patient and let the situation play itself out. Besides, there was nothing he could say to Charlie at this point that would come across as anything other than paternalistic. Maybe this would just blow over.

Shortly after the start of the Redeemers' set the following Tuesday night, Bert noticed Eric and a few of his friends walk in. As the band played, more friends joined them, some from the time before, and some new faces.

When the band stepped down from the stage, Charlie immediately walked over to the group, slapping hands in greeting and placing his arm around one of the female members of the entourage. The jovial greetings Bert observed confirmed what he had suspected when they had started arriving during the set. This would not go away quietly or easily.

Charlie's posse came to see the band play again the following night, and after the set, Charlie spent the remainder of the evening huddled with the woman from the night before and the others in a corner of the bar.

When Charlie showed up for practice with the woman, whom he introduced as Doris, later that week, the seemingly harmless relationship began to drive a wedge between Charlie and the rest of the Redeemers. His eyes kept wandering toward her. He spent each break talking to her. He clearly wasn't focusing on any of the instructions

from Bert. Worst of all, Charlie added spontaneous saxophone riffs throughout the pieces. He was showboating for Doris.

“Our practice sessions are closed to outsiders from this point forward!” Bert hissed at Charlie when the session was over.

“What are you talking about?” Charlie asked incredulously. “We’re the same guys who used to practice at frat parties and in subway stations. How much more open could our practices be?”

“No one was making googly eyes at the fraternity brothers instead of practicing. It’s different now. We’re not some college frat band.”

Abe, who was listening to the dialogue, muttered, “Yeah, we’re not even that popular.”

Bert ignored the comment and continued to press Charlie. “I feel like your head’s not in this right now. What was all that nonsense in there?”

“I was just having a little fun, that’s all.”

“Well, it’s hurting the band. This is serious business now. We need your focus.”

Charlie looked at Bert silently for a long time. “All right,” he acquiesced. “I’ll tone it down.” He then walked over to Doris, slung his arm around her, and without looking back, walked out the door.

Bert and Charlie’s relationship remained cool over the next several days. Charlie came and went, showing up at the hostel only to shower and change clothes. It quickly became apparent to each of the Redeemers that the camaraderie that existed before was fading without its catalyst.

Further compounding the situation, Bert and Abe had a big flare-up after one of the Tuesday night performances, when Bert introduced 'Blind Abe' Jackson as the lead singer of the Redeemers. After the show, Bert entered the small dressing area that served as backstage to find Abe in a foul humor.

"Don't exploit me!" Abe shouted at him.

"What are you talking about?" Bert asked in confusion.

"That 'Blind Abe' Jackson stuff. Don't you call me that!" Abe answered, his voice still at a roar.

"C'mon, Abe. It has a cachet to it. Look at how many blind musicians refer to themselves that way: Blind Willie Johnson, Blind Willie McTell—"

But Abe was not deterred. "Look how many don't: Ray Charles, Stevie Wonder. You've been exploiting me since we met back in San Francisco, and I've had as much as I'm going to take."

Bert had had enough of Abe's consistently negative attitude, and was about to counter Abe's vitriol with a diatribe of his own when he caught himself. He could tell that all eyes were fixed upon him without having to turn his head. Everyone was a little on edge. They had come to L.A. thinking that Bert had arranged more for them than he had, and it would be best now to smooth feathers. Also, Bert was mindful that he was in danger of losing Charlie. He couldn't afford to lose Abe too.

"Listen, my friend," he said to Abe finally, resting a hand on his shoulder. "I had no idea you were sensitive about that. You have my promise. Those words will never pass my lips again."

The band's mood over the next weeks continued to deteriorate markedly. Charlie and Doris had parted ways, but just as quickly, Charlie had found a new female companion in the group. He had been taken in by Eric and his friends, and virtually every night, Charlie ran off somewhere with them, often not returning until the early morning hours, and sometimes not until the next day.

Bert knew that for Charlie, this was everything he never had before in his life. He had grown up a solitary kid. The musicians at Maggie's had taken him in, but that was more paternal than anything else. After that, he had just drifted with his cousin Randy until Bert came along, providing his only friendship. But now here he was, the center of attention. Friendships were flowing, and Charlie's self-esteem exploded as he was taken into Eric's circle.

He would be completely oblivious to the hurt he was inflicting on the Redeemers until it was too late.

In the early days, when Charlie would appear at the hostel, Bert could almost feel the mood rise as most of the other Redeemers would gather around him excitedly, hoping to hear what he had been up to or to hear a funny story. But the visits repeatedly ended in disappointment as Charlie returned their overtures with nothing more than a quick hello and goodbye. As time went by, it became clear to all that the Redeemers had become Charlie's second priority.

This feeling was validated when Charlie started showing up late for practices. He was always quick with an excuse – his bus broke down, he got stuck in traffic, he lost his watch--but everyone knew the score. Charlie had found that the L.A. night scene suited him and he was enjoying it at the expense of the band's mission.

Bert tried hard to manage the band through this rough period. What made it particularly trying was that Bert himself was feeling the deepest cut from Charlie's absences. Bert had latched onto Charlie like a life raft, pulling himself out of the solitary confinement he too had suffered for so many years. Bert had opened himself up, vulnerably developing strong feelings for another human being for the first time in many years. And now the opening had become a wound.

The carefree feeling on the rooftop above L.A., which now seemed long ago, had been replaced with a sense of hopelessness and a loss of purpose. Time was weighing heavy on the Redeemers' hands, and the introspection that the time provided was not good for them.

\* \* \*

"What are we doing here?" Abe asked the others at one point when Bert was out somewhere. "I mean, let's be real. We came all the way down here from San Francisco, for what? To play in a bar less than half as crowded as we had back at Berkeley? And do you think Bert was really some record industry hot shot? It sure doesn't seem like it."

Ethan thought that for once, Abe was right. But he held his tongue. But even Dave and Aaron, who were normally supportive, couldn't help but add similar sentiments.

"I hear you," Dave said. "I mean, Bert's sure created this band out of nothing, but sometimes I still wonder about him. He's been a little mysterious down here, and that has me concerned. Not that my home back in San Francisco is any palace, but it sure looks good compared to this place."

Aaron added, "I wasn't making a lot of bucks washing dishes, but it's getting to the point where I could use some cash soon. I know it's not Bert's fault, but the money from the gigs here doesn't add up to much once we back out expenses and split it seven ways."

Dave, who probably had more invested in the dream than anyone, continued, "I miss my family. I know it's only been a couple of weeks and I need to be patient, but I sure wish there was something tangible that I could tell them about. Something to show that we're making real progress. Right now, it sure looks like we could be here awhile."

Ethan and Gene observed the discussion silently, Ethan still keeping his interaction with the band members to a minimum. He didn't know if Gene had concerns, but the dissent was near unanimous. Charlie no longer mattered, he thought. Ethan could see that Charlie had moved from the nucleus of the band to its periphery. The relationship was now like a marriage of convenience. Functional, but not fun.

That night, Ethan was unable to sleep in the uncomfortable cot and wandered outside for some fresh air. Abe was there, sitting on a curbstone facing the road across the parking lot, his back toward the hostel. Ethan approached him.

"What brings you out here, Ethan?" Abe asked without moving.

"How did you know it was me?"

"I can always feel the icy chill in the air when you're around," Abe answered contemptuously.

"Yeah. Well, I was thinking about the conversation you guys were having earlier today and that didn't make it any easier to sleep in this fleabag place, four hundred miles from home. I'm not used to this kind of living. I mean, this place makes the dorms at

Berkeley seem like five-star hotels. I don't know. Sometimes I wonder what I'm doing here too."

This was already the longest conversation the two had had with one another. Ethan took a seat on the curbstone one empty parking space over from Abe.

"Not used to this. My, my," responded Abe. "Try living like this all the time."

"Not me. That's why I'm in school, to do something with my life."

"Is that it? Is that why you're so hostile to me? You think that I'm just some lazy bum who's done nothing for himself?"

"Look, Abe. It's not that. We come from different walks of life. My parents raised me to work hard, to strive for things, to overcome life's obstacles. I feel badly about your sight, but I don't want to be like you – someone who's just given up, who looks for handouts, who's just carried along by society."

"I think your parents forgot to tell you about empathy, about compassion for your fellow man," replied Abe.

"No, that's not it," Ethan responded quickly. "I have compassion where it's deserved. I just think for the most part, people control their own destinies. It's their decisions and choices and their fortitude and their inner drive that determines how life plays out. It's not about luck. Everyone has a chance."

"Well, let me lay something on you, college boy," returned Abe, agitated. "I was never given a chance. Tell me how your life would have turned out if you were raised in the projects in a tiny apartment with your mother working day and night to support you. And then imagine if you were eight years old and you got an illness that took away your sight."



Abe detected Ethan's slight gasp. He continued.

"That's right. I was once able to see. Imagine, one week you're out there playing with your friends and the next week, you're in San Francisco General Hospital. When you return, you can no longer play the way you used to play and slowly, your friends don't come by so often.

"Then imagine that when you're thirteen, your mother is taken ill and ends up in the very same hospital and you're put in a foster home."

"And your mother --?" Ethan asked.

"I don't know," Abe responded. "I didn't want to live in a foster home, so I took off and started living out on the streets. I thought I was pretty tough for awhile, but things got pretty hard. I strayed, keeping clear of my old neighborhood. I was a young kid, bitter at the world for taking my sight and then taking me away from my mother.

"Nearly a year later, I finally had the courage to go back to the neighborhood to try to find out what had happened. When I got to our old home, I found someone else living there. I checked at the hospital and they said that my mother had been released to the care of someone. I guess it was probably some distant relative or something, 'cause I don't remember us having much family.

"Anyway, I never could find this person, and I never saw my mother again." He paused and turned his head in Ethan's direction. "Nice story, huh?"

Ethan sat there, quietly somber for a few moments. He then said to Abe, sympathy in his voice for the first time, "So your mother was pretty great, huh?"

"Yeah, she was great all right. I always wondered though if she ever came through it and came looking for me. There's never been any closure."

“What’s your fondest memory of her?” asked Ethan, trying to turn the conversation a little more upbeat.

“It’s funny,” said Abe. “My clearest memory of her is that she used to sing this little song to me when she tucked me into bed at night. She had a beautiful voice. I guess maybe that’s where my voice came from. Of course, I couldn’t hold a candle to her. But she used to sing to me. Even up to the end when I was too old to be sung to and tucked in, she still did it, and I never objected.”

“Sounds nice,” offered Ethan.

“Yeah, it was,” said Abe, lost in thought. “But that’s ancient history.”

The two men sat in silence for a while. After several minutes, Abe rose off the curbstone. “I guess I’d best be getting back to sleep. You coming?”

“I’ll be in soon,” answered Ethan. “I’m going to hang out here a bit longer. Good night, Abe.”

Abe paused at the door, then called back over his shoulder, “Good night, Ethan.”

## Chapter 13 – The Crossroads

Bert knew that the band members were feeling anxious about Los Angeles. But if he took the band's emotions and multiplied them fivefold, that might describe how he was feeling. He had uprooted the musicians and created upheaval in their lives. Most of them hadn't given up much, but what little they had back in San Francisco still provided a tenuous security that was preferable to the complete uncertainty here. At one point he asked Gene directly, "Do you think I jumped the gun bringing us to L.A.? Do you think we should be somewhere else?"

"Maybe," Gene had conceded. "There's dissension in the ranks for sure. We're going to need some positive reinforcement fast or these guys are gonna be wanting to get back home."

*Not only that, we're going to run out of money soon,* Bert thought to himself.

On a Thursday morning after one of the Redeemers' shows, Bert headed over to The Crossroads to speak with Pete Wilson. The club's manager had been pleasant enough in his dealings with Bert, but it was clear to Bert that he was a strictly-business kind of guy. He would talk to Bert just long enough to make whatever arrangements were necessary with the band, and then he would turn his attention to other matters, be it taking a phone call from a liquor distributor, checking the night's receipts, or going over policies with the head bartender.

The chairs were still upside down on tables when Bert arrived, but he was let in by a bartender who was in the process of setting up. Pete was in the back, he told Bert.

Bert found the short, stocky manager hunched over a desk writing checks. Bert cleared his throat, and Pete looked up.

“Bert, good to see you. Nice show last night,” he said, standing up and extending his hand. “What brings you here?”

Looking him confidently in the eye, Bert said, “I wanted to talk to you about our time slot. While we really enjoy playing here, and I appreciate your taking us on, I don’t see us realistically getting any exposure playing Tuesday and Wednesday nights. The Redeemers and I know we can pack them in for you if we just had the chance for people to hear us play. Do you guys draw a happy hour crowd those days? Maybe we could start earlier?”

Pete studied Bert for a moment. “Hmm, maybe. I’m not sure how well that would go over. But I know how you feel. You came all the way down here from San Francisco, and you could probably do this well back up there. I’d rather not lose you guys, to tell you the truth. You’re reliable and well behaved. I can’t say that about all my acts.” He laughed. “Plus, you guys are good. I mean, *really* good.”

Then he looked as if a light bulb had just appeared over his head. “Bert, this is your lucky day. We’ve got this band, Credible Threat, playing here tomorrow night at eleven. They’re pretty hot locally. We had decided to go without a warm-up act for them, but we had been on the fence about it. Do you guys want to play from nine to say, ten-thirty or so?”

“Would we?” asked Bert rhetorically. “Hell, yes! Thanks for the opportunity. We’ll bring the house down.”

“You don’t need to do that. Just keep the crowd entertained until Credible Threat goes on. Also, you need to know that I can’t guarantee anything beyond that. We’ll have to see how it goes. I can’t always go by my taste. It’s a fickle world out there.”

“I understand, but you don’t need to worry. We always make the most of our opportunities. We’re the Redeemers.”

Bert thanked him and left the club with a rediscovered bounce in his step.

True to his prediction, the Redeemers wowed them at The Crossroads that Friday night. When the band started to play, the audience was already larger than its peak earlier in the week, and the crowd swelled to near capacity by the time the band left the stage at the appointed 10:30. The crowd loved the mix of originals and cover songs, and for the first time in the club’s history, as Bert would later learn, the crowd spontaneously called an opening act back out for an encore. Responding to chants of “We want the Redeemers!” the band came back out and played a drawn-out, bass-guitar-overloaded, totally raucous version of Otis Blackwell’s “Paralyzed.”

Minutes after the encore, Pete Wilson offered Bert the same time slot for the next several Fridays.

The band members rode the adrenalin from the Friday night performance for several days, but it wasn’t long before they started to feel like fish out of water again in Los Angeles. The reality was that performing twice per week (they had dropped Tuesday night) left a surplus of time on their hands in a city that was intimidatingly huge and where they had no financial means to avail themselves of any activity beyond playing music. Dave and Ethan continued to write songs, the band continued to practice, and Aaron had gotten himself some work cleaning up at The Crossroads, but all in all, they were a long way from home and a little stir crazy.

Friday nights took them away from these feelings and elevated them to new heights. They played off the energy from the crowd, which flocked to see them as word

rapidly spread of the band. And as long as the Redeemers were on stage, it was easy to block out the dissention. When Charlie was on stage with his saxophone in his hand, for that brief hour or two it was as if nothing had changed.

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As the Redeemers came off the stage following their second Friday night performance at The Crossroads, Charlie was on his way to the bar to get a few beers for his buddies when he was intercepted by a man in his late twenties or early thirties, looking slightly out of place in his khakis and polo shirt.

“That was an outstanding set you guys just played,” he said.

“Thanks very much,” replied Charlie, grinning appreciatively and continuing to the bar.

The man walked with him. “You know, you look really familiar to me.”

Charlie paused with his elbow leaning on the bar and gave the man a second and longer look.

“Have you spent any time in Las Vegas?” the man asked.

“Who? Uh, me?” Charlie replied instinctively. “No, you must have me confused with someone else.” Charlie’s pulse quickened with the fear that his past had caught up with him after all these years.

The man looked dubious. “Really? I’d swear you used to play the Gin Joint while I tended bar there.” The man slapped the wooden bar top excitedly. “Your name is Charlie, right?”

Charlie hesitated.

“Mark Tomlinson,” the man said, thrusting out his hand.

The lightbulb went on for Charlie. “Oh my god, Mark! I remember you! Sorry I didn’t recognize you right away.”

“It’s the hairline, I think. People say I’ve aged a lot in the last few years,” he laughed.

“I didn’t realize tending bar was that stressful.”

The Crossroads’ bartender appeared and Charlie ordered the beers, including one for Mark. Eric came over and Charlie handed him three of the beers. “I’ll be there in a couple minutes,” Charlie told him. Eric nodded, took the beers, and headed off to his entourage.

“Oh, I’m not doing that anymore,” Mark answered, when Charlie’s attention had returned. “I’m now the director of entertainment at the Emerald City Hotel & Casino. How long have you guys been playing together?”

Charlie told Mark the history of the Redeemers, and then Mark filled Charlie in on all that had transpired in his life since the days when they’d worked together in Las Vegas. They hadn’t known one another well, their time at the bar overlapping by only a few months, but Charlie had spent enough time there in between and after sets that the two had some conversational history.

Mark downed the last of his beer. “Listen,” Mark said, “I’ve got to get going. I have an early flight tomorrow, but here’s my card. If you’re ever back in Vegas, look me up. And by the way, you guys have a really bright future ahead of you. Hell, I’d love to get my hands on you guys.” He smiled broadly. “Do you have a business card?”

Charlie dug into his pocket for one of Bert’s cards and handed it to Mark. The two shook again and Mark disappeared into the crowd, heading for the exit.

Charlie suddenly found Bert alongside him. Bert had been watching the scene and observed the business card exchange.

“Who was that you were talking to?” he asked.

Charlie explained.

Bert’s eyes widened. “And you got his card?” he asked excitedly.

“Yes,” Charlie answered slowly, “but why is that important?”

“I’m not sure yet,” said Bert. “But you never know when someone will be of some use, especially someone in that type of position.”

Charlie shrugged. “I suppose so, but I couldn’t see us playing Vegas. What would we do, open for Charo?” He laughed.

Bert was deep in thought and gave a reflexive chuckle, but didn’t answer.

\* \* \*

It turned out that Bert didn’t have to spend much time figuring out how to make use of Charlie’s chance meeting with the former bartender. On the Wednesday following the Friday night performance, Bert received an unexpected call from Mark Tomlinson, who said he was calling to discuss an opportunity.

Bert felt his heart rate quicken, but he tried to relax by telling himself that this call could amount to nothing.

“You probably know that I saw the Redeemers play in Los Angeles,” Mark went on. “You guys were brilliant. Really. I can’t remember the last time I was struck so immediately and so powerfully by a band.”

“That’s very flattering,” replied Bert. “We like to consider ourselves set apart from all other bands.”



“And that’s why I’m calling. We’d like to bring your unique style of music up here to Las Vegas.”

“What are you thinking specifically? Are we talking about a lounge act?”

“No, of course not,” Mark answered. “You’re way better than that. We’ve got a musical review that runs five nights a week here, Sunday through Thursday nights, and we thought it would be great for you to be the opener for it. And that’s not all. A number of the marquee performers we get here--you know, singers, comedians, whatever--don’t have opening acts touring with them. You would get to open for them on some Fridays and Saturdays.”

“Wow!” escaped Bert’s mouth. Then, catching himself, he said more casually, “That sounds like quite an offer so far. And what are we talking about financially?”

“We can offer you \$1,000 per show on the weeknights and \$3,000 per show for any performance as an opener for one of the name entertainers.”

Those weren’t world-beating numbers, but they were the biggest numbers Bert had heard in a long, long time. He decided to press it a little. “What about accommodations? Is there anything you can do for us in terms of housing?”

“Sure. We own some rental properties away from the strip. I’m sure we could put you up there for as long as you’re playing at the hotel.”

Bert felt as though he could hear the blood pumping through his veins. He thanked Mark for the offer and said that that he would get back to him, but that it sounded exciting.

Now he needed to roll the pros and cons around in his mind. On the one hand, Mark’s offer represented steady work in a major town. That was a big plus. And the

frank reality that Bert had avoided contemplating now entered his mind. The band was on a collision course with bankruptcy. While it was nice to be drawing income from the performances at The Crossroads, the money wasn't enough to offset the living expenses in Los Angeles, and the deficit was creating a steady drain on Bert's limited savings.

He had brought the band to L.A. to quickly win over the record companies, not to have an extended stay playing in a bar. True, The Crossroads had given the band a big boost, and under normal circumstances, it would have been an extremely welcome entrée into the L.A. music scene. But these circumstances were anything but normal. There were too many disparate personalities, too much restlessness, and too much infighting to hold the band together through a long slow haul. Without a change of scenery, the band could unravel. And it sure would be good to extricate Charlie from the grip of Los Angeles.

On the other hand, Los Angeles offered endless possibilities, and what could be better than L.A. for an aspiring band? Yet, it was easy to get lost here, and Bert's psyche had taken some not insignificant punishment.

And what about Las Vegas, the city of glitz, excess, and decadence? Is that where the band should be? What kind of opportunities might that create? And how would the band react, especially Charlie?

These questions roiled him, attacking his thoughts in rapid succession until, in the end, he went with his instincts, which told him to get the hell out of L.A. Even if Las Vegas turned out to be a dead end, at a minimum, Bert could sock away enough money to finance the band's next move.

He decided to float the idea by Charlie over the weekend. If nothing else, the conversation would draw the proverbial line in the sand, forcing Charlie to choose one side or the other.

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“Aren’t you excited, Charlie?” Bert asked after telling him the news.

“I can’t go back to Vegas, Bert. You know that.”

Bert recalled the story Charlie had told him when they first met about Charlie’s gambling addiction.

“C’mon. That was a long time ago. You’re beyond all that. You’ve proven it to yourself all these years in San Francisco.”

“I don’t know about that. I haven’t faced that kind of temptation. Look at me. I’m shaking just talking to you about it. I don’t want to go through that again.”

“You’ve got to believe in yourself and believe in the band. We need to do what’s best for the band.” Bert wrapped his arm around Charlie’s shoulder. “Besides, you know I’ll watch out for you.”

Charlie forced a smile. “Sure, but with all due respect, your track record isn’t so great either. Besides, I kind of like it here. For the first time in a long time, I’m somebody.”

“I know you’ve made some friends here. But you’ll make friends in Las Vegas too.”

“It’s not the same, Bert. I’ve found my niche here. I’ve got a band. I’ve got friends. I’m having the time of my life. Let’s just stay here for awhile.”

“We can’t stay, Charlie. It’s time for us to move on.”

Charlie shook his head. "I'm not ready to move on. Don't you see? I mean, I love you like a brother, Bert. I really do. But the rest of the guys in the band are just my band mates. I've got something special here. I've never been part of the 'in crowd' before. I've never been this accepted for just being me."

"Are you saying you would leave the band if we went to Las Vegas?" Bert asked, his heart pounding. "You can't mean that, Charlie. After all we've been through?"

"Don't make me choose, Bert. Please."

"I'm afraid you have to," Bert replied.

A painful sadness raced through Bert as he waited for the answer and then listened to words he hoped to never hear.

"It's nothing personal, Bert. I owe a lot to you. And to the others. But I've got too many relationships here to go anywhere now."

"Hollow ones," said Bert flatly.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Charlie asked.

"C'mon, Charlie," said Bert. "You know there's more to life than staying out late, picking up woman, and drinking."

"You're jealous! That's it, isn't it?" said Charlie with a sudden look of realization spreading across his face.

Bert thought for a moment about how to answer the tricky question. "Yes, that's true. I'll admit it. But that has nothing to do with this. You've never seen me do anything that wasn't in the best interest of the band and in the best interest of each of you. I just don't want to see you throw your life away again."

Charlie flushed with anger. “You don’t need to take care of me. You’re not my father, you know.” He paused, calming himself. Then he spoke very directly. “I want to stay in L.A.”

Bert saw that further discussion on this topic would not do either of them any good. Not today, anyway.

“I think you need some time to evaluate your priorities,” Bert said gently. He left Charlie to his thoughts.

\* \* \*

Come Monday, Bert had arrived at a decision. He pushed the conversation with Charlie aside in his mind as he addressed the Redeemers, save for the renegade saxophone player, in the shared room in the hostel that afternoon. “Gather ’round! I’ve got some exciting news!”

Ethan looked up from the magazine he was reading on his cot and sat up, throwing his legs over the side. Abe took off his headphones and propped himself up on his bed. Dave, Aaron, and Gene, who were playing cards at the room’s lone table, placed their hands face down in front of themselves.

“Gentlemen, we’ve been discovered!” opened Bert with a flourish. “I received a phone call from the entertainment director at the Emerald City Hotel in Las Vegas. He saw us play here and he’s offered us a regular schedule there. What do you think?”

“Live from the Coconut Lounge, it’s the Redeemers! Please remember to tip your waitresses,” said Ethan.

“Ha, ha. That’s funny,” replied Bert, brushing aside the sarcasm.

“Seriously, Bert,” said Aaron, “isn’t Las Vegas where rock bands go on their way down?”

“So we’ll play there on the way up *and* the way down,” laughed Bert uneasily. He had known this wasn’t going to be an easy sell. As their manager, he could probably force them to Las Vegas, but he knew that was a dangerous game. It would be appreciably more effective to get their buy-in.

“What’s the deal?” asked Abe.

Bert explained Mark’s offer. He told them that while Las Vegas wasn’t traditionally a breeding ground for new acts, it did afford the band the opportunity to perform before a broad array of influential people, as well as connect with promoters from other musical acts. He also told them his concern that L.A. was going to tear them apart.

The Redeemers’ mixed feelings were quickly apparent. They were animatedly talking over one another, splitting into side conversations, stopping abruptly to hear one another whenever it seemed like someone had a particularly insightful thought on the prospect, and then talking over one another again.

Bert then added the kicker. “By the way, Mark also offered to put us up in one of his rental properties.”

“Count me in, baby!” exclaimed Abe. “Anything to get out of this shithole. Do I get my own room?” Bert knew that Abe had lived in squalor for most of his life. As the years passed by, his existence had become little more than an exercise in survival – earn a little money for food and shelter, eat, sleep, wake up, and do it again. For him, creature comforts now reigned.

“I think so,” said Bert. “I don’t have all the specifics yet.”

“Let’s not be foolish,” cautioned Aaron. “We can’t decide what our best path to success is based on our living accommodations.”

“I think we’ve got to factor that in, man,” said Abe. “How long are any of us going to tolerate living in some tiny room with six roommates? None of us needs to be at the Ritz. I mean, that’s not what we’re about. But we’ve got to have some basic human needs met, and a little living space and privacy are the most basic of basics. There are going to be trade-offs along our way and this is one I’m willing to make.”

“I don’t know,” said Ethan, not contentiously, but thoughtfully. “I hear you, Abe, but Los Angeles versus Las Vegas? I mean, come on!”

“What about Charlie?” asked Dave suddenly. All other conversation halted.

Bert grew somber. “I don’t know,” he said. “I’m not sure that he would go with us.”

“We wouldn’t just leave him here, would we?” asked Dave, beginning to assess the dilemma pragmatically.

“Well, I can’t force him to come,” answered Bert. “He has to make his own choices.”

“I can’t imagine Charlie not being with us,” Dave replied, as much to himself as to anyone. “We’ve been through so much together--courting Ethan at Berkeley, rescuing Gene from the old folks’ home. We’ve come too far together to cast him aside.

“It’s not about his saxophone playing,” Dave continued, head in his hands now. “In a lot of ways, Charlie has held us together. I, for one, am not ready to let go.”

Everyone's eyes were still on Dave, so he went on. "I don't know. This just doesn't feel right to me. I mean, we've been like family these last months."

"I say screw him," blurted Abe. "He doesn't care anything about us anymore, just his posse." Abe's emotional scaffolding was firmly in place. "If Charlie doesn't care about me, then I don't care about Charlie. No let downs. No sadness. It doesn't get any simpler than that."

"Your thoughts, Ethan?" Bert asked, turning to the guitar player.

Ethan looked surprised to be put on the spot. "Uh, well," he stammered, searching for the right thing to say. "I think you all know that I could have left Charlie behind long ago. But I have to admit, the Redeemers wouldn't be the same without him. He's a key member of this band." He paused and looked contritely from member to member. "Each of us is."

"Yeah, well, I'm with Abe," said Aaron.

All faces turned abruptly toward the drummer, who was typically the most easy-going member of the troupe.

"He's hurt us," Aaron continued with a tear building in the corner of his eye. "He clearly has no time for us, so I don't see why we should have the time for him." He choked back tears. "I just wish things were back the way they were before we got here."

Bert watched as Aaron, the most fragile of the Redeemers, ranted like a bitter child. "The band had been going great. I was having the time of my life. Why did Charlie have to go and spoil everything?" He was talking to no one in particular.

Bert had seen this tempest brewing over these past few weeks, as Aaron felt spurned, vainly reaching out to Charlie on those rare moments when Charlie was around.



But Charlie had become economical with his words to Aaron and to the others -- a grunt here, a nod there, like he was barely listening.

Gene approached Aaron and rested a paternal hand on his shoulder. "You can't will things to be the way you want them to be," he said. He then looked at the others. "Adversity can motivate or destroy, depending upon the mettle of the man. I believe that we will soon need to choose down which path we let it lead us."

Silence filled the room. Eventually, Bert spoke. "Look, everyone. We don't need to decide this immediately. Give it some thought and we'll talk more in a couple of days."

\* \* \*

A surprise guest showed up at the Friday night show at The Crossroads. Off to the band's right, about halfway toward the back of the room, Bert spotted Edgar James, sitting and sipping a drink.

Bert made eye contact with him, but waited until the performance was over before walking to the table. It would have been too loud to have a conversation before then anyway. The two shook hands, and Edgar gestured for Bert to sit down across from him.

Bert said jokingly, "I didn't realize you were still part of the bar scene."

"No, unfortunately, my barfly days are well behind me. But my brother-in-law kept hounding me about some band that I just had to see. He said something about my referring the band to him." Edgar's coyness triggered Bert's radar.

"Uh huh. And what did you think of this band?" asked Bert.

"Needs a little work," answered Edgar, with faux disinterest.

Bert continued to look at Edgar, waiting for the next move.

“Actually, Bert, I was quite impressed. Your boys have a fun, up-tempo sound. Not quite polished, but plenty of energy and creativity.”

“Thanks. It was nice of you to come see us play,” responded Bert cautiously.

“Let me cut to the chase. I was doing some thinking while your boys were playing and I’ve got a proposal for you.”

“Go on.”

“Well, I’m still not sure what we have here, but I’d like to get the Redeemers on the L.A. club circuit and see how the crowds respond.”

“That sounds great!” Bert grinned.

“Yes, well, there’s one issue that would need to be resolved,” said Edgar, his facial expression becoming frank. “I think we both know that you’ve taken this band as far as you can. Not to take anything away from you. Hats off to the job you’ve done. But I think the band needs a professional’s touch. Someone who can take them to the next level. I have a guy--”

So that was the game, thought Bert. Well, Edgar wasn’t going to do this to him again. Bert cut him off hastily. “We’re not interested,” he said tightly. “You can take your offer and shove--”

“Careful, Bert. You never want to burn bridges in this industry. Besides, we’d compensate you well. Think about it. You deserve something for all the work you’ve done. We would just be buying the rights to the band from you.”

A rush of hostility coursed through Bert’s veins. He raised his voice and looked Edgar dead in the eye. “Whatever your offer is, I don’t want it,” he said, slowly

articulating each word. “You’re not going to bully me out this time. We can make it without you.”

Bert rose and had started to walk away when Edgar shouted to him, “You’re only thinking about yourself. What would the band say to my offer?”

Bert froze in his tracks as he considered what Edgar had said. *Do I owe it to the band to let them know about the offer?* Bert realized reluctantly that his personal integrity offered him no choice.

“Very well, Edgar,” he answered. “I’ll run it by them.”

Bert stormed through the bar, banging into patrons, and abruptly broke up conversations in order to gather up the Redeemers. He was unable to find Charlie, who must have left already. That was just as well, Bert figured, feeling that Charlie was undeserving of a vote at this point anyway.

When they were all together at a table at the rear of the restaurant, he took a deep breath and laid it out. After telling them the entire proposal, he looked around the table and concluded, “This is difficult for me, but if you want to take Edgar’s offer, I’ll step down. If you stay with me, I want us to go to Las Vegas. I want you all to understand where my head is. I’ve had enough of L.A., and I think despite how well some things have gone here, a lot of you have had enough here too.” He paused and gathered his thoughts. “I’m really proud of you guys and of what we’ve accomplished. And I know in my heart that we’ve only scratched the surface.”

Bert choked back his emotions. “I’m going to head back to the hostel now. I’ll give you the opportunity to stay here and figure out amongst yourselves what’s next for

the Redeemers.” And with that, Bert wished the band good night, put on his hat, and walked away. But he didn’t go straight back to the hostel.

\* \* \*

Dave joined the stunned silence around the table. Finally, Aaron broke it. “Well, let me guess which way you’re voting, Ethan.”

Ethan began to respond, then stopped himself. More silence.

Then Aaron asked, “Well, Dave, you’ve invested a lot in the band. What do you think?”

“I’m not sure. For me, it’s all about the performing. Would I rather play in a nice theater in Las Vegas than a bar in L.A.? I would have thought so, not long ago. But there’s something about playing here that I really enjoy. On the other hand, my allegiance is to Bert, and if he thinks Las Vegas is the better stepping stone, then who am I to say?” He looked at the others and grimaced. “And then there’s Charlie. I worry that at times this band is held together by a thread, and that if we abandon Charlie here, we’ll just unravel.”

“I wouldn’t think too hard about Charlie,” said Abe with a sneer. “He’s forsaken us. He’s as good as gone either way, and I think we need to get ourselves a new saxophone player, pronto.”

Dave frowned as he realized that Abe spoke the truth. “So your vote, Abe, is to go to Las Vegas?” he asked.

“Hell no!” roared Abe. “If I’ve got an opportunity to rid myself of Bert, I’m not going to miss it.”

“What about the living accommodations?” asked Aaron.

“Look. I’ve been trying to shake Bert ever since the day he arrived in my subway station. Hell, I only promised to join his band because I thought he was bluffing. I thought it would get rid of him.”

“But you’re happy to be with us now, aren’t you?” asked Dave.

“Happy? Heh, heh,” Abe laughed wryly. “I don’t get happy. Or sad. I just *am*.”

Despite the answer, Dave sensed that deep down, Abe had found a home with the Redeemers. Otherwise, he would have left long ago, promise or no promise. Maybe Abe just couldn’t admit that, even to himself.

“I don’t know. I’m not sure I trust this Edgar guy. Something is not right between him and Bert,” Dave said to the group.

“Why not?” came Abe’s voice again. “He’s a top dog at a major record label in the city where all the action takes place.”

“I have to take Abe’s side on this, as much of a shock as that might be,” said Ethan. “What’s not to trust?”

“What about Bert?” asked Aaron.

“What about him?” countered Ethan. “I’m sure he’ll get a piece of the action.”

“I’m not sure that’s what he’s in it for,” replied Aaron.

Ethan exclaimed mockingly, “Oh, right. This ‘band of destiny’ thing.” Then, more earnestly, he added, “Well, Bert’s got to realize that life changes. He’s taken us a long way. He should feel good about that.”

“I’m just not sure that’s good enough, and I for one feel indebted to him,” came back Aaron.

“It’s not about indebtedness,” said Abe in support of Ethan. “It’s about a chance to make some serious money. We can’t just piss away an opportunity like this.”

“So you think Edgar is the right opportunity for us?” asked Dave.

“Heh, heh,” laughed Abe again. “Are you asking me to compare Bert’s track record to Edgar’s?”

“No, not at all,” replied Dave. “It’s just that there’s something slick about him. He makes me edgy. I’m just worried what he might do to the band.”

“Like what?” asked Ethan.

Gene weighed in at last. “Dave means that bands with star power can call their shots. Those without leverage are unable to stand strong together.”

“Meaning....?” asked Ethan.

“Meaning that Edgar will replace any one of us, or more than one, if he thinks it will improve the band,” answered Gene.

Dave watched as Aaron’s face quickly paled. The kid had come a long way in a short time, but that wasn’t enough to create the confidence that he wouldn’t be one to go. From the look on Abe’s face, he was suddenly feeling similar reservations. And he knew that Gene, who had spent his career as a bystander, was not about to put himself in a position where he could be left on the side of the road again.

The elder statesman continued. “I’ve seen many a time where some haughty producer or record exec comes in and starts tinkering with the sound, with the band make-up, with whatever. They wouldn’t think twice about replacing any of us, with the exception of Dave maybe, with one of their own people. Or they might find someone to do the studio recordings and hire someone else to tour.

“In fact, I wouldn’t be surprised to see Edgar pry Dave and his music-writing talent out of the band and create a totally new band around him. We could all be tossed aside.

“On top of that, I think we need to look inside ourselves. A lot of us were nowhere in this world until Bert came along and revived us. Ethan and Dave, even you guys who had respectable lives before this, can you honestly say that Bert hasn’t breathed new fire into you? He hasn’t steered us wrong yet and I’m with Aaron. I’m indebted to the man and until he leads me astray, he’s got my backing.”

Gene’s words resonated in each and every one of them and for a long time, no one said a word. Finally, he broke the silence.

“Can I assume from the silence that we’ve all agreed to stay the course and move on to Las Vegas with Bert?” Gene looked around the table, one by one, and each head nodded.

“Okay then,” he said with a sigh of relief. He rose from the table and put on his jacket. “I’m going to head back and give Bert the news.”

\* \* \*

Along the walk back to the hostel, Gene replayed the conversation he had about Bert with his former agent. “Just be careful with this guy,” Sherman had warned. Gene brushed it aside. Bert had accepted Gene unconditionally. Bert deserved Gene’s support the same way.

When Gene pushed open the door to the Redeemers’ shared quarters, he found Bert slumped in the corner of the room, sitting on the floor with his legs straight out and his head thrown back awkwardly. He was staring at the ceiling and his face displayed

every bit of the strain of the evening's events. Bert's left hand gripped the neck of a 750 ml bottle of cheap gin, half empty, and his right hand delicately held one of the plastic cups from the bathroom.

He looked blearily at Gene as he approached.

"Oh my god, Bert!" Gene exclaimed.

"s' okay," Bert replied. "You guys will be fine without me."

Gene tried to interrupt, but Bert talked over him. "You don't need to apologize. I unnerstand. Thish is a business, after all."

"Bert. Stop for a second," Gene insisted. "The band voted to stay with you. We're going to Vegas!"

"They did?"

Gene laughed as he lifted Bert from the floor and pulled the bottle from his hand. "It was unanimous, you old fool!" He took the plastic cup from Bert, walked over to the bathroom sink, and poured the contents of both cup and bottle down the drain.

When he returned, there were tears in Bert's eyes.

"I slipped, Gene," Bert said to him.

"What do you mean?"

"Thish is the first drink I've had since August. I thought I had it beaten." There was a lengthy pause. "But I don't," he whispered.

"Look, Bert. Everyone slips. You just can't use it as an excuse to let yourself slide all the way back." Gene slung his arm around him. "C'mon, let's go get a cup of coffee somewhere. The rest of the guys don't need to see you like this."



## Chapter 14 – The Emerald City

Bert looked at Charlie in silence for what seemed like minutes. He had just told the saxophonist of the band's decision to go to Las Vegas. His voice overwrought with emotion, Bert had said, "I never thought it would end this way. We've been blood brothers. But I now have no choice, Charlie. The Redeemers can't stay here."

"You can't be serious! I didn't even get a chance to talk to the others about it. How could you decide without me?" exclaimed Charlie.

"You haven't been a Redeemer for weeks now, Charlie," answered Bert, trying to sound firm, but his voice quavering with the discomfort of the words. "You know it. The band knows it." He sighed. "We're not a priority for you."

Charlie turned away, then wheeled back around. "Look, give it another chance. A few more weeks in L.A. won't hurt anything. I can balance--"

Bert cut him off. "No. I don't think you can. You're too caught up in the scene here. Look, no one feels worse about this than I do. You've been my closest friend these last several months." He paused. "And I, for one, miss the old Charlie."

Charlie looked sullen. "And the others? What do they say?"

"They're all in agreement. They have no allegiance to you anymore. I'm sorry, but that's the harsh reality." Bert pressed a hand on Charlie's back. "Listen, it doesn't have to be permanent. When you get your priorities back in order, I honestly hope you'll give me a call. But the band comes first. It always will." Bert let his arm drop and began to back away. "You know where to reach me."

\* \* \*

It took Charlie a couple of days to recover from the conversation with Bert, but before long he had convinced himself that the Redeemers were at the end of their days anyway. *Bert is steering them off a cliff! I mean, really. Who would take a band like that to Las Vegas when we are in the recording capital of the world?*

Charlie was between lady friends at the moment, so he called up Eric to see what the boys were up to.

“You what?” asked Eric when Charlie told him what had happened.

“That’s right. I quit the band. I’m an L.A. boy now.”

“Well, good for you, Charlie. You can hang with us anytime.”

And hang they did. They hung out on a street corner in South Central L.A. They hung out in front of a neighborhood Min-E-Mart. They hung out on the front stoop of Eric’s row home. They hung out at a local burger joint.

But it wasn’t quite the same. Charlie missed the gang coming to watch him play at The Crossroads. It had been fun having admirers fuss over him after the sets. Now, with no schedule of any sort, Charlie was quickly finding the time in L.A. heavy on his hands. The practices had helped fill his days and the two nights a week at the club had helped fill some evenings. Charlie was slowly realizing that hanging with Eric and the boys was a lot more fun when it was a diversion from the band, not his primary activity.

A few nights a week, Charlie continued to go out with Eric and his group of friends. The times were good, but Charlie was no longer the center of attention. And the ladies sure seemed to enjoy dating Charlie the sax player more than dating just plain Charlie. On top of all that, he’d have to find some type of work soon or the money would run out.

\* \* \*

Bert's spirits had improved ever since the bus pulled out of the Los Angeles depot, his emotions riding a wave of relief. Ten days had elapsed since they'd left L.A., and he had still not completely recovered from the band's near dismantling and Edgar's unforgiving treatment. He still felt the sting of Charlie's departure, but he did his best to keep his inner emotions quiet as he transitioned into the new situation in Las Vegas, outwardly displaying the same fire and enthusiasm for which the band had gotten behind him in the first place.

The bus ride had gone without incident, save for one minor episode involving Ethan. At one point along the way, Ethan's cell phone rang and he had excused himself to an isolated spot at the rear of the bus.

"What do you make of him?" Aaron had asked of the others.

"What do you mean?" Dave asked.

"I don't know, but he's been awfully mysterious the last few weeks. A couple of times I walked in on him in the hostel in L.A. while he was on the phone and he seemed very anxious to get off the call."

"So maybe he likes his privacy," offered Dave.

"I don't think so," Aaron replied. "It's been a recent phenomenon. Up until the last few weeks, it was just the opposite. He would talk to folks back home as if we weren't even there."

"Hmm. Now that you mention it, I've noticed that too," Dave said with a sudden realization. "What do you--?"

The conversation ended abruptly as the others noticed Ethan approaching down the aisle on his way back to his seat. Noting the sudden silence, Ethan gave each a curious stare, slowly moving his gaze from person to person, but no one uttered a word.

It had been a good ten days in the desert. The Redeemers, minus one saxophone player, were settled into their new digs, a high-rise apartment building whose rooms were furnished with just enough of the basic amenities. The building was used to house the transient help in the casino hotel industry. A shuttle made the short ride between the apartment building and the strip every fifteen minutes and operated 24/7.

Bert had made arrangements with Mark Tomlinson to utilize a small auditorium not far from the main showroom at the Emerald City Hotel & Casino, both to store the band's equipment and in which to practice. The rehearsal space was a significant improvement over Dave's garage and the living accommodations felt like the Ritz compared to the Los Angeles hostel.

The performances had also gone well. The nightly revue show was a tribute to the legends of jazz and drew an audience that appreciated the Redeemers' R&B, rock, and funk crossover sound.

The auditorium for the revue had a 750-seat capacity and was always between half and three quarters full depending on the night of the week. The room itself was appointed nicely, with row after row of red-cushioned arena style seats bolted to the beige carpet. Sculpted molding adorned the edges of the walls and ceilings, and the room exhibited an elegance that was more understated than the rest of the hotel and casino.

While the overall stress level had surely declined, Bert would describe the atmosphere surrounding the Redeemers' experience in Las Vegas so far as nothing more

than comfortable. The audiences had been appreciative, but probably due to the nature of the venue and clientele, they were more subdued than the college throng back at Berkeley or the party crowd in L.A.

The crowd had been more vibrant, however, on the most recent Thursday night, when the band had opened for Cold Sweat, a rock band from Minneapolis that came through Vegas as part of its national tour. The audience was a lot younger and filled the hotel's 4,000-seat theater. The crowd stood and bobbed to the music for much of the set and a handful even came down to dance in front of the stage.

"That was more like it!" said Ethan after the show.

"That's for sure," Dave had agreed, but added, "yet somehow it still had the sterile feel of Las Vegas. I don't feel like we connect with the audience as well here."

"Yeah, but at least we've got steady work," said Aaron, to which Dave just grunted.

Unspoken, but in each of their minds, Bert knew, was that the band sounded better with Charlie, no two ways about it.

Bert had used the opportunity to open for Cold Sweat to network with the band's manager and promoters, not missing any chance to tell the Redeemers' story to anyone who would stand still long enough to listen. Over the next few weeks, he would continue to seek out anyone who might have an "in" in the music industry, press the flesh, hand out business cards, and start to cultivate relationships.

\* \* \*

Over the second weekend in Las Vegas, to his joy, Dave's family came in for a visit. The band was opening for comedian Lenny Clark that Saturday evening and wasn't

due at the theater until 7:00 P.M., so Dave, Ann, Jack, and Kate decided to go to Boulder City for the day. Ann, at Jack's urging, invited Aaron to join them. Aaron eagerly accepted.

Late in the afternoon, after spending the day sightseeing, the group stopped to relax in a local park. While Aaron was teaching Jack and Kate how to throw and catch a Frisbee he had brought along, Ann pulled Dave over to a shaded bench. She looked like something was troubling her.

"You seem like you've got something on your mind, honey," Dave said.

Ann forced a smile. "You know I'm doing everything I can to support you with this band," she said.

"I know," he answered, pulling her close and kissing her gently on the forehead. "You're the most supportive wife a man could ask for."

"It's just getting a little tougher not to worry, that's all."

"Worry about what?"

"About Bert's intentions. And some of the others," Ann replied. "I mean, look at the situation from a distance. Here you are, the band I mean, with a steady schedule, playing in a nice hotel, making some money."

"So?"

"So I'm worried that it might be enough for some of your band mates." Dave started to interrupt, but Ann held up a hand. "I know this isn't the be all and end all for you, but what's to stop it from ending here? You've got a steady income and family back in San Francisco, but for a lot of these guys--Bert, Abe, probably even Aaron here--

they've got a pretty good thing going. This is more money and a better lifestyle than most of them have ever had before, or at least in a long time."

"So that's it?" Dave responded rhetorically. Usually the more rational one of the two, Dave felt anything but rational. He felt as if he were having an out of body experience with his physical being safely teaching school back in San Francisco, while his spirit had headed off on its own adventure. Now the two worlds were colliding. "You're worried that we'll get too comfortable here?" he said to Ann.

An errant throw skidded to a halt at their feet and Dave picked up the Frisbee and tossed it back to Aaron.

Ann was looking down, but Dave lifted her face up gently. Her eyes were glassy and tears began to flow. "Yes, I am," she answered.

"Ann, Ann, Ann," Dave said as he comforted her. "That's not how it is. I mean, maybe a couple of the guys feel that way, but I know Bert won't let that happen. He's tasted victory before and he won't settle for something short of that. You'll see. Bert moves quickly. I think he knows he's on the clock with some of us. He knows how much I miss you and the kids and that he's got to deliver something to prevent me from just walking out and stepping back into my old life. Hell, Bert's got the same issues with Ethan. He knows Ethan won't stay away from school forever."

Dave leaned in closer and lowered his voice. "Just between you and me, Bert has to know that Ethan and I are the cornerstones of this band. We do all the writing. Without us, all he's got is an ordinary cover band. And while I haven't said this to Bert, he knows that I know, and he feels the pressure."

“Okay,” said Ann, still sniffing. “But promise me as soon as it looks like you’ve hit a dead end, you’ll come back home.”

“It’s a promise,” Dave said smiling, “but the real promise is that we’re going to be huge, and then I’ll be back home to live the rest of our lives together the way we should be.”

\* \* \*

“Bert, I hate to have to tell you this, but we’re closing the revue show.”

Bert sat in Mark Hutchinson’s office, stunned. “But why? The crowds haven’t been that bad. And we’re just getting started.”

“This is Vegas, Bert. If the house isn’t full every night, the show’s not cutting it.”

“I see,” Bert replied softly, trying to listen to Mark while his mind raced ahead, thinking about where this news left the band.

“Frankly, I was hoping that the Redeemers would inject the type of energy that would push the show over the top.”

“But we didn’t, I guess.”

“You’re good, but you’re not the same band I fell in love with in L.A.,” Mark said frankly. “Something’s missing.”

“Charlie?”

“Maybe.”

Bert looked at Mark pensively. “So where does that leave us? Out of work?”

Mark sighed. “I’m afraid the best I can offer you at this point is the Ruby Lounge in the hotel lobby.”



“Good god!” Bert exclaimed. “A lounge? You can’t be serious! We came all the way here from Los Angeles –”

Mark cut him off. “I can’t help that things changed, Bert. I’m sorry. I truly am.” He paused and looked Bert in the eye. “But I think you know that the band I hired isn’t the band I got either.”

In his heart, Bert knew that Mark spoke the truth. Bert nodded and the two men awkwardly shook hands.

*What will I tell the band?* was all Bert could think as he left the Emerald City.

\* \* \*

“That’s it. I’m outta here!” proclaimed Abe bitterly when Bert told the band the news. “California, here I come.”

“Wait!” Bert implored.

“For what? Some type of divine intervention? This sucks, man. I knew we should have stayed in L.A. and gotten ourselves a real manager.”

“Just when I was starting to believe in us,” Ethan added dourly.

The others looked on in silence, too upset to speak.

Bert had prepared himself for this reaction and launched the only strategy he thought might stand a chance of success.

“Look Abe, Ethan, Gene, Aaron, Dave,” he started, shifting his eyes from one to the other. He summoned his motivational skills from the deep recesses of his past.

“We’ve been through a lot already and we can’t give up. This is just a setback.

Adversity will just make us hungrier and stronger. Remember what Gene said? Let’s feed off it. Besides, we still have the opportunity to open for name acts that come here.”

Privately, Bert wondered whether that was really the case. Mark hadn't explicitly said otherwise, but the fact remained that the Redeemers had become a shadow of the band they were with Charlie. Bert would need to find a vibrant saxophone player fast.

"What if those are few and far between?" Dave asked.

"Which they will be," added Abe gruffly.

"Gentlemen, gentlemen," Bert responded calmly. "Give it a couple of weeks. You're not thinking rationally. I'll fire up the network and see what I can hook us up with outside of here. In the meantime, let's play the Ruby Lounge and pull in a few bucks to fund our next move. A couple more weeks is all I ask. If you're not satisfied with our direction by then, we can call it quits. Okay? Abe?"

Abe nodded grudgingly.

"My summer is blown anyway, so what the hell," replied Ethan with a wry laugh.

"I've got nothing better to do," said Aaron.

Gene gave a silent nod.

All attention turned to Dave. "Well, you all know that I'm on the clock." He paused in thought. "But I guess a couple more weeks won't do any harm."

\* \* \*

Back in L.A., Charlie was doing some soul-searching. He had been spending an awful lot of time on his own. Eric was the manager of a convenience store and more often than not was tied up there. The others held jobs with schedules that shifted from week to week, so Charlie found himself constantly trying to find out who was around to help occupy his time.

He thought back to Kansas City, to a time when the world seemed to have so much to offer. He had been happy playing music in the nightclub.

San Francisco had been okay. He was making ends meet, but what kind of satisfaction had he derived from hustling strangers in a card game? And before that, there was Las Vegas. Ugh! What a disaster that had been. Clearly the low point of Charlie's life, working menial jobs and then letting the casinos vacuum his pockets clean.

After a time, his mind worked its way back to the Redeemers, and he felt saddened. Bert had lifted him out of the abyss and given him the spirit of life again.

He thought of the Berkeley coffee house and a nostalgic smile formed on his lips. That had been a cool scene. And The Crossroads. That had been fun, even on the empty nights. And then the realization finally struck him. It wasn't where the Redeemers played that mattered at all. What mattered was *that* they played. The making of the music was the end unto itself. And the camaraderie, the awkward heterogeneity of the band members, the disparate personalities, the conflicts, the resolutions – he missed all that.

Sitting alone in the hostel where he had stayed on, Charlie began to cry. He realized what needed to be done, and it wasn't going to be easy.

\* \* \*

The flashing neon, scrolling message boards, and dancing light bulbs of the Las Vegas strip mesmerized Charlie as a rush of emotion raced through his head with equal assertiveness. Here he was, back in Las Vegas, the city he'd sworn that he'd die before setting foot in again. It had taken most of the life from him once before, and while he had recovered, he had his doubts whether this time he would be able to keep the demons

at bay. Reluctant and terrified, but resolved to do what was necessary, he had made the long bus journey.

Charlie had avoided calling Bert. *What if the Redeemers found a new saxophone player and became the darlings of Las Vegas?* He decided that he'd look up Mark Hutchinson instead and see what Mark could tell him. Meanwhile, he would need to steer clear of the casinos. There was no telling what pull they might have.

The afternoon Charlie arrived, he placed the call to Mark, and with mixed emotions, listened as Mark described what had transpired for the Redeemers. Charlie felt relief that the band had not replaced him, and in a way, felt a guilty satisfaction that the band had struggled in his absence. But he quickly saw the downside. Charlie knew instinctively that it would take all of Bert's deftness to keep the Redeemers on track.

\* \* \*

The Ruby Lounge was situated just off the casino floor, with its name shining in metallic red mosaic script on the wall above the tables. The seating area resembled an outdoor café, perched on a platform three feet above ground level, from which the patrons could observe both the hotel lobby and the entrance to the casino. A low-rise gold railing adorned the perimeter. The stage, in the back center of the lounge, rose a few feet above the seating area.

During the break between Tuesday night's first and second set, Ethan had started in. "If they make us play any more quietly, we may as well not be playing at all," he said.

"Yeah," added Aaron. "How will we ever get any attention? I can hear glasses clinking over our music. The elevator muzak is louder than this."

Bert sighed. Whenever the band had edged up the volume, the hotel manager had politely come and requested that the band drop it down. Things were getting more frustrating every day. The band pressed on for the second set, but the emotion and will were long gone. Time was clearly running out on Bert and the Redeemers.

Bert sat somberly at the same corner table which he had sat the last four nights, his head resting on his arm, gazing across the lobby. The band was performing a rather lethargic version of its "Finding the Way" as he desperately tried to figure a way out of the pathetic situation. Suddenly, he was struck by a vision across the marble floor. Could it be? It was! There was Charlie striding through the lobby, carrying that same black saxophone case that Bert had first seen under the card table in the San Francisco subway.

Charlie didn't notice Bert at first and nervously continued walking until he reached the foot of the stairs leading up to the left side of the stage. The musicians, facing forward, were oblivious to the prodigal son, who now took a deep breath and slowly ascended the steps. He stood to the band's right, motionlessly watching them perform.

Dave was the first to notice Charlie and his face lit up immediately. Suddenly, the keyboard sounds created by his fingers were more crisp and full of energy. He motioned Charlie onto the stage.

Bert rose from his table and gazed at Charlie, too paralyzed to move. Charlie raised an anxious eyebrow. Bert's emotionless face then broke slowly into a smile, and his subtle nod toward the stage gave Charlie all the approval he needed. Charlie set down

the case, removed the golden instrument, and let forth a triumphant wail as he stepped onto the platform.

Aaron, revitalized, began pounding the drums with a pulsating rhythm. Ethan, unexpectedly invigorated by Charlie's return, walked over to him and leaned on the saxophonist back-to-back as both jammed on their instruments.

Abe, startled by the new sound's intrusion, nearly flubbed the lyrics, but he figured out what was going on even before Gene whispered into his ear. He would recognize the wail of that sax anywhere.

Bert, feeling suddenly liberated, slid over to the soundboard and pushed the volume controls full throttle. That cue fevered the band, and they let rip with everything they had. All the power that had been missing was suddenly back in a glorious blaze of guitar riffs, saxophone wails, keyboard runs, and cymbal crashes.

Out of the corner of his eye, Bert saw the hotel manager hurrying across the expansive lobby, but by the time he got there, a crowd had formed outside the railing. Bert held his hand out as if to motion 'stop,' wanting the manager to observe the scene before acting rashly. The manager held still and looked over his shoulder to witness more and more patrons moving toward the lounge.

Sweat poured down the faces of the Redeemers as they jammed without inhibition. Minutes passed. The crowd swelled to where the lobby was impassable. Finally, at last, the clash of Aaron's cymbals marked the end of the song. But it didn't stop there. A chorus of voices rose up a cappella, chanting in unison: '*Ohh-woahh, ay-ayyy, come with me, we'll find the way,*' led by Charlie, front and center, hands clapping over his head, goading the crowd to keep it going.

The Redeemers were back.

\* \* \*

Later that night, when the band had struck its final chords, the manager rushed over to see Bert. Bert started to apologize for all the noise.

“Don’t be sorry,” the manager said. “You guys were fantastic!”

Then Charlie approached him and asked the manager for a few minutes alone with Bert.

The two men looked at each other awkwardly for a few moments. Finally, Bert spoke. “So here you are, back in Las Vegas.”

Charlie smiled. “It ain’t easy, man. I hate this fucking place.” He gave a big laugh.

“But you’re tougher than it is,” said Bert.

“I am this time,” Charlie replied, his eyes glistening.

Bert knew right then that his friend would bravely battle his ghosts and come out the victor. He asked lightly, “So, is this just a cameo?”

The other band members had now gathered around.

“Only if you say it is,” Charlie answered sheepishly. “Bert, I was really stu--”

Bert cut him off. “You don’t need to explain. After all, we’re the Redeemers.”

Bert wrapped both of his arms around Charlie in a bear hug. His voice cracking, he whispered, “I’m so proud of you, man.”

Then, one by one, each of the other Redeemers hugged Charlie, welcoming him back. When Charlie got to Ethan, the two men looked at one another uneasily until Ethan finally extended his hand to shake. Charlie did the same.

“Oh, what the hell,” said Ethan, and pulled Charlie into a hug. “It’s great to have you back, Charlie.”

“It’s great to be back, Ethan,” Charlie replied.

The show that night propelled the band forward again. The Ruby Lounge had heretofore been an afterthought on the Emerald City’s entertainment calendar. Now, Mark Hutchinson’s rediscovery of the band he once knew led the entertainment director to aggressively market the Redeemers’ appearances there. Over the next couple of weeks, the Ruby Lounge miraculously transformed into the city’s hip place to be.

Over this same period, Mark began to work the Redeemers back into the large theater as often as he could, and Bert continued to work himself into any situation where he could get face time with anyone of any influence in the music industry. He had amassed a nice collection of business cards along the way, but hadn’t received more than a nibble here and there regarding potential opportunities outside Las Vegas until one Saturday night, when the Redeemers opened for Unskilled Labor, an up-and-coming Europop band.

After the show, Bert managed to finagle an invitation to the backstage party for himself and the rest of the Redeemers. The private room at the back of the theater was laid out with a catered spread of food and drinks. As Bert was fixing himself a sandwich, the lead guitarist and songwriter for Unskilled Labor came over to him.

“Someone told me you’re the manager of the Redeemers,” the musician said with a British accent that was nonexistent in his singing voice.

“Yes, I am,” said Bert. “I’m Bert Ingram. And you’re Nils Anderson.” He extended his hand. Bert had always made a point of researching the bands with whom



they were performing, which helped make a good impression when they met. “Great show! You guys are really going places!”

“Us?” replied Nils. “What about you guys? When they told us some house band was opening for us here, I imagined some old dude crooning ‘Feelings’, know what I mean?” He laughed and nudged Bert. “But the Redeemers are spectacular. Hey, hang on a second.” Nils looked around the room and then called out, “Tim!”

A tall, blond man in his mid-thirties, dressed in a golf shirt and sleeveless vest, looked up. Nils waved him over. “Tim, come here. There’s someone you should meet.”

Nils made the introductions. As it turned out, Tim was the music promoter who was handling Unskilled Labor, among other bands. Bert and Tim got to talking and after a short while, Nils excused himself and headed over to the bar. Bert worked the history of the Redeemers into the conversation. Tim had seen the set and had been extremely impressed with the band. He was curious about one thing, though. “Bert,” he said after a time, “between you and me, and no disrespect intended to this place, what are you guys doing in a hotel in Las Vegas?”

Bert explained about the financial situation.

“So you’re interested in leaving Las Vegas?” Tim asked.

“For the right opportunity,” Bert answered.

“Let me make a couple phone calls this week. I’m connected with the Laguna tour. Are you familiar with that?”

“Are you kidding?” Bert exclaimed. “Of course.” The Laguna tour was the annual summer-long cross-country all-day music jam featuring the best new acts. It was sponsored by the Laguna Beverage Company.

“Then you probably know that we still have another month on the tour. There are about twenty dates left. I’m not certain that they’re taking on new acts at this point, but I can make the phone calls if you’re interested.”

“That would be a great opportunity for us,” answered Bert. “Just say the word and we’ll be in whatever city you need us.”

“You got it. Either I or Geoff Dowell, who’s the tour coordinator, will give you a call this week one way or the other.”

Bert thanked Tim, who then went off to work the rest of the crowd.

On Tuesday, a very anxious Bert got the call and on Wednesday, the Redeemers were on their way to Indiana.

## Chapter 15 – The Tour

The Redeemers watched in quiet awe as the roadies set up the stages and tents across the multi-acre campground of the Verizon Wireless Music Center in Noblesville, Indiana, just outside of Indianapolis. This was finally it. The big time. Well, at least the fringe of the big time. The Laguna tour had twenty-plus acts, many of which already had a solid foothold on the climb toward commercial success, while others had developed growing underground followings. And here were the Redeemers, side by side with them.

To be fair, the Redeemers were still very much on the periphery. Geoff Dowell had offered the band a spot on one of the tour's side stages. The shows ran from noon until 9 P.M. and the Redeemers would be performing right at noon, well before the attendance would be anywhere near capacity. But still it was exciting.

In fact, it was almost too exciting. Bert had gone to sleep on Tuesday night, ecstatic about joining the tour and the opportunity that beckoned. But midway through the night, as he lay in his pitch black, noiseless room and thought about the finish line that he could almost glimpse out on the horizon, he started to become unnerved.

Trying to block the thoughts until morning in order to get some rest proved futile and Bert tossed and turned through the remainder of the night, unable to clear his mind of the anxiety. His feelings intensified as his subconscious conjured the images from his final days at Sapphire Records. Things had come crashing down once before, and with his shield of invincibility gone, he was susceptible to doubt.

Bert realized that he needed help. He considered Charlie and Gene, but he quickly dismissed the idea, knowing that he couldn't show any signs of weakness. Not now. He needed a detached observer.

As the dawn light crept into the room, Bert found himself almost wishing that the whole thing would go away and he would be sitting at Ted's with a nice bowl of soup and the bay breeze blowing gently on his face. Then a thought struck him. *I need to call Ted.* Bert had forgotten how important it had been to have Ted there to speak with, unattached and uninvested in Bert's life.

Bert anxiously waited until mid-morning, when the restaurant would be preparing for lunch and punched in the number on the cell phone. "Hello, may I speak with Ted?"

Bert could hear a woman shout the message back to Ted over the noise of the restaurant, and he held the phone away from his head to avoid having his eardrum pierced.

Ted's animated voice came on the line. "Bert, where are you? Is everything okay?"

"I'm fine, Ted. Don't worry, I haven't found a new restaurant," Bert joked uneasily. "I've just been away. With the band. Listen, do you have a few minutes to talk? I could sure use your help."

"Of course, Bert. I always have time for my favorite customer."

Bert gave Ted the abridged version of everything that had transpired since he had gotten on that bus to Los Angeles back in April.

"It sounds like things are breaking your way," Ted assessed as Bert finished, "but I can tell by your voice that something's troubling you."

"I'm frightened by what might happen, Ted. We've come a long way, but what if we don't make it? I'm not sure I can go through that again." Bert paused, feeling even

more panicked. “And as we get closer to the mountain, it just seems to look higher.

What if I don’t have it in me to lead the Redeemers to the top of it?”

“Bert, Bert, take a deep breath,” Ted counseled. “You are thinking too much, and yet not thinking enough.”

“What do you mean?”

“What’s your plan of attack?”

“I don’t know. That’s kind of why I’m calling. I have all these thoughts swirling through my head and I can’t focus on any of them.”

“Break it down into pieces. Don’t try to swallow the elephant whole. What needs to happen in Indianapolis?”

“We need to perform well, start to develop a following,” Bert answered quickly.

“See, that was easy enough. Now what needs to happen after Indianapolis, wherever you go next?”

“Cleveland,” Bert replied, looking over the tour schedule. “We need to grow our audience and our following?” Bert asked in the manner in which an unsure student might answer a question from the teacher.

Ted laughed gutturally. “And you thought you needed my help when you had all the answers all along.”

“But how?” asked Bert, still confused.

“How have you gotten this far?” asked Ted.

“It’s all been through a network of people. This person knows that person. That person knows someone else.” The lightbulb in Bert’s head was just beginning to glow.

“Okay, so all you need to figure out is who can help you.”

“Right,” Bert said, now speaking to himself. “Who do I know who can help me build awareness on the tour?”

“Ahh, but be careful, Bert. One city at a time. One city at a time.”

“That’s it!” Bert exclaimed. “I’ve got it! I can get Alice from radio station KBRK to help me connect to the network of college stations for every city on the tour!” He was now talking rapidly. “And I can build the network as we go. The contacts in each city can feed the next city, and the word will spread exponentially!”

“My, my,” said Ted happily. “It sounds to me like Bert Ingram is back.”

“Ted, I don’t know what I’d do without you. Thank you.”

“Not at all, my friend. Not at all.”

It was too late to do anything for the show in Indianapolis. However, Bert would closely manage the remaining tour dates, and he would be sure that before they got into town, the town would damn sure know that the Redeemers were coming. They were scheduled for nineteen shows in twenty-four days, so it was going to take a superhuman effort to get out in front and get the publicity building in the cities before the Laguna Express rolled into town.

Later that same day, as they waited to board the flight from Las Vegas to Indianapolis, Bert placed a call to KBRK in Berkeley and asked to be passed through to Alice. Bert had purposely avoided calling her to this point, for fear of losing focus on his mission. Now that he needed to call, he would try to keep the conversation very businesslike.

“Hi, Bert!” Alice greeted him warmly. “It’s great to hear your voice. What are you guys up to?”

“We’ve been keeping ourselves busy,” Bert said with feigned nonchalance.

“You sound far away. Where are you?”

“The Las Vegas airport, but we’re on our way to Indianapolis, believe it or not.”

“Good Lord! What will my California buddies be doing in that part of the country?”

“We’re on the Laguna tour. We just joined up. Tomorrow is our first show.”

Alice squealed. “Wow! That is so awesome! I hadn’t heard. How did that happen?”

“Long story,” Bert answered. “I’d love to tell it to you over a cup of coffee one day. Anyway, I could sure use your help again.”

“Of course. What do you need?”

“Thanks, Alice. I knew we could count on you. I just need you to make a few phone calls.” Bert then laid out the plan for Alice to contact the college radio stations in and around all the cities remaining on the tour. Bert would create press kits with demo discs, and saturate the radio, television, and newspaper media in each of the cities. What he needed Alice to do was to call her counterparts at each of the local colleges and universities near where the Laguna tour would be landing and convince the stations to support the Redeemers. Bert would follow up Alice’s calls with a phone call to each, and personal visits whenever possible when he arrived in the town.

Alice, always a bundle of enthusiasm, agreed. Bert offered to provide her with the list of the remaining tour dates, but Alice said she would simply get them from the tour’s website.

“Alice, I can’t thank you enough,” Bert said as they wrapped up the call. “I’ll touch base with you again in a day or two.”

“Anytime, Bert, you know that,” she replied.

He started to say goodbye but was interrupted.

“Bert?”

“Yes?”

There was an awkward pause. “I miss you.”

“Me too, Alice. Me too.”

With great difficulty, Bert blocked Alice from his mind, refocusing on the task at hand. Hopefully he could get the human network up and running in time, he thought to himself. Once he developed a relationship with the station manager or programming director in each city, he hoped to persuade them to then call ahead to the remaining cities on the tour in support of the Redeemers. In that way, the momentum would build rapidly day by day until it acquired critical mass.

Bert studied the tour schedule: Indianapolis, Cleveland, Pittsburgh, Cincinnati, Louisville, Memphis, New Orleans, Tampa/St. Petersburg, Miami, Jacksonville, Atlanta, Charlotte, Virginia Beach, Washington, D.C., Philadelphia, Northern New Jersey, Boston, Syracuse, and Buffalo. It was an impressive list, and it was sure to make or break the band. He knew that it would be impossible to create another opportunity with the potential of this one, or for that matter, to rebound if this one failed. He took a deep breath. The next few weeks would require all the energy and creativity that he had to give.

\* \* \*



“What do you think?” Bert asked to no one in particular the next day as the Redeemers watched the roadies fasten the stage lighting to the scaffolding surrounding the stage.

“I’m tingling all over,” answered Aaron. “I’m nervous just looking at our stage.”

Dave chimed in. “I can’t believe I’m saying this after performing in concert halls so many times, but me too. This is totally different.”

“Just close your eyes and imagine yourself somewhere that you’ve been,” advised Bert. “A nightclub, a concert hall, the subway, your garage. Find that place where you feel the groove. This is the moment we’ve all been working toward.”

“Amen,” said Gene.

Noon couldn’t come quickly enough for the band members who vacillated between intense anxiety and extreme excitement. They would have roughly 45 minutes to play, with the 12:00 to 12:30 time slot uncontested, and then another act beginning on the other side stage at 12:30, overlapping the Redeemers’ set by fifteen minutes.

At a few minutes past noon, with a sparse crowd of about a hundred or so, Geoff Dowell stepped up to the microphone and announced the start of the event. With the band holding its collective breath, Aaron slapped his drum sticks together, counted off, and the band launched into “Streets of Shame.”

The sun shone bright and strong as they played. A warm wind wafted across the flatlands as the Redeemers cranked out a lively set which was enjoyed by the small collective who had come early to get their day started with some music and to take advantage of the short beer lines.

Immediately after the performance, Bert placed another call to Alice for the Cleveland show on Friday. He desperately needed the information she was gathering.

“This is K-Berk. Alice speaking,” came the voice on the other end of the telephone.

“Hi, Alice. It’s Bert. How are you?” he asked, forcing himself to go through the pleasantries despite his strong desire to cut straight to the purpose of the call.

“I’m doing great. You?”

“So far, so good. We just got off the stage in Indianapolis. I think the audience liked us, but it was a pretty small crowd. How did you make out with the phone calls?” Bert’s pulse quickened as he awaited her response.

“Do you have pen and paper ready?”

“Yes.”

Alice proceeded to give Bert the names and phone numbers of the program director or station manager at Case Western, Cleveland State, and several other local schools, as well as Ohio State, figuring that some segment of the student body would make the two-hour drive from Columbus for the show.

“Alice, you’re the best!” Bert exclaimed.

“You know you can count on me, Bert. By the way, I raved about the Redeemers to each of them, but of course, I don’t know how much influence I had. Hopefully, some of them will come out to the show.”

“You opened the doors for us, and that’s all I could ask for. You’ve done heroic work. I can’t thank you enough, Alice.”

“You’ll get your opportunity,” she replied coyly.

A short time later, while the other bands played, Bert found a quiet area of the campground and placed a few more calls. The first was to Eric Beckman, the program director at Case Western's radio station. Eric was unavailable, but Bert left a detailed message including the hope that they could hook up either before or after the Cleveland show. He also told him that he'd drop off a handful of tickets early on Friday. As a side stage act, the Redeemers received just ten complimentary tickets for each performance on the tour. Bert would use these judiciously. His next call, to Taylor Burke at Cleveland State's WCSU, found her at the station.

"Taylor!" Bert said excitedly, "This is Bert Ingram from the Redeemers. I believe you spoke with Alice at KBRK earlier today."

"Yes, I did. She had quite a few nice things to say about you guys. I have to confess. I hadn't heard of you before she called."

"Understandable. We're just emerging. Hey, I don't want to take up too much of your time, but I was wondering if I might be able to stop by the station early tomorrow and drop off a couple of tickets for you for the Laguna show. I'm not sure if you've gotten press tickets already or not."

"Oh, no. We don't really rate. The big stations around here get them, but it's pretty rare that the college stations get included."

"Great, then. I'll drop them off and you can use them however you'd like. Hopefully, you can come to see us. We play at noon. And please stop by to say hello after our set."

"Will do, Bert. Thanks for the call."

Bert thanked her and hung up. *That didn't go too badly*, he thought to himself. He proceeded to make similar calls to Ohio State and Cuyahoga Community College, and made a mental note to start calling ahead to the other cities with a bit more lead time.

The formula for the Laguna tour was that each night after the final performance, the roadies would break down the stages and tents and pack everything into the trailers. The side stage performances ended a couple of hours earlier than those on the main stage, which allowed the men to get a jump on their work. They had created a finely honed process by which the tour bus and equipment trailer caravan could be ready to roll two hours after the last note was struck on the main stage.

The buses would travel overnight, and everyone affiliated with the tour effectively lived on the buses. They would sleep while en route to the next city and upon arrival, the buses would park, allowing everyone to continue their night's rest. It was not a comfortable way to live, but that was life on tour.

The roadies would be up earliest each day to begin their construction. They would build the side stages first, then progress to the main stage. This sequencing minimized the impact of an unforeseen delay, since the main stage starting time lagged that of the side stages.

In the early morning hours, Bert enlisted Charlie and Aaron to accompany him to the three nearby university radio stations to drop off the tickets and copies of the demo CD. That day, the show was to take place both on the stage and in the expansive parking lot and grounds of Cleveland's Amphitheater at Tower City.

Later, as the Redeemers were preparing on site for the show, a female voice called out, "Excuse me, I'm looking for Bert Ingram."

Bert turned to see a woman in her mid-twenties at the top of the stairs that led to the elevated stage. She was dressed in a floral print shirt and beige capris and sported black-rimmed, football-shaped glasses. An even younger-looking male in a gray T-shirt, short-sleeved button down shirt with buttons undone, and cargo shorts accompanied her.

“I’m Bert Ingram,” Bert said, extending his hand as he walked over to the pair.

“Taylor Burke, from WCSU radio. We spoke yesterday,” she replied. “This is Jason Livingston, one of our DJs.”

“Great to meet both of you,” Bert responded warmly. “Thanks for coming out to the show.”

Bert introduced the two to the rest of the band and made arrangements to meet up with them after the performance.

When the Redeemers wrapped up at 12:45, Bert waited around for fifteen minutes, wondering if anyone from the other stations at which he had left messages and dropped off tickets would come to find him. When no one else materialized, he walked over to the nearby food tent while the band finished putting away its equipment. He had arranged to meet Taylor and Jason for a quick bite and found them waiting just outside the tent. After purchasing hot dogs, a couple of beers, and a soda for himself, the three of them sat down at one of the white resin tables in the parking lot.

“Well, Bert,” began Taylor, “that was everything Alice promised. Your band is terrific! Tell him what you thought, Jason.”

Jason was stuffing a hot dog into his mouth and started talking while he struggled to swallow. “I totally agree. Your sound is fresh, energetic, fun.” He turned toward

Bert. “What would be the chances that I could interview you and the band for the station?”

Bert, of course, replied that it would be their pleasure. Jason hurried to his car to get a digital recorder and a notepad so he could conduct the interview for his program that evening.

Bert and Taylor continued talking about music until Jason returned. Jason seemed excited about getting in on the ground floor with the Redeemers and the prospect of making his mark as the one who “discovered” them.

Sensing that he would be a great resource, Bert decided to make Jason the same promise that Ethan had made to Alice. In exchange for Jason’s support, Bert would always be there for him whenever the Redeemers could help him out in any way. Jason eagerly agreed, which gave Bert the opening to solicit Jason’s help in calling ahead to stations in the next several cities on the tour to help build the Redeemers’ hype factory.

Bert spent that afternoon and evening playing the role of public relations manager. He located a business center in downtown Cleveland where he made copies of the band’s press clipping from Berkeley, and created a biography of the band and a press release announcing the band’s performance for each city.

By the time he got onto the bus bound for Pittsburgh near midnight, he was physically exhausted. Nonetheless, he pressed on during the ride, fighting off the temptation to sleep in favor of assembling press kits containing the three documents, along with a demo disc of the band.

At one point during the night, Gene awoke and sat watching Bert hard at work. His head propped on one arm, he observed Bert silently. Several minutes passed before

Bert looked up and noticed Gene. When he finally did, Gene looked penetratingly into Bert's eyes and whispered to him earnestly, "You're going to pull it off this time. You know that, don't you?"

Bert gave Gene a confused look, but didn't reply.

"I know about what happened to you back when you were at Sapphire Records," Gene continued. Bert nodded uncomfortably, unsure how to respond.

"I just want you to know that you have my faith," Gene went on. "Nothing's going to get in the way this time."

Bert's mind reeled. He had often wondered if Gene knew about his less-than-illustrious past, but for obvious reasons, had never asked. "Even knowing all that, you stood by me in Los Angeles?" he now asked.

Gene nodded.

"Thanks, Gene. That really means a lot to me." Bert reached across the aisle and put a gentle hand on Gene's shoulder. "Now get some rest. We still have a lot of work ahead of us."

As Gene drifted back to sleep, the feeling from his warm words propelled Bert onward.

\* \* \*

To the packages he created for the college radio stations, Bert clipped tickets to the show and added a handwritten note inviting the station manager or program director to attend as Bert's guest and meet up afterward. Bert also offered to have the band call in to the radio station in advance of their arrival in the city if the station was interested in

doing an interview and any pre-concert hype. Bert would follow up each offer with a phone call.

At 4 A.M., Bert finally gave in to his drooping eyelids and drifted off to sleep. A few hours later, though, as the bus sat in the parking area of Pittsburgh's First Niagara Pavilion, he was at it again, establishing a process that would repeat itself like the instructions on a bottle of shampoo.

As the tour traveled from city to city, Bert made phone calls and sent tickets and press kits in advance of their arrival. He continued to build relationships, taking every opportunity to enlist anyone and everyone to make phone calls or send emails to extol the virtues of the Redeemers.

The success rate varied. In cities such as New Orleans and Miami, Bert was received by representatives from multiple college stations, while in others, such as Memphis and Jacksonville, he was unsuccessful in making any contacts. What didn't vary was the reception that the Redeemers received from the fans in each location. It was overwhelmingly enthusiastic, regardless of the crowd size, which followed a pattern like a corporate profits growth chart. There were increases and dips, but over time, each subsequent peak was higher than the last.

The only thing that tempered the success was the hardship of life on the road. The bus rides were grueling, and sleep for the Redeemers meant nothing more than a series of short naps interrupted by bumps and turns, or the need to shift from one uncomfortable position to another.

By the time the Redeemers arrived in Atlanta, the grass roots effort had achieved critical mass, and thousands of fans arrived promptly at noon to catch the Redeemers' act.



The Laguna tour, unprepared for the crowd size this early in the day, struggled to get all the concessions open across the grounds to meet the demand.

The vibrant, boisterous crowd in Atlanta was the largest of the tour to date. When the final chords had been struck and the cymbals crashed, the band members were downright giddy.

Bert stood at the helm as the band packed its gear.

“So, Gene, was this how you imagined it would be?” Dave asked as he removed his keyboard from its stand.

Gene looked at him, expressionless. “No,” he answered flatly.

At Dave’s puzzled look, Gene’s deadpan gave way to an enormous grin. “This is *way* better than I ever imagined it could be.”

“I know what you mean,” Dave said, laughing at Gene’s little jest. “Back when I was playing before crowds of a couple thousand in concert halls, I really thought that was exhilarating. Classical music was all I knew and all I ever wanted to know. But you know what? That feeling can’t touch this one. There’s an energy here, a connection with the audience that just doesn’t happen where I come from. I can’t believe I’m actually saying this, but I had more fun today than at any other time in my career.” Dave paused as a thought occurred to him. “Is this what you came back for?”

“This is all I ever wanted,” Gene answered, his voice choked with emotion.

“You know something,” Dave replied as if struck by a sudden realization. “I don’t think we’ve peaked yet.”

“I have the same feeling,” Gene answered, winking at Bert. “This ride is a long way from over.”

Late in the day, as Bert was talking to Dylan James of Emory University's WEMY, Geoff Dowell approached him and asked if he could interrupt for a minute. He pulled Bert aside.

The Redeemers could have heard the scream a mile away when Bert heard the news. "The *main* stage!"

"The main stage," Geoff repeated. "Your following is getting too big for a side stage. Our first act on the main stage is currently at three, so we'll start you at two o'clock. I have someone sending updated schedules to the media for the remaining cities on the tour. Congratulations!"

## Chapter 16 – The Media Darlings

The band was flying high when it arrived in Philadelphia in mid-August, fresh off powerhouse performances on the tour's main stage. Most recently, aided by support from college radio stations in the Baltimore/D.C. area, the crowd in the nation's capital had dwarfed those of any earlier show. The momentum would take another quantum leap in Philly.

Ian Wood, a disc jockey from D-103, a local alternative radio station, had seen the band perform while scouting the show in Washington for the station. Before the band arrived in Philly, Ian had invited them to appear on his morning radio slot.

On the day of the show, Bert roused the Redeemers at what for them was an ungodly hour and dragged them over to the station for Ian's 6:00-10:00 A.M. slot. It quickly became apparent as music played and they spoke off the air with Ian that he was a long-time radio veteran who prided himself on spotting new acts before they became mainstream.

The disc jockey and his guests bantered back and forth on the air, with each band member chiming in to add snippets of color to the history and the stories that had become the Redeemers' folklore. Suddenly, the comfortable tone evaporated as the interview was interrupted by the increasingly familiar sound of Ethan's cell phone.

Over the last several weeks, the Redeemers had continued to notice an unusual pattern of behavior regarding Ethan's phone calls. Most of the time, he would take the calls he received and talk openly in front of the band. But every few days, he would receive a call that, upon recognizing the number, he would either let go to voicemail,

mumble quickly into the phone that he'd have to return the call later, or step outside to take the call.

Now, as Bert glared, Ethan withdrew the phone from the breast pocket of his T-shirt, looked at the number displayed, and quietly excused himself from the studio to the astonished looks of his band mates. He stepped outside the sound proof door and could be seen talking animatedly into the phone while the others continued on air with Ian Wood. The station had cut to a commercial by the time Ethan returned.

“What the hell are you doing?” Charlie and Dave hissed at him from opposite directions.

Ethan jumped back. He began to offer an explanation, but Ian pointed to the “on the air” sign and signaled with his hand that they would be back on in five seconds, sparing Ethan for the moment. Bert hurriedly whispered to the group, “Drop it! We can discuss it later,” managing to get the last word out just as the sign lit.

The rest of the interview went uneventfully, and Ian went on to plug the Redeemers throughout the rest of his show that morning, as well as announcing that he'd be there that afternoon at 2:00 to catch the live performance.

Once outside the station, the Redeemers were all over Ethan again.

“You can't just walk out in the middle of an interview!” shouted Bert in a rare loss of composure.

Ethan shrugged. “It was just a few seconds. I'm sure no one listening even noticed.”

“That's not the point,” Bert responded. “Ian noticed, and we all noticed. It's just not respectful.”

“I’m sorry, but I had to take that call,” Ethan replied.

“Who were you talking to?” Abe asked hotly.

“I can’t tell you right now,” Ethan answered. Seeing that this answer would not satisfy the angry mob, he went on. “Look, it’s something personal. I promise I’ll tell you when the time is right.”

Ethan’s cryptic response ended the conversation, but the band members’ curiosity about Ethan’s behavior lingered. Later that day, when the band was tuning up its equipment and Ethan was momentarily out of earshot, Charlie raised the question that was on everyone’s mind. “What do you think is going on with Ethan?”

All eyes turned to Charlie, but no one spoke.

“I mean, we all agree he’s been acting pretty strangely these last several weeks.” Charlie paused. “Do you think he’s trying to get out?”

“Get out where?” asked Dave.

Charlie replied, “I don’t know. Maybe he’s trying to strike his own deal with –”

“Edgar!” exclaimed Aaron, cutting Charlie off mid-sentence.

“Hmm,” Charlie answered, his eyes widening. “That hadn’t occurred to me, but that’s a possibility, isn’t it? I was thinking maybe it was someone from the tour here, a promoter, a record label...”

Bert jumped in. “I think your imaginations are running away with you. Give the kid some slack. It could be anything: family issues, girlfriend trouble, who knows?”

Bert cut himself off as he observed Ethan approaching the assembled group.

Ethan shifted his eyes from person to person and noticed that all were looking at him. “What’s going on?” he demanded.

Abe, who had been silent during the most recent discussion, now blurted out with his usual lack of diplomacy, “These guys here think you’re trying to find another gig for yourself.”

Ethan looked stunned. “Why in the world would you think that?” he asked, looking from face to face.

At first no one answered. Finally, Bert spoke. “It’s nothing, Ethan, really. It’s just that some of the guys with active imaginations noticed that you’ve been making a lot of phone calls in private lately.”

Ethan laughed and shook his head. “Don’t worry. I’m not going anywhere.” He then called over his shoulder as he walked back to his guitar. “You couldn’t be further off base.” He laughed again, but elaborated no further.

\* \* \*

With the support from D-103, the audience for the Redeemers once again eclipsed the band’s previous record. What had started as a zephyr had now reached gale force as the Redeemers tour blew across the northeastern United States. Throngs flooded to see the band at its next stop in the Meadowlands in northern New Jersey.

The escalating success, however, was moderated in Bert’s mind by the reality that the tour was down to its last few days. The desperate and disjointed nature of the group meant that time was not a friend. The members of the band had managed to largely block the outside world as they reveled in their success on the tour, but with the tour’s end staring them in the face, they were beginning to show signs of anxiety regarding what would happen next, and Bert offered no answers.

He offered none because he had none. Sure, Bert could take them back to San Francisco after the tour and continue to grow the fan base there. But that seemed like going backwards, and too much had already been invested to do that. Maybe he could take the band on the club circuit around the country; but with Labor Day looming, signaling the end of summer, maybe Ethan would tell him he was starting back at school in September, and maybe Dave's family would draw him back to his teaching position. On more than one occasion, Bert had overheard members of the band talking about looking forward to going home.

The more Bert contemplated the situation, the more he realized that this was it. He had started skiing down the mountain, and he could navigate a brilliant and dramatic run to the bottom or he could end up in a crumpled heap, but there was no turning back and no stopping. He would need to find a way to push the Redeemers to the finish line now. When the band reached Buffalo, the last stop on the tour, the sole measure of success would be whether the Redeemers had attracted the attention of the major record labels.

Bert also realized that he needed to maintain perspective. While the groundswell of fan support was electrifying for the band, the reality was that the attention they had garnered to date was still largely underground. The band had a big following among the crowd that was in tune with the music scene, but there was as yet no recognition from the industry establishment.

Bert had been approached a few times on the tour by representatives from some of the small independent record labels that handled the other bands. Flattering though it

was, Bert knew that contracting with one of these labels would leave the band with too steep a climb.

As the tour progressed, it had become keenly apparent to Bert that it would take the media to send the band into hyper drive. Finally, in New York City, the constant barrage of press releases, the furious assault on the media outlets, day after day, in every city on the tour, and the band's mounting success combined to produce a return. An entertainment writer from the *New York Daily News* was covering the show at the Meadowlands. Bert and the Redeemers were miles outside of New York City on their way to Boston by the time the paper hit the streets. But the writer reviewing the Laguna show for one of the largest newspapers in the country had raved about the upstart band from San Francisco. The fuse had been lit.

\* \* \*

The summer sun was already burning brightly when Bert stepped off the tour bus and started making his way to the Brockton Fairgrounds outside of Boston. Bert was going through his morning ritual of stretching out the muscles of his back, which were sore from the night after night on the tour bus, when he was interrupted by the musical tone of his cell phone.

"Bert Ingram here," he said into the phone.

"Hi, Bert Ingram. This is Christian Alexander from the *Boston Globe*. How are you this morning?"

Bert quickly shifted into sales mode. "How could I be better? I'm in the glorious city of Boston, it's a brilliant day, and if my guess is correct, I'm talking to a writer from one of the most prestigious newspapers in America. What can I do for you?"



“That’s a terrific answer!” Christian responded cheerfully. “As you guessed, I write for the *Globe* and I’m covering the Laguna show today. I was scanning the net and I saw the review from the *New York Daily News* this morning. I assume you’ve seen it?”

“Actually, I haven’t,” Bert responded. “We don’t have web access on the tour bus, and we were on the road all night. Were they kind to us?”

“More than kind. They were downright ebullient. They predicted the Redeemers to be the ‘next big thing’.”

“That’s awfully flattering,” Bert replied trying to sound humble but unable to conceal the joy in his voice. The sparks were beginning to catch. “Would you like to talk to us after our set today?”

“I’d love to. If it’s all right with you, I’ll meet you behind the stage right after the set.”

“You’re on,” Bert replied.

The band was abuzz when they learned that not only had they made the New York City newspaper, but they were about to be visited by the Boston Globe.

Later that same day, after the Redeemers had concluded their show and the interview with the *Globe* writer, the news got even better. Bert’s cell phone rang and he found himself talking to Catherine Horn, the scheduling director for *USA Daybreak*. The Redeemers were being invited to appear on the show! Catherine had seen the *New York Daily News* story, and one of her colleagues had attended the Meadowlands show and thought a segment on the band would be great.

“Would this coming Tuesday work?” she had asked. Bert, of course, had told her that would be perfect.

If the band members were charged up about the *Boston Globe* interview, they were downright delirious when Bert announced the *USA Daybreak* invitation.

“National television!!” shrieked Aaron.

“I can’t wait to call Ann and the kids!” said Dave. “They will be thrilled.”

“This is pretty cool, I’ll admit,” said Abe, the resident cynic. “But then what? The tour still ends Saturday, and then we have the TV show, but we still have nothing lined up after that.”

“Don’t be so sure,” said Bert with a smile. “Never underestimate the power of the media. We’re reaching the masses in New York and Boston. Next week we’ll touch people across the entire country. I have a feeling our dance card will be filling up faster than we can dance. Once that happens, the record labels will be beating down our door.” Bert’s speech sounded so good, he was starting to believe it himself.

\* \* \*

The Laguna tour had a scheduled day off the following day, so the Redeemers were able to stick around in the Boston area long enough to see the *Globe*’s glowing review of the concert and particularly the Redeemers’ set, published next to a story box on the band. The article would prove to be black gold.

Later that day, Bert pondered how to reach the record labels as the tour caravan pulled out of Brockton and made its way to Syracuse. Bert was unaware that the *Globe* article had made it onto the news wire until his cell phone rang with a call from a local television station in Buffalo. A news reporter there was being assigned to do a brief feature on the Redeemers when they played there on Saturday, and he wanted to ask a few questions.

It started as a trickle, but over the next couple of days, the frequency of calls began to rise. They came from music critics from newspapers, writers from music industry publications, and the alternative press.

Of all the phone calls Bert received, though, one immediately brought him to full alert. It was a message from Linda Baines of Arista records, with whom he had reconnected briefly back in Los Angeles. She had gotten word of the band's success and was interested in coming to see them play.

Bert returned the telephone call from a local bar in Syracuse, where the Redeemers were having a few beers and some chicken wings before the midnight bus call for the ride to the tour's finale in Buffalo. Bert moved to a neighboring table to distance himself from the din of the conversation.

He was patched through to Linda, and after the necessary pleasantries, she cut to the chase. "Bert, the Redeemers have shown up on the radar of our record label out here. What are the chances I can fly out somewhere to see you perform and talk with you?"

*What timing!* Here Bert was with a chance to showcase the Redeemers for a major label, and the band was down to its last show. "I don't suppose you could make it out here by two o'clock tomorrow?" he said hopefully, but without expectation.

"That depends on where 'here' is. Last I heard you were on the east coast."

"Syracuse, on our way over to Buffalo tonight," Bert answered.

"How convenient," Linda said sardonically. "I suppose that's not *quite* the farthest spot from L.A. in the continental U.S. No, I'm afraid I couldn't swing that. I have a commitment tomorrow morning here in L.A. that I can't reschedule. What else do you have?"

Bert thought for a minute. “Let me give you a call back, Linda. I’ve got something in the pipeline and I’ll let you know as soon as it’s firmed up.”

“Sounds good. Talk to you then,” she said.

Truth was, Bert had nothing in the pipeline, but he sure as hell needed to come up with something, and quickly. His mind had been preoccupied of late, worrying that despite all the band had worked toward, and all they had been through, they had run out of time. Linda’s phone call now confirmed what Bert had suspected. He desperately needed to buy a little more of it.

These thoughts continued to plague Bert throughout the nighttime ride to Buffalo, but in the morning an idea germinated, an idea that would become epic. He shook Charlie awake and told him the epiphany: the Redeemers would play a free concert in New York City’s Central Park on Labor Day.

“I don’t know,” Charlie mumbled through a sleepy haze. He squinted as his eyes adjusted to the daylight pouring in through the bus windows. “The natives are getting restless. I think the guys are about ready to head home.”

“C’mon, Charlie, it’s only another two weeks.”

“Yeah, but to these guys it’s a couple more days here, a couple days there, a trip to L.A., a trip to Las Vegas, bus rides all over creation...”

“I know, I know,” Bert acknowledged, “but this would really be it. I promise we can all go back home after the show.”

“Hey, I’m just telling you what I hear. Just be sensitive when you break the news to the others.”

“Sensitive. Got it,” Bert replied dismissively.

Charlie shook his head and muttered under his breath, “Somehow I get the feeling we’re never going home.”

\* \* \*

When the last of the Redeemers had awakened, Bert pulled them together and told them the idea.

Aaron was the first to speak. “Are you crazy, dude? Do you know what it would take for us to play Central Park? We don’t really have a gig there, do we?”

“No. Not yet,” Bert admitted. “But don’t worry. We will. We’ve got to take advantage of all this publicity. We’re right on the cusp of fame, and what better way to push us over the brink than by making a big splash in the Big Apple?”

True to Charlie’s estimation, there was grumbling about the extension of time away from their west coast home. Bert was able to mute the reaction, though, with an oath that the Redeemers would return to San Francisco, win or lose, after the New York City show.

Eventually coming around, Ethan announced, “So if I’m getting the plan correctly, the concert gets hyped and the record labels flock to the show.”

“Ahh, you have learned well, my friend. That is precisely the plan,” Bert replied, feeling very satisfied about Ethan’s newfound perceptiveness.

“Are we really ready for New York?” asked Abe.

“Someone once said if we can make it there, we can make it anywhere,” answered Bert, half jokingly.

“Yeah,” responded Abe, “some well-connected white dude from Jersey. That ain’t us.”

Ethan spoke again. “How are we going to pull it off? We can’t just show up and start playing, can we?”

“No. Probably not,” Bert answered. “Especially if the crowd is going to be as large as we want it to be. We’ll need some type of security for crowd control. and --”

“And bathrooms, and a stage, and sound equipment, and promotion, and...”  
continued Charlie.

“This will get pretty expensive and need a lot of coordination,” said Aaron.

“I know,” replied Bert. “Let me make a phone call.”

Bert exited the bus and found an isolated area of the parking lot. He hurriedly pulled his cell phone out of his breast pocket and nearly dropped it in the rush to punch up Geoff Dowell.

“I love it!” Geoff exclaimed immediately after Bert had laid out the proposal.

“So you’ll do it?” Bert asked eagerly.

“I don’t know,” Geoff replied. Bert’s heart sank. He was hoping it would be easy. “I don’t have final say in these things. And realistically, it’s pretty late to pull this off.”

Bert remained steadfast. The concert would happen. It had to. Anything else was unthinkable. “I’ve got six men ready to help day and night, Geoff,” he offered. “I’d hate like hell to have a different sponsor,” he added, in hope of applying a little pressure.

“It *is* intriguing,” Geoff said after a moment’s silence. “Tell you what. Let me try to sell it to Laguna on Monday and I’ll give you a call.”

\* \* \*

Later that morning, a stroll through Buffalo's bohemian Allentown section allowed the Redeemers to clear their minds of the frenzy of the preceding weeks and to free themselves from the newfound attention, if only for a few hours. The brief escape also provided time to reflect on all that had been accomplished by this unlikely assembly before they prepared for the final stop on the tour.

That afternoon, after the band concluded its final set of the Laguna tour, Bert got back to business, the first order of which was to alert the media to the news that the Redeemers would be performing a free concert in Central Park on the Monday afternoon of Labor Day weekend. Once these calls were made, there was no turning back. The show would have to go on. Some way.

Bert's brainstorm was perfect on so many levels. At its heart, it was a great publicity stunt. Pure and simple. But it was much more than that. It was an opportunity to introduce the Redeemers' music to a big audience in New York City. It created a setting in which to perform before representatives from the major record labels. And perhaps most importantly, it bought Bert two more weeks to keep the band focused while the media attention spread.

The biggest problem with the idea was the finances. The Redeemers needed a sponsor to take on the costs of setting up and taking down the equipment, security, and promotion, among other things. Bert prayed that Laguna would come through. If they didn't, Bert would need to find another sponsor, a tall order even if they had more lead time. It would be an uncertain prospect at best.

On Monday, an anxious Bert Ingram took a phone call from Geoff Dowell.  
Laguna was on board!

The following morning, the Redeemers had their much-anticipated appearance on *USA Daybreak*. As Aaron struck the cymbals, ending their one-song set, Leslie Brown, the show's host, stood and clapped as scripted while the Redeemers walked from the stage to the sitting area. Once they were all situated for the interview portion of the program, she lobbed an opening question at them.

"So guys," said the vivacious and perfectly made-up host, "you've gone from obscurity to a national audience in just a few months. How are you enjoying all the attention?"

Bert, who had managed to take the prime position closest to Leslie, spoke for the band. "It's been an exhilarating ride, Leslie. We're loving every minute of it. In fact, we can't wait for Labor Day weekend to reach out to all our great fans here in New York City."

"Ah, yes. You mentioned backstage that you'll be playing in Central Park."

"That's right," responded Bert as he turned toward the camera. "We don't have all the specifics nailed down yet, but we have a sponsor lined up and we'll be finalizing all the arrangements in the next couple of days."

Leslie moved the conversation away from Bert's less-than-subtle promotional announcement and on to the history of the Redeemers with a few more standard questions, which the band members took turns answering. Concluding the brief dialog, the host thanked the Redeemers for the appearance, previewed the next segment, a visit from the latest castoff from a reality dating show, and cued the commercial break.

That afternoon, Bert's cell phone kicked into overdrive. His voice message box filled again and again, and it was all he could do to clear it out and keep a log of all the



calls he needed to return. Calls were now coming in from *Rolling Stone*, *Entertainment Weekly*, *Newsweek*, *Time* magazine, and newspapers across the country. Radio stations, too, were calling to talk to the band.

The Redeemers had become media darlings.

Bert frantically worked the phones, inviting each and every caller to come see the band play in Central Park and scheduling time with each to conduct whatever interviews or photo sessions were requested.

Bert barely found the time to sleep over the next week and a half, spending every waking hour either doing PR for the band or obsessively following up to ensure that the arrangements for the Central Park show were progressing on schedule and that not even the subtlest detail was overlooked. Every effort the Redeemers had put forth in the last year, every sacrifice made by themselves and their families, every ounce of sweat and energy, and every emotional investment would boil down to one hour under the microscope in New York City. Nothing could be taken for granted and nothing could go wrong.

On Monday, one week before the big event, Bert received an unexpected call. It was Edgar James, but the conversation had a decidedly different tone than had their last. Bert fantasized momentarily about the multitude of ways in which he would enjoy responding to Edgar, from not taking his calls to having him grovel for forgiveness. But, while the scent of a recording contract was so near that Bert could almost smell it, nothing was yet assured, and he was in no position to offend anyone, even Edgar. And so it was with his teeth firmly clamped to his tongue that Bert graciously invited Edgar to come see the band play in Central Park.

Over the next several days, Bert and the band worked so hard that it made the frenetic Laguna tour schedule look like summer vacation. All focus was on the Central Park event and they now had just a week left to pull it off. Phone calls were made. Plans were developed, shredded, and put together again. Issues of security and crowd control, sound systems, first aid, and promotion were worked through. The details were almost overwhelming. Bert drew upon his long-dormant event-planning skills and, paired with the public relations team from the Laguna Beverage Company, mapped out the task list and the sequencing.

Finally, after hour upon hour and day upon day of preparation, the first Monday of September arrived. Labor Day. It had been an unusually mild summer, and the day that unofficially marked summer's end was no exception. The forecast was for a high of seventy-five degrees, although it would undoubtedly feel hotter in the open area in Central Park, where there was little relief from the sun. The concert was scheduled for high noon with the thought of allowing time for city dwellers to get to their late-afternoon barbecues.

At 8:00 A.M., Bert hovered around his charges like a nervous hen. Most seemed relaxed, but Ethan was pacing nervously in the makeshift backstage area as the crew did the sound check. He clutched his cell phone and gave it a glance every minute or two. Something was clearly on his mind.

The band wasn't set to go on still for a few more hours, but Bert had instructed all of them to be there by eight for any preparation, "meet and greets," and any contingencies which might arise.

“I just hope the music industry scouts show up,” said Aaron to no one in particular.

“No need to worry,” Bert assured him. “They’ll be here.”

And they were. In force. Representatives from no fewer than seven record labels arrived and introduced themselves to the Redeemers and to Bert over the hours leading up to showtime. Bert held court, cordially thanking each of them for coming, even Edgar’s rep from Sapphire, and explaining he would have more opportunity to speak with them after the performance. For a moment, he thought he had been transported back in time.

The backstage area had become a virtual parade. Suddenly, intermixed between the record label reps, the media, and the various well-wishers from the band’s past, appeared Ann, Kate, and Jack. Dave was over in a corner talking to Charlie when a huge smile lit up Charlie’s face and he told Dave to turn around just in time to be slammed into by the two children, their arms extended wide to hug their father.

“Ann!” Dave exclaimed to his wife, who was glowing before him. “Why didn’t you tell me you were coming?”

“The kids wanted it to be a surprise,” she answered as Dave took her in a long embrace.

A short while later, another surprise visitor appeared.

“Alice!” Bert cried out when he saw the Berkeley radio station manager outfitted in a yellow sleeveless summer dress, made up, and looking significantly more feminine than the last time Bert had seen her. She ran over to him and jumped into his waiting arms.

“What are you doing here?” he asked as he joyfully spun her around.

“Did you think that after all I’ve done for the Redeemers I wouldn’t be here for this?” She eyed Bert coyly. “Besides, I wanted to make sure you made it home afterward.”

While people shuffled in and out, Ethan nervously eyed his watch and mysteriously paced around the small area.

At a few minutes after noon, the Redeemers huddled out of sight at the back of the stage, waiting to be announced. They took turns peering around the scaffolding to observe the sea of humanity. Upwards of 40,000 spectators huddled shoulder to shoulder on the grass fronting the stage, waiting just for them.

Just then, a stocky white man with a rumpled shirt and pants that were not quite long enough to touch his shoes, accompanied by an aging African-American woman, pushed their way toward the band. Ethan raced over to greet them, a look of distress on his face turning to relief.

The other band members looked on curiously as Ethan and the man engaged in a short conversation. Ethan then took the woman by the hand and walked her over to where the band waited.

“Abe,” Ethan called. “There’s someone here to see you.”

Abe turned toward Ethan.

“Abraham Ezekiel Jackson!” the woman cried out wondrously, enunciating each syllable. “My lord, it really is you.”

Abe looked stunned. He had not heard his middle name uttered in nearly thirty years. In fact, he had never shared it with anyone. There could only be one person who would know it. *Yet it couldn't be.*

“Who are you?” he demanded as he stepped toward her, his big body starting to quiver.

“It’s me, Abraham. Your mother,” said the woman, her soft voice cracking.

“It can’t be. It’s impossible. My mother died when I was a child,” Abe replied, tears forming in the corner of his eyes.

“No, Abraham,” said the woman. “I didn’t. But I was sick for a long, long time. So long that by the time I got well enough to come find you, you had disappeared without a trace.” She studied his face. “You don’t believe me, do you?”

“You know my middle name. You sound like the woman I remember, but... but I just wish I could be sure. I mean --”

Tears trickled down the woman’s face as she approached the singer. “It’s really me, Abraham,” she assured him, grabbing each of his forearms with her hands. Then she started singing a lullaby.

The song erased all doubt. The timbre of her voice, her soulful delivery, her reassuring, comforting intonation had not changed with the passage of time. Suddenly, Abe’s emotional veil lifted, and all the repressed anguish accumulated over the years came pouring forth.

“Oh my God, Mama,” Abe declared. “It really is you. How did you find me?”

“You have your friend Ethan to thank. He hired Mr. Pitts over there to track me down.” She cast each of them a smile. Then she pulled Abe in close and gave him a long hug. “I’ve missed you so much, my son.”

“I’ve missed you too, Mama. I looked for you all those years ago, and when I couldn’t find you, I just drifted away,” sniffed Abe as tears flowed down his cheeks.

“Well, you’re not getting away this time,” she admonished playfully.

“I wouldn’t dream of it,” Abe replied, a radiant smile now forcing its way through the tears.

They embraced for a long time.

A few steps away stood Ethan, observing the reunion. The private investigator he had hired to track Abe’s mother had come through and his timing could not have been more perfect. What a way to cap the tour!

Abe moved his head as if he were scanning the area. “Ethan, where are you?” he called out loudly. “Come over here.”

Ethan strode over as Abe extended a hand to shake. But as their hands touched, Abe pulled Ethan in close and gave him a bear hug. As he did so, his hand brushed against Ethan’s face, and Abe felt the tears of joy that were not just dripping, but gushing freely down Ethan’s face too. “Thanks, buddy,” he whispered in his ear.

“You’re welcome,” Ethan replied. “Buddy.”

The scene was abruptly interrupted by Geoff Dowell. “Are you ready to go on?” he asked the group at large.

Abe released Ethan and stood frozen, unsure what to do next.

“Go do your show, son. I’ll be here,” his mother instructed.

A smile transformed Abe's face as his mind snapped back to the present. He reached out and gave his mother's hands a firm squeeze. Then he turned to the others.

"Let's rock!" he shouted.

\* \* \*

The speakers cast Geoff Dowell's voice forward, but from the back of the stage, the band could still hear him address the crowd. "Thanks for coming out today, everyone. I hope you're enjoying your Labor Day weekend. It is with great pride that I introduce the band here to entertain you today. Ladies and gentlemen...the Redeemers!"

## **The Epilogue**

A soft breeze blew at the sheer white curtains in the bedroom of Bert's Nob Hill apartment. The light from the television added the only color to the black and white contemporary decorating scheme of the room. Seven months had passed since the frenzied tour and the climactic concert in Central Park.

It was now 11:20 P.M., and Bert sat in his bed, his back propped up comfortably against two pillows, Alice asleep by his side.

“And in entertainment news,” came the voice from the television news broadcast, “Bay Area rockers The Redeemers released their debut CD this week, which entered the Billboard charts impressively at number eight. Elsewhere...”

Bert stopped paying attention. He lifted the remote control, clicked off the television, pulled up his blanket, and went to sleep.

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