

## Prologue

Nothing soothes a person's ego more than being smack in the middle of a lucid dream.

I amble down the sidewalk along Bonisteel Boulevard as the sun sets behind the roof of Earl V. Moore School of Music. North Campus has a blurred, surreal feel to it, but it comes into sharp focus wherever I cast my eyes. It must be a Sunday, judging by the scant number of students around. I slow down as I close in on the grassy knoll, beyond which lies the music school building, taking care not to alarm the flock of mallards milling around. As I stroll near each street lamp along the trail, I will it to light, spotlighting the short distance ahead with a cone of illumination. The cherry trees rain blossoms and paint a medley of pink polka dots on the snowy landscape. Just for the heck of it, I will the falling petals to freeze in midair. They do so without delay.

While I am enjoying my little game, the sun pushes its white disc over the eastern horizon, showering blinding rays through the birch trees. Suddenly the street lamps blink out and the suspended petals fall to the ground. For reasons that are not altogether clear, I understand the cause of the interruption and move to find the culprit. I stride over the grassy knoll and onto the music school grounds, ignoring the ducks' loud cackles and their violent fluttering, but I fail to locate a single soul. But then the faint, metallic plucks of a harpsichord are heard emanating from one building. I try the entrances, but all are locked. I look in through the windows but cannot spot anyone inside. As a mix of excitement and dread start to take hold, I quicken my pace and circle around the sandstone building one more time. As soon as I turn the southern corner, I see, from fifty yards away, alone at the edge of the Piano Pond, not far from the G clef sundial, leaning against an elm tree, the vague silhouette of a young woman.

Starting with a trot, I break into a run halfway through. But the quicker my pace and longer my strides, the farther away she recedes from me. It begins to feel as if I am fighting against hurricane winds as I continue. Drenched in sweat and with cramping calves, I stop to recover, putting hands on my knees. When I finally catch my breath and straighten up, I inexplicably find myself face to face with her.

She's dressed in a pair of skinny, mid-rise jeans, torn at the shins, a Maize-and-Blue hoodie open in the front, and Converse sneakers that are long past their prime. Hands stuck into trouser pockets and hips swaying sideways ever so slightly, she cocks one leg at the knee and tosses me a lopsided grin: all the signs of a body language I used to know—intimately—but for the life of me I just can't remember from whom.

I lean in closer, and the freckles from her blanched cheeks leap out, like blotches from staring at an intensely bright light. Dazed, I close my eyes, and when I open them again, one side of her face is basking in the sun's glow; a few crabapple blossoms are caught in her unkempt pageboy hairstyle. There is certain effervescence in the way she carries herself—a certain in-your-face rebelliousness bubbling beneath the surface—but the fleeting, pensive looks of her eyes hint at some deep-seated vulnerability. I still don't recognize her, but I recall a couple of people who possess these very same attributes.

As if dismissing my thoughts, she laughs and twitches her nose, jiggling the pair of brown horn-rimmed glasses, then reaches out and pulls me into her arms.

The honeysuckle fragrance of her hair unlocks memories I thought I'd safely tucked away in the furthest recess of my mind—memories of the smells of late autumn and muddy river water. They come

in waves, one after another, surging and cresting. Each brings forth a role she once played in my life: lover, friend, tutor, and co-conspirator. And when the final swell ebbs, I'm left with a sharp tinge of regret. Now I know who she is—if only I could remember her name.

But then the cinnamon taste of her lips recalls the image of someone different—someone I cared about but in a wholly different way. I realize I was wrong. She is not who I thought just a moment before. The confusion throws me into a tizzy.

A light flickers at the corners of my vision. I can see through a double-hung window, in the only lit room in the music building, a slim figure playing an antique harpsichord. “Love is Blue” seeps through the windows and fills the air.

The woman at the tree, who has nestled her head on my chest, breaks free and, flashing an unreadable facial expression, pushes me back and away.

The woman in the practice room looks up. I recognized her right away and start walking toward her. But before I can reach the window, I wake to the beep of the alarm clock.

Lying on the sweat-sodden sheets, I glance at the blue 2:30 glaring in the dark and remember that I set the clock for an early rise. The job of a project architect is never done, especially a week from a major product rollout.

As I get out of bed, I swat at the clock, punishment for plucking me out of a dream whose significance I'm gradually coming to grasp. But I miss and knock over the glass of water on the nightstand. The digital clock emits a frizzling cry, and for a fleeting moment I hesitate: should I leave the annoying gadget alone or unplug it and deliver it from a liquid death? The blue LEDs blink. Once. Twice. Three times. *Save me*, it seems to say, or *Put me out of my misery and spare me your intellectual musings*. I reach for the cord, but the timepiece turns its nose up at my delayed offer of help, spews sparks and whiffs of smoke, hisses loudly, and goes dark and silent. I mutter a curse and stumble into the bathroom.

The cold tap water on my face brings my mind into better focus. I want to go back to bed and get a good night sleep, to keep me from dropping more bugs into my code for a project that's already months overdue. I have not been myself lately, and people at work have noticed, especially the engineers working for me, some of whom, as I heard through the company grapevine, have begun to wonder if I am ready to jump ship to the greener pastures that flirt and beckon from every corner of Silicon Valley.

Back in bed and wide awake, the details of my dream zips by in a stream of still images, rich, sharp and mesmerizing. The woman leaning on the tree. The incessant harpsichord. Dark water in the pond. The woman in the practice room. I have not dreamt about Ann Arbor in years—a fact I find at once reassuring and disheartening. I remember the name of the woman by the tree—Ingrid—but a mental block is blotting out the name of the other woman, though the memories of our times together are as vivid as if they happened only yesterday.

I get up to make a pot of coffee in the kitchen. Outside, the quarter moon shines through Jeffrey pines and plays shadow puppets on the kitchen window. I quickly down one mug of black coffee, spend a little more time nursing the second, and in a lame attempt not to wreck my morning with caffeine jitters, drop cream and sugar into my third and bring it back to my study.

I have a job that pays me a ridiculous sum of money for doing something I'd gladly do for free. Bosses and subordinates consider me indispensable. I get along with everyone. People respect me for that rare gift of passion infused with humility. My name always comes up in the conversation whenever a new endeavor is in the offing. *Get Kodi to head up that new project. He'll manage the risks without blowing*

*the precious cash reserve. A difficult client ranting and raving about broken promises? Send Kodi in to calm him down and offer him a solution. Planning a hike in Sierra Madre? Make sure you've got Kodi to agree to come along because he tells the best campfire stories.*

And everyone also knows I live in a rental house up in the foothills. I have no pets, just shelves full of books and a jury-rigged cloud server that doubles as a research machine. I live alone by choice, thinking the solitude will afford me the luxury of writing a book I've been planning for a long time. A book of all the stories I've told around campfires, at parties and over plates of chicken casserole and green peas at friends' dining tables. A book about me and the woman playing harpsichord, the woman with ripped jeans. A book about how I came to be who I am today, a man of strange contrasts, who in one moment could be outdueling colleagues in computer coding at the company's workbench and in the next spontaneously spouting Qin Quan's poem *Maggie Bridge*, about love and longing, to a group of bewildered underlings.

It's been a year since I moved into this house, and I've yet to pen a single word. Before my subconscious mind completes its job to crack down on what it deems undesirable—the bitterness, the stifled anger, the privation of losing those to whom I had a visceral connection—I must put them to paper, or risk my story being riddled with holes, frivolities, and half-truths. I need to do this for my sake—and theirs.

I tune my playlist on the laptop, reach for the candy dispenser, put my feet up, and pop a jelly bean into my mouth. The peculiar blend of sweet, tart, and cayenne pepper swirls on my tongue, while Vicky Leandros blows "L'amour est Bleu" in my ears. The song's corny lyrics tug and cajole. It isn't until after a dozen confections have passed through my lips that a name is finally coerced out of my groggy brain.

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