

## Opening Night

It's clear tonight. Usual crowd, maybe a few newcomers, willing to look for a new place since it's an easy night to walk the extra few blocks to find Jack's Back Room, affectionately known as 'The Hack Room' due to the burnt-out neon on the sign's B. The newcomers have no respect for what we do here, and I'm in for a night of making rum and cokes for people who complain without rest. Rainy nights are better, when only the real staples of the crowd arrive, when the rich brats and their bimbos stay in their usual haunts. Those are the nights when Kate is in rare form at the piano, playing the songs from her past with a real fervor. The staples are the only ones who can appreciate it anymore.

But it's clear, and just starting to feel like spring. Stupid kids crawling out of their sex-warmed winter hibernation and trying to find a place with enough culture and character to impress their dates, who could be doing so much better. The whole front half of the club is cluttered with them, and the usuals retreat to the bar stools to escape.

Kate hates pleasing this crowd. They don't understand, or even know the music in her soul. But there's only so much Tate, the owner, lets her do on clear nights like this. Patronage of the arts my ass; she's a slave to popular taste on nights like this, playing glorified elevator music that's just jazzy enough to keep some semblance of atmosphere without offending the pop-trained ear. She had me angle the piano before we opened tonight so they can't see the grimace on her face while she plays.

But tonight might have more in store for us. That kid is back again. He's been here every night for a week and a half, just sitting at the end of the bar by the door. Hair's a mess, like he doesn't even own a comb, same jeans as yesterday judging by the mud stains from yesterday's rain. He's still staring at Kate, just like the last few nights. I've seen him talking to Tate and looking discouraged, so I can guess what he's here for.

"What can I get ya?" I ask him.

"Just a draft beer, whatever it is."

"Here." I slide him a Guinness. "You know as well as I do that stuff's piss-colored water."

"Thanks mister, but you know I can't afford it."

"I also know you can't stand this vanilla crap Kate's stuck playing, so you've earned it. What'd your name, kid?"

"Danny." He's wide-eyed, like no one's tossed him a bone in months, as he tosses back the drink with the first smile I've seen on a clear night. There's a case by his feet that hasn't been there before, but Tate's standing behind him before I can ask "alto or trumpet." Next thing I know, kid's getting whisked off backstage, beer still sitting on the bar.

Now Tate's introduced the kid to Kate as he's pulling out a trumpet. She's looking skeptical, the regulars are all looking at me, but hell if I know anything. Tate glances at the crowd and decides against an intro.

Kate starts a lead in with some low octaves, sort of syncopated feel. I can't help but hum along when she repeats it a few times. She shifts into a slow swing on D-flat, and Danny comes in with the tune- one of Coltrane's, a head called "Equinox." It's a simple tune, just minor triads, but the kid's got soul- or at least he's playing like it. Mix of connecting lines, and using the silence. He's closed his eyes, and it looks like



he's just feeling the music coursing through him.

"Saul, who is this kid?"

I see the entire bar watching, waiting for an answer. I shrug, and pick up another glass to clean. This kid can really blow a horn. The last few kids in here have choked on slow tunes- can't rely on flashy shit, and they haven't had the artistry or the patience. I can catch an imperfection once in a while, but I just saw another smile- *Kate's*. The kid just ended his solo and gave Kate the spotlight- last few kids played right through, badly. Talent and etiquette, kid's got promise. Kate keeps it simple but refined, some octaves, some simple melodies. Danny comes back in when the head comes back, and it's like liquid gold.

"So whatd'ya think?"

Tate is at the bar now, fixing me with the look. The man might know what's popular, but I've got final say on the talent. I close my eyes and nod. Tate scowls and heads back to the stage. Kid's got a job, and a warm beer waiting for him if the crowd ever lets him take a break.

\*

Danny's making a habit of hanging out at the Hack Room on his night's off, says it puts him in a better mood after his "office-bitch" day job. Kate seemed mildly annoyed that some of the crowd keeps giving Danny requests when he doesn't even have his horn, but seems like everyone knows her bark is worse than her bite. Even Tate can see that she enjoys the kid's playing.

"What'cha playing tonight, Kate?" Danny asks one evening. He and Kate are at the end of the bar, he with his beer and she with her customary Cabernet. I keep a bottle of her favorite around all the time.

"Not up to me tonight, Danny Boy," she answers, and takes another sip of wine. "Julius finished up his studio project, so he'll be back on the stage."

"Who-"

Before he can ask, the door opens rather dramatically to reveal a figure in a long coat with a black case. The rain blows in with him before the door slams. With a sweeping motion of his arm, he whips off his hat, and the flourish shakes off most of the raindrops. He continues toward what has become the musicians' corner; Danny takes a sip of beer and realizes he's been holding his breath as he chokes on the dark liquid. I grin and Kate rolls her eyes, while we're ignored by our reluctant returner.

"Jaaaammes Deeeaan," says Kate as he walks past us.

"Give it a rest," he snaps. Kate smiles and appears to ignore him while he hangs up his jacket. I set his glass of water on the bar without a word.

"How'd the recording go?" asks Kate as she savors the last of her glass.

"Fine enough, thought the pianist could hardly keep up," he replies. Now he's holding his reeds up to the light for inspection and selection. "I still wish you would have at least consi-"

"I told you, that ship sailed a long time ago, Jules."

"And I told you not to call me that," he says, a hint of a smile in the corner of his mouth. He picks up a reed and starts putting it on his mouthpiece and tightening the ligature. "Who's the kid?" he asks.

Danny coughs again and realizes he *still* holding his breath. "Oh, hi, um, I'm Danny, I, uh-"

"*Kate?*" he interjects.

She sighs and sets her empty glass down. “Danny, new trumpet, meet Julius, sax of all kinds and resident tool,” she announces with a smirk.

I can’t help myself now, Kate’s being hard on him. “Oh please, like you’d put up with him if he was always that bad,” I add.

“With you in and out of the studio, Tate decided to bring on a second soloist,” Kate explains.

Julius eyes Danny critically while he fastens his saxophone to his neck strap, and finally extends a hand to the trumpet player. The two shake without a word, and Julius goes to the far corner to warm up.

“How come he’s so…” Danny tries to ask, but Kate finishes for him

“What crawled up his butt and died, you mean?” she says.

“We’ve been wondering for years,” I add.

“But what can you do, the kid plays like a god and draws a pretty good crowd,” signs Kate. With a final nod to me, she heads up to the piano for Julius’s set.

Danny shakes his head and drains his glass. “He didn’t ask me a thing, and yet I still get the feeling a huge judgment just took place,” he says.

I give the kid a refill. “Yep, that’s Julius for you,” I tell him. Danny doesn’t even know the half of it. “Hard to believe he had a fiancé before he moved to the city.”

“Really?” Danny glances over his shoulder toward the resident sax. “What happened, she leave him?”

I shake my head, “If only. You ever wonder why he doesn’t drink?”

“He doesn’t want to blow it into his horn?”

“Partly,” I say. “He got pretty blasted one night when he was new. Apparently the fiancé was going to come with him, sell her apartment, find a new job. Had her bags all packed only to find him gone once morning. No note, no address, all he left was a watch she bought him.” I set down the glass I’ve been cleaning, and it hits the stack with a little more force than I intended. I can’t help but feel a little sorry for the poor girl.

“Damn, *why?*”

I shrug and tell the rest of the tale. “Never seen him with a girl here. We’re starting to think he’s not interested in *anything*.”

“No.”

Julius is at the end of the bar, not quite glaring at us, though his lips are one thin, tense line. He knows what I think of him and I don’t care, but Danny looks like a puppy caught pooping on the carpet.

“If you learn nothing else here, kid, get some priorities. You won’t make it in this business if people come first.” With that, he heads up to the stage.

“What an-”

But before he can finish, Julius launches into an up-tempo version of “Giant Steps.” Danny absent-mindedly fingers along to the arpeggios, until Julius reaches the solo section. Danny’s jaw drops as Julius plays the same solo as Coltrane played on the recording- note-for-note.

“Yeah, that’s why we put up with him,” I say. “Makes you wonder what he’s gonna do when he hits the top and no one’s there to share it with him.”