

*chapter one*

HE CLIMBS without faith, the ladder unsteady, the wooden rungs brittle, each step filling the air with the sound of old bones. Don't look down, he thinks, watching the slow drift of his shadow, seeing its darkness on the long white surface of the hull.

He stops, checks his grip, and struggles to turn his head, the cramp in his neck burning. He strains again, harder this time, until something moves – a snap – at the base of his skull. The stiffness gives way. Clusters of stars whirl, trail off, and vanish.

He reaches the top and steadies himself before loosening the cover. Two days ago, he found the boom tent dusted with snow. Tonight, it's dark and dry. He waits for the smell, the heavy scent that begins with canvas, a strange mingling of wood smoke and old skin, but it doesn't come. Too cold, he thinks. He clambers onto the deck and crouches on one knee, listening to the stillness.

From his perch, he looks toward the channel. Everything visible is white, silver, or gray. Untouched snow covers the buildings and docks; it clings to the

empty cradles and the towering hoist. Snow reflects the light from a few tired lamps, imbuing the dark with a spectral glow. Swirls of low-lying fog, impossible in such cold, rise up around rusty trailers and fuel tanks, moving through the marina like men in long coats. The shifting outlines make him uneasy. The ghosts of sailors, he thinks. They're here to pass judgment. Call him an imposter. Tell him to give it up.

He's in Michigan, downriver from Detroit. It's the beginning of the twenty-first century.

Though it can't be seen, he knows that HUMBUG MARINA, in letters large enough for a roadside billboard, hovers above him. He marvels at the correctness of the name.

HUMBUG: the word under which he labors; the word that in winter seems inescapable; the word that in his coming and going is always the first and the last.

His grandfather used to say that a great name guarantees success. "It shouldn't be a placeholder," he insisted, "or a catchall for loose ends. It shouldn't be given lightly, whether to a boy, a boat, or a business, not when dreams, even fate, hang in the balance."

He rubs the top of his right hand behind the knuckles. On some days the pain is general, difficult to pinpoint or describe. On other days it grows like a rolling fire, waves of misery that pressure and pills cannot relieve. He finds it intolerable when both hands go off at once, because then the most familiar routines – shaving, taking a shower, putting on shoes – deplete what little he has in terms of humility and patience. When the pain is constant, he sweats to make deliveries, the hours dragging, and by the time he punches out and gets to Humbug, having stopped at Blue Moon for a bottle, his fingers are cramped and rigid, too clumsy for the simplest chores.

The only safe haven is Humbug, he thinks, especially for a guy with bum

hands. It's a refuge of faded glory, an anchorage filled with practical buildings and unfashionable clientele, a business that takes pride in being cheaper than the Ford Yacht Club. He mentions the savings whenever he calls Maureen to ask her for more time.

Alone in the cold, kneeling on the white deck, he hears her voice. "You can't do this anymore," she says. "You're late six months out of twelve. What am I supposed to use at the grocery store? My good looks?"

"You could," he says, almost smiling. He still thinks of her as beautiful.

"That boat," says Maureen, "is more important than your daughter."

"Not true," he says.

"But it makes no sense. For God's sake, Jason, you don't even like sailing."

"You'll get the money," he says. "Nothing comes between you and your money."

"Humbug," says Maureen.

He regards it as mean-spirited, her refusal, after marriage, divorce, and child support, to call him by his adopted name – his stage name. From the beginning, she took sides with his mother, insisting that he be Jason, overruling the friends and strangers who braved late hours and bad weather just to hear him play. To those people he was Coleman Moore.

He is Coleman Moore.

HE REMEMBERS his first lesson – though no one would've called it that when it happened – having seen the guitar with its black body and ebony neck resting in a silver stand and then picking it up without thinking and trusting the weight of it in his hands and knowing, as if by communion, that it was already under his skin, that he felt more like himself just holding it, though his fingers were at a loss for what to do.

He sat on a stool, the guitar cradled in his lap, and looked up at Mr. Young,

a man with dark eyes, coffee-colored skin, and yellow teeth. He heard Mr. Young's voice, raspy but melodic. "That'd be Lucille's sister. She's been here since before you were born."

He nodded, feeling grateful, realizing in a flash that seeing the guitar and touching it were matters of pure chance. He'd started to walk off, taking his pay for cutting the grass, when Mr. Young said, "You got a minute? I could use some help in back."

So he followed Mr. Young down the hall and through the kitchen and out the back door to the small shanty that sat in the corner of the yard.

After moving two or three boxes, he saw that the shanty was some sort of studio stuffed with sound equipment, microphones, and tapes. A few records were framed and hanging on the walls. Then he walked over to the guitar and picked it up, forgetting to ask permission.

"I'll teach you," said Mr. Young. "You need a guitar?"

"Yes."

"All right. We'll use that one until you find your own."

"I don't know, Mr. Young. Getting my own may be a long shot."

"You can drop the Mr. Young routine. Call me Otis."

He remembers the way Otis made him feel at home and the first notes on Lucille's sister and the lessons, week after week – once his father agreed and talked to Otis about what instrument to buy – and then the hours of practice between the lessons, losing himself in the scales, the grips, and the patterns. He believed that learning music would make him a better person – that it would change him in some essential way so that he could move beyond his neighborhood, beyond the wishes of his mother and father, beyond the lives of the people he knew.

After each session, he'd ask Otis one question after another, careful to call him Otis rather than Mr. Young, wanting to know more about the black-and-white photos that cluttered the studio, about the old days, the gigs with Duke

Ellington or Dizzy Gillespie, about working as a sideman with John Coltrane – names that had little or no meaning to an uninitiated boy. More often than not, the stories ended abruptly, usually in midsentence. “What are you waitin’ for?” Otis said then, his voice like sandpaper. “That’s all there is to it. Don’t count on a second ending.”

HE FEELS his legs aching. He drops into the cockpit and sits on the starboard seat, unzips his coat pocket, and pulls out a flashlight. He sets it down, the beam pointing toward the stern. He reaches into his other pocket and carefully unloads a pint of vodka and rests it on his thigh. He tries to open it but the fingers of his left hand seize up. He clamps his teeth on the cap and turns the bottle.

Maureen is constant, he thinks. She takes for granted the solidity of things. He sees her now much as he did before, a woman of disciplined habits living without indecision or clutter. She appears to be the same person in the morning and in the afternoon, at work or at home, at the post office and at the grocery store. He judges this to be a monumental, if unnatural, achievement. The self he sometimes knows as Coleman seems to waver, to change pitch, to move faster or slower depending on the conversation, the weather, or the room.

Maureen calls him unstable. “I’ve spent my entire life in Gibraltar,” she says, “but you didn’t stay long enough to be a husband or a father. I’m telling you, a lack of routine makes a person thin and indefinite.”

When he did materialize, she took it as a blow to her system. “You don’t understand,” she said. “Each time you step through that door, you’re a man I can’t quite recognize.” She attributed the changes to his itinerant profession, to the convenient and well-heeled women, to the harsh lights.

He listened to her judgments but didn’t believe that his poorly defined self had anything to do with music or the ways of a musician. It went back almost to the beginning. He was a joker in math, a vandal in chemistry, and a dreamer

in English. He could be any combination of these traits even then. The years had only added to the list. He didn't cultivate these qualities as some sort of perverse game. This was simply the way he was. The way he is.

ONCE, after he'd cried all the way home, unable to pull himself together, he got obsessed with the idea that his cheek would never stop burning, so he opened the faucet and ran water into the flower bed until the rich, black soil turned to mud. Then, sinking to his knees, he plunged his hands into the wet darkness and smeared his face with it, the earthy smell filling his nostrils. With his chin dripping, he ran into the house, rushing past the washed-out faces of his mother and father, and locked himself in the bathroom, staring into the mirror like an actor worried about his makeup, wetting his fingers and trying to cover the blank spots, but all of it looking worse for the effort as the mud dried and became brittle.

He remembers how his cheek kept stinging and his heart continued pounding and his breathing wouldn't slow down, having been caught off guard after Levina, a girl he barely knew and would never see again, had invited him in, and her mom had poured two glasses of milk and arranged fresh cookies on a plate. Levina had said, "This is Jason. He lives close to the water and has two sailboats, and he says that someday I might be able to go out on the big one with him and his grandfather."

"Are you sure?" said Levina's mom. "Why would anyone need two boats?"

"One belongs to my dad," he said. "The other one – the big one – belongs to my grandfather. He keeps it here but lives in Saginaw."

"Oh, I see," said Levina's mom. "But my baby girl can't swim."

He gulped his milk and put down the glass. "I'll swim for both of us," he said.

They finished their cookies and Levina walked him to the front door. In the hall were photographs filled with black faces, most with dark hair and others with white.

“See ya,” he said.

“When?” said Levina. “When school starts, you won’t come around.”

“Why wouldn’t I?” he said.

He was already on the front walk, having heard the door close behind him, when Levina’s big brother, a muscular boy with a midnight face, decided to block the way.

“You’re Jason Moore,” said Levina’s brother. “What are you doing here? You slumming?” He narrowed his eyes. “My sister ain’t for sale.”

He didn’t like the smell of the older boy’s breath. He didn’t know what to do or say, so he stepped back and began to smile. That’s when the boy slapped him, the open hand landing with enough force to turn the head of a statue.

THE VODKA warms the back of his throat. He considers the chores that need doing, but now, after the exertion of climbing aboard, he’s lost his ambition.

He sits here two or three evenings a week, smelling the canvas and drinking vodka. He looks forward to it. He likes the boat resting in its cradle, no pitching or rolling. No immediate demands. With tanks cleared, engine drained, and compartments left open to the air, it’s a good place to think, to hunker down. He likes being hard to find.

He comes to the marina straight from work in an effort to avoid the kids who collect signatures or sell magazine subscriptions, to escape the bow-tied Christians who, for the redemption of his soul, say that they’ll provide a personal introduction to Jesus. There’d been no talk of solicitors, religious or otherwise, when he submitted his application for the house – a two-bedroom ranch with an attached garage – and the landlord, a woman anxious to reveal her spiritual fervor, had kept her ecstasy under wraps, kept things low-key until she had a signed lease and the first month’s rent.

He’d lived in the house for forty days when, as a concerned proprietor, she made her first unannounced visit. She wore a white tank top over a deep,

coconut-oil tan. The slope of her breasts led to a book, a Bible, which she squeezed with both arms like a child. She created a place for the Bible on the kitchen table after brushing bread crumbs and granules of salt onto the floor.

Later, when she came by again, her tan darker and her hair shorter than before, she remarked that the Bible hadn't been moved. She put a sticker on the wall above the phone. "This is my number," she said. "For emergencies."

On her third visit, she wore tight shorts and a thin T-shirt and asked him if he'd accepted Jesus as his personal savior.

Now he tries to avoid her by leaving the house in darkness and going to the boat as often as obligations and weather allow. On some nights, he conjures up the scent she left behind and the moist warmth of her breathing, but in Humbug's yard, surrounded by snow, he drops the fantasy and sails high and dry. He keeps an almost perfect solitude.

HEATHER'S the only one who visits him here, and he suspects, though she'd hardly admit it, that duty is a large part of her devotion. What choice does she have? "You're my dad," she's fond of saying, "for better or worse."

He feels too often that she's trying to save him, if not from loneliness then from the bald realization that he's a middle-aged failure. Exactly when she became so wise and sophisticated is impossible to say.

His daughter, already seventeen, drives her own car and waits tables at the Lighthouse Diner, a young woman so blessed with her mom's best features that it makes him wonder what part he played in bringing her into the world. Her figure is Maureen's – only more so. She has her mother's red hair, her freckles, and her green eyes. Their smiles are the same too, but lately Maureen obscures this detail with a fixed expression, an artful mix of disappointment and disgust. Naturally, she reserves this face mostly for him – for terse meetings in coffee shops where they talk about parenting or money and where she stubbornly calls him Jason, as if Coleman had never been.

Heather, on the other hand, smiles easily. She's in the habit of stopping by on weekends. When she doesn't catch him at home, she drives over to Humbug and usually finds him on the boat.

He wants her to turn up now, despite it being the middle of the week, a school night, but he knows the notion would go against her better judgment. He moves his foot and knocks over a plastic bottle; it rolls across the floor of the cockpit. It's the one Heather brought up here on Saturday, he thinks.

She held out the bottle as soon as she came aboard. "Want some? It's spring water from a faraway mountain."

"Too pure for me," he said.

He led her down into the cabin and they sat across from each other at the teak table, an electric heater keeping out the frost and damp. She spoke in a low, soothing voice, as if she were visiting a sick friend in the hospital. She touched the top of his hand and the swollen joints of his fingers. The warmth of her skin astonished him. She went on about her plans for college and made a passing reference to her new boyfriend. The part of him that felt fatherly pushed for taking a little interest in the guy, but the larger part, the not-so-fatherly side, argued for writing the kid off. As always, he skirted the issue, choosing to avoid questions that showed him up as defensive or absurdly jealous.

Heather reached into her bag. "I bought you a present," she said, pulling out a CD. "I know you don't listen to music anymore, but I heard this and thought of you."

Maybe a year ago, when they were looking at his old LPs, he'd made the mistake of telling her that he'd stopped listening to music. Since then she'd bought him a dozen or so albums, an attempt, no doubt, to stave off his precipitous decline.

"And the next time we're at the house," she said, "would you play me a song? Something ancient and slow."

"It's hard to do," he said, rubbing the heel of his left hand.

“You’re lying,” she said.

“Maybe. I haven’t changed the strings in a while.”

“You told me old strings are bad for a guitar.”

“That’s right.”

“And rough on the ears, too.”

“I guess no one listens better than you.”

She smiled. “That’s what you always say.”

Too much talk about music, he thought. He longed to give her some useful advice, a few words she could save for later. “As for college,” he said, “you’ll figure out the right move. Don’t worry about me or your mother. Take yourself as far from here as you want – as far as you can. Don’t look back.”

“NOT so fast,” says the sandpaper voice. “There’s more to it than speed. When I say attack, it isn’t about fighting. It’s about feeling.”

He plays the phrase again, slower this time, alert only to the sensation of strings beneath his fingers. For a moment, the sound flows from him like water. When he starts pushing the tempo, Otis shakes his head.

“You’re like those boys in the Big Apple,” says Otis. “In a hurry. You think you got somewhere to go.”

He wonders how Otis could live in a place like New York and then give it up and settle here. Why would you do that? he thinks. If I ever get to a city, I’ll stay there. There’s no place to play in a little town.

After collecting his sheet music and closing his guitar case, he points to a picture on the wall. “Is that New York?”

Otis rubs the gray stubble on his face, his hand a little unsteady. “That’s Grand Circus Park,” he says. “Detroit.”

“Why don’t you live there?”

“I would – I was born just a few blocks away. But I left when I was your age, and when I finally went back, it was gone.”

He looks at Otis looking at the picture.

“You have to find a safe haven,” says Otis. “If you can’t find a real place, then you have to make one, up here.” He taps his temple with a long finger.

“See you next week, Mr. Young – I mean – ” The screen door of the studio slams. “I appreciate your time.”

On this day, like all the others, he stops and glances back to see Otis standing at the door in his crisp white shirt and black pants. The silence is awkward. He wants to fill up the space, say something to ease the tension, but always in that moment the old man turns and disappears.

LATER, three of his classmates surround him in the school lavatory.

“We saw you,” says one of the boys. The others look on with suspicion.

“So what?”

“You’re supposed to be cuttin’ grass.”

“So what?”

“Cuttin’ his grass is bad enough. Now you’re goin’ inside.”

He dries his hands and steps toward the door but can’t get by the others, big boys with strong Midwestern shoulders.

“Are you that nigger’s nigger?” says the tall one.

The boys laugh.

“What do you do in there?”

“Nothing.”

“Does he take you out to his little shack?”

“No.”

Putting his head down, he tries to squeeze between two of the boys, but sharp fingers dig into his arms.

“For Christ’s sake, Jason, we know you’re lying. I suppose when you’re out there on the edge of town you think we can’t see you. But we can. We’ve all seen you, even when you said you weren’t going.” The boy pretends to be

thinking hard. “I know, maybe you can clear up a little rumor we’ve heard. Is that man your real daddy?”

The lavatory rings with laughter.

“No.”

“You can’t deny everything,” says the first boy who spoke. “How do you expect to stay in our good graces if you don’t tell us the truth?”

He struggles against their grip. “He’s a teacher,” he says, staring at the floor, one arm pinned to his side, the other twisted and cramped. “He’s teaching me to play guitar.”

“That coon’s a picker?”

He nods slowly.

“Well. All right then. The man’s an entertainer. You should’ve said so in the first place.”

“I’m taking lessons.” He looks at the faces of the three boys. “But only until I can afford someone better.”

The fingers let go. The boys nod approval.

Two of them disappear into stalls and urinate while the third waits. The boys flush, zip, and check themselves in the mirror; then the one waiting opens the door and the three leave together.

HE BRINGS the vodka to his lips. No wind tonight but something in the air sounds like a muffled voice. Heather won’t be here anytime soon. He thinks of her now, sleeping in her mother’s house, dreaming the dreams of the young.

He remembers his first leave-taking, turning away from his father, driving to the East Coast in a rusty Dodge and looking for a place off campus.

He arrives late for orientation and sits beside a woman wearing a white jacket. “I’m Jennifer,” she says. Her long straight hair is black, swept to one side, and secured with a silver clip.

They meet for coffee and later she listens to him play. After a while, she