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Introduction

Clara Thompson had always found music to be something greater than sound—a shimmering bridge between the present and the places forgotten. In the heart of bustling Chicago, where skyscrapers cut through the sky and the city pulsed with relentless energy, Clara's life echoed with melodies that seemed older than the streets themselves. A prodigy on the violin since childhood, she felt each composition linger long after the bow left the strings, trailing her into dreams that felt more vivid than waking life.

Her apartment, nestled in a quiet corner just beyond the noise, overflowed with sheet music and the faint scent of rosin dust. Nights after each concert, Clara would collapse onto her bed, her mind swirling with the applause and the lingering resonance of the final note. Yet, what truly lingered were the dreams—fragments of laughter in smoky parlours, gaslight glinting on polished wood, and faces that wore the fashions of a world she had never known. She often woke with her heart racing, her fingers curled as if able to feel the aged wood of a violin in another time.

Clara could not explain the source of these haunting visions, nor the sense of longing they awakened deep within her. The music seemed to call to her, spinning tales not only of joy and triumph, but also of sorrow and echoing loss. Each melody beckoned her to listen, to remember, to search for something just out of reach. What began as an odd curiosity slowly morphed into a shadow that trailed her every performance—a presence both comforting and unsettling.

One evening, after a particularly stirring concert, Clara found herself drifting further than ever into these reveries. The city outside her window faded into a mist of lamp-lit roads and the delicate strains of a bygone era's waltz. It was as if the boundaries of waking and dreaming world had thinned, and she floated somewhere in between—held by the familiar embrace of music, yet untethered from time.

In the days that followed, the line separating Clara's reality from her dreams grew faint. She felt watched by the past, drawn to it by threads she could neither sever nor fully understand. Each time she played, her senses tingled with *déjà vu*, as if someone else's memories guided her hands.

Unbeknownst to Clara, she stood at the threshold of an extraordinary journey—one where music would become not only the language of her soul but the portal through which echoes of the past would awaken, calling her to unravel a destiny entwined far beyond her own.

CHAPTER ONE: Awakening in the Afterglow

The last note of the Tchaikovsky Concerto had faded, replaced by the fervent applause of the Orchestra Hall audience, yet Clara remained in a liminal space. The violin, still warm against her cheek, felt like an extension of her own nervous system, its vibrations humming through her arm, up to her chest, and into the very core of her being. The stage lights, once blinding, now seemed to shimmer with an otherworldly glow, refracting the lingering music into visible tendrils of light. She bowed, a graceful dip of her head, the heavy silk of her concert gown rustling around her, but her mind was already elsewhere, drifting on the echoes.

Back in her dressing room, the sounds of the bustling city and the lingering excitement of the concert hall felt distant, muffled. Clara removed her gown, replacing it with a soft silk robe, her movements languid, almost dreamlike. The floral scent of the wilting roses from her appreciative fans mingled with the faint, metallic tang of her own perspiration. She knew she should feel exhilarated, but instead, a profound weariness settled over her, a deep exhaustion that went beyond the physical demands of her performance. It was a weariness of the soul, a prelude to the dreams she knew would come.

She called a car service, the ride home a blur of city lights and half-formed thoughts. Her apartment, usually a sanctuary, felt strangely alien tonight, the modern décor stark against the rich, swirling tapestries of her mind. She barely registered pouring a glass of water, the cool liquid a fleeting sensation on her tongue. The violin, still in its velvet-lined case, seemed to hum softly from the living room, a silent siren call.

Clara moved with the unthinking precision of someone walking in their sleep. She slipped into bed, the familiar comfort of her sheets a brief anchor in the rising tide of her subconscious. The air in her room seemed to thicken, heavy with an almost palpable presence, as if the past had decided to pay a visit. Her eyelids felt weighted, and despite the racing pulse in her veins, sleep claimed her swiftly, pulling her down into its depths like a powerful undertow.

The transition was not jarring, but gradual, a slow unfolding from one reality into another. The Chicago skyline, which had been a distant glimmer outside her window, dissolved into an entirely different panorama. The first sensation was a subtle shift in the air itself—no longer the dry, recycled breath of her apartment, but something softer, laced with the scent of blossoming chestnut trees and a faint, sweet aroma she couldn't quite place. It was the smell of a different time, a different city.

Her eyes flickered open, but the ceiling above was not the familiar white plaster of her

bedroom. Instead, ornate plasterwork swirled above her, painted with delicate floral motifs and cherubs that peeked down with benevolent gazes. Sunlight, a golden, dusty cascade, poured through tall, arched windows draped with heavy, patterned velvet. It was a room of impossible opulence, a scene plucked from a history book or a period film.

She blinked, once, twice, expecting the vision to dissolve, to reveal her familiar surroundings. But it remained, stubbornly real. The bed she lay in was a grand affair, with a towering headboard carved with intricate designs, and the sheets were not her crisp cotton, but smooth, cool silk. A heavy, embroidered quilt lay draped at the foot of the bed. Her own body felt different too – a subtle shift, a lightness in her limbs that wasn't quite her own.

Panic, cold and sharp, began to prickle at the edges of her awareness. This wasn't a dream. This was too vivid, too tactile, too real. She pushed herself up, her heart hammering against her ribs, and swung her legs over the side of the bed. Her feet, clad in fine silk slippers she'd never seen before, met a plush oriental rug, its patterns muted with age.

Her gaze swept around the room. A large, gilded mirror stood opposite the bed, reflecting not her own sleep-mussed hair and wide, disbelieving eyes, but a stranger. The woman in the mirror had dark, lustrous hair styled in soft waves that framed a delicate, oval face. Her eyes, a startling shade of hazel, held a bewildered expression that mirrored Clara's own. The silk robe she wore was a vibrant emerald green, richly embroidered, not her plain beige one.

A choked gasp escaped her lips. This wasn't her reflection. This was someone else. And yet, she was looking out from *those* eyes, feeling the flutter of anxiety in *that* chest. A terrifying, exhilarating jolt coursed through her. She was in someone else's body.

Her hands, slender and elegant, with long, artistic fingers, flew to her face. The skin felt smooth, unfamiliar. She pinched herself, hard, on the arm. A sharp, stinging pain confirmed it: she wasn't dreaming. This was a waking nightmare, or perhaps, an impossible reality.

A small, ornate clock on a nearby bedside table chimed softly, its delicate melody a stark contrast to the thrumming chaos in Clara's mind. She looked at it, squinting, trying to make sense of the Roman numerals. It read eight o'clock. But eight o'clock *when?*

A heavy, wooden door across the room creaked open, and a woman in a crisp, black dress and a starched white apron entered, carrying a silver tray laden with a delicate porcelain teacup, a small pot of tea, and a plate of what looked like delicate pastries.

She was of an indeterminate age, with kind eyes and a knowing smile.

"Bonne journée, Mademoiselle Colette," the woman said, her voice soft, with a melodic lilt. "Did you sleep well after your late evening?"

Clara froze, her heart seizing in her chest. *Colette*. The name resonated with a strange familiarity, a faint echo from the deepest corners of her research into forgotten musicians. Colette Dubois, the vanished violinist.

"Mademoiselle?" The woman tilted her head, a hint of concern in her eyes. "Are you feeling quite alright?"

Clara swallowed, her throat suddenly dry. She had to respond. But what? Who was Colette? What was going on? She glanced wildly at the mirror, then back at the woman. The words struggled to form on her tongue.

"Yes," she managed, the word feeling foreign, heavy in her mouth, her voice sounding subtly different, higher pitched, more refined than her own. "Yes, I... I am fine. Just a little disoriented." She tried to make it sound convincing, but the tremor in her voice was undeniable.

The woman, who Clara now assumed was a maid, set the tray down on a small table near the window. "You played beautifully last night, Mademoiselle. The Monsieur was quite enchanted."

The Monsieur. Clara's mind raced. This was 1920s Paris. This was Colette Dubois's life. She was living it. Her modern-day reality, Chicago, her own apartment, her life as Clara Thompson, felt like a distant, fading memory. The blurring had begun.

She tried to compose herself, to mimic the composure she imagined Colette Dubois would possess. She took a deep breath, the scent of fresh croissants filling her nostrils. It was overwhelmingly, impossibly real. She was in Paris. The Paris of nearly a century ago.

"Thank you, Marie," Clara said, hazarding a guess at the maid's name, hoping it was correct. It was, she quickly realized, when Marie's smile widened. "I suppose I am still feeling the effects of the performance."

Marie nodded understandingly. "Of course, Mademoiselle. You give so much of yourself to the music. Shall I draw your bath? Or would you prefer to rest a little longer?"

"A bath, please," Clara replied, her voice gaining a little more confidence. "And perhaps... could you tell me what day it is?" She tried to make it sound like an absent-

mindful query, not a desperate plea for information.

Marie paused, a faint frown creasing her brow. "It is Tuesday, Mademoiselle. October the fifth, nineteen twenty-something." She chuckled softly. "Are you truly so disoriented? Perhaps I should fetch Dr. Moreau."

"No, no!" Clara quickly interjected, waving a dismissive hand, trying to sound casual. "Just a... momentary lapse. I had a rather vivid dream, that's all. A very long, complicated dream." She offered a weak smile, hoping it masked the terror churning within her.

Marie nodded, though a flicker of doubt remained in her eyes. "As you wish, Mademoiselle. I will prepare your bath at once." She curtsied and exited the room, leaving Clara alone with her burgeoning, unbelievable reality.

Clara got out of bed, her silk slippers barely silencing her steps as she moved towards the windows. She drew back the heavy velvet curtains, and the world outside burst into view. A bustling Parisian street lay below, cobblestones gleaming under the morning sun. Elegant cars, sleek and boxy, shared the road with horse-drawn carriages. Women in cloche hats and long coats walked arm-in-arm with men in smart suits. The air vibrated with the murmur of French voices, the distant clang of a tram, and the sweet, almost intoxicating scent of fresh bread from a nearby boulangerie.

It was undeniably Paris. But not her Paris. Not the one she knew. This was the Paris of Edith Piaf, of Hemingway, of the Lost Generation. This was the Paris of Colette Dubois. A shiver, not of cold, but of profound bewilderment and a strange, burgeoning excitement, ran down her spine. The echoes of the past had not only called to her, they had swallowed her whole.

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