

## Chapter One

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# THE PORCH

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*The very thought of you  
And I forget to do  
The little ordinary things  
That ev'ryone ought to do.  
I'm living in a kind of daydream...*

—“The Very Thought of You”

April, 1997

Slightly hunched over, he sat very still, his head jutting forward, eyes squinting, teeth bared as he tried to make out the face he was waving to in the passing car. Though it putted along obediently within the five mile-per-hour speed limit allowed at the mobile home park, it still went too fast. All he could take in was slight animation beneath a stack of gray hair.

Another quiet morning for Charlie, who bathed himself in a typical Southern California sun. Not a burning one, but one warm enough to deepen the olive of his perfect Mediterranean skin. As the car drove out of sight, he leaned back, sucking in a startled breath as he recalled another moment, another special memory. He looked skyward for just the right words, then jotted them down hurriedly, almost frantically, like a Good Samaritan

scratching down the license plate at a hit and run. He dug the stub of his pencil deep into the paper on his lap with each letter, as if the pressure of the marks he made would record his thoughts more vividly.

"The Very Thought of You..." began wafting through the tin can walls of his mobile home from the radio inside, drifting gently toward the porch. That damn tune: it made his nose begin to burn again, his throat tighten, his eyes well up. Still, he hummed along with it.

He pulled a snot-encrusted hanky from the pocket of his gray flannel trousers, wiped the clear debris that began to tumble from his nose like a staggering drunk, and caught it before it could fall down. All but one small ball of fluid, that is. That dribble rested atop the insignia of his pale pink polo shirt, the same one he wore everyday. He was quick to smear it into the cotton knit. He then dabbed his eyes.

His sadness was soon obliterated with another familiar sound. He froze, cupped his hand to his ear, trying to make it out. As he recognized the song, he abruptly changed his tune. He sang along softly now, scat-style. "Dwee-dee-dah-dah-dah-dah-de-dah," It was Basie doing "Satin Doll." Charlie damn near tipped over as he swayed to the beat. He tapped out the rhythm with his right foot. Then suddenly, without warning, a thought—not a song—stole the lead. Basie was relegated to playing backup.

The lead was another memory.

He wrote it down.

Charlie was pleased this cloudless morning, for now he had even more of his story. And an interesting one at that, he thought smugly. For Charlie had recently decided to sum up—to collect and record—all that he had been. He had decided to write his biography.

After all, he had some great stories to tell.

Actually, the idea had come to him on one of those desolate Billie Holiday mornings when he wandered aimlessly about the house. By remembering the good times and writing many of them down, he clung to the possibility that he might finally have something to look forward to. It would give him something to do every day. Sum up his life.

Lately he muttered run-on sentences in the company of friends and family, chattering endlessly about one musical experience after another. When he spoke of these events they were magical to him all over again. Each was prefaced with a loud "Boy, I'll-never-forget..." Then his words trailed off in a child-like whisper as he quietly dramatized the finish of each story. It kept him going, this narrative and now this self-imposed writing assignment.

Like his music, he lost himself in it.

Every day now, for reasons he didn't understand, he was flooded with fragments, bits and pieces of what once was. Charlie's memories gnawed at him, came at him unexpectedly most of the time, like fleas on a dog. And just like a restless canine, he couldn't still himself. He itched to tell his tales, so he scribbled. When one part of the blow-by-blow report was scratched to a near bloody finish, his mind would circle frantically until he snuck up on the next. When the thought was finally clear enough, he would snap at it and grab it like a pooch attacking his own flesh. He would exhaust himself with this process until, like a spent spaniel, he would conk out for a time right there on that rainbow-colored mesh and aluminum lawn chair. And there he would doze for a time, peacefully.

Each time he awoke, he resolved to record more of it.

His life.

On a crisp, oblong, yellow lined note pad.

He would be the scribe for that violin, the ass-chilling winters of Niagara Falls, the corner pharmacist who hid him from his Uncle Leo, his torturer; and he would recall all the details in the letter of encouragement from Thomas Edison to his older brother, Joe.

Charlie would write about his music mostly, his love for it, his introduction to it, his indoctrination into the big time, the celebrities he worked with or for, fifty in all, he guessed. Elvis, Danny Kaye, Audrey Hepburn, Judy Garland, Sonja Henie, Charlton Heston, Frank Sinatra, Howard Hughes... the entire list kept eluding him.

He cherished those stories as much as his Epiphone guitar. And he still had them both. The guitar he had tucked away in the spare bedroom, still encased neatly, supine atop the man-

ufacturer's capabilities brochure. It had lain there for the past forty years. The stories? He had put those away too, but rather recklessly. He'd shoved them haphazardly into various parts of his mind. He was running in search of every one of them now, like a single mother late for work and in need of her keys. He turned every part of his memory upside down, leaving mental drawers open, disheveled and in a state of disarray. When finally they came into view, he scrambled for them, latching on to what he could. Then he quickly wrote them down.

As the memories began to crystallize, they sometimes flowed effortlessly. He lay them down as smoothly as the hip-swinging, syncopated notes he had once played on his upright string bass. Just like with his musical creations, each handwritten note was meticulously transcribed with clarity and heart. When he was done he folded these written notes painstakingly.

Sometimes he forgot where he put them.

But on those days when he delightedly happened upon some of those yellow squares, folded like diametrical cootie-catchers, he entombed them. Put them away for safekeeping. Ever so slowly, smiling, he placed them inside the beveled glass china cabinet in the dining room, way in the back, stacking them softly on top of one another, like delicate china teacups. Later he snatched them down, passed by them hurriedly one more time, like a checker scanning groceries, hoping that when his metaphorical basket was full, his life might add up to something special.

This stock and shop could go on for hours.

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So that he might be remembered in some impressive way, he recorded the most outstanding accomplishments only. He edited out the beatings and the hunger and the discrimination and the longing and the rejection—the profound disappointment, like a mad composer second thinking and then deleting a counter melody. He would layer his composition, he decided. It would be “just so.”

When his book—this biography—was finally read he hoped there would be those who would appreciate it. Relate to it. Fellow musicians and friends, other children of immigrant parents. His children. He would just have to remember where the hell he put it, this biography of a jazz musician.

He was deep into worry when his Casio waterproof beeped a sixteenth note. His hands, eighty now, fumbled awkwardly as he set aside his stub and note pad in exchange for a meager turkey on wheat and a graham cracker in the kitchen. His thoughts didn't leave him, though. They continued to drift.

He hoped one day his written notes would be read and that the messages in each of them would touch others as profoundly and intensely as those of a finely amplified Ray Brown solo. He smiled at the prospect as the screen door nudged him from behind, punting him toward the refrigerator.

Ah, yes. Nice. After lunch he hoped he would remember that Ray Brown simile. He would like to make a note of it.