

SAVANNAH

A novel by Perry Martin

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Prologue

Los Angeles, California
Saturday November 13
Present Day

It was Saturday afternoon when he finally awoke after passing out, dead-drunk, on the couch of his one-bedroom apartment the night before. His first tentative attempt at opening his eyes ended painfully the moment it began. The sunlight pouring through the curtain-less kitchen window was blindingly bright and because of the apartments' layout it was shining directly at him. He felt bad enough already and spears of light attacking his bloodshot eyes with needle-like precision only added to the agony. With a groan he rolled over onto his side and tried again. He was successful this time. Successful, that is, if peering at his surroundings through half-open slits in his head could be considered "opening his eyes".

He was now facing his "entertainment center" - - a second-hand, 19-inch Zenith television which sat atop a small shelf unit he'd bought from the "as-is" section of IKEA. The cable box fit snugly on the middle shelf and beneath it was an old Sony Tuner/Amplifier that he'd connected to a pair of weather-beaten speakers he'd found at a Goodwill store. *"Nothing but the best for Michael Easton, the rock star who never was,"* he thought bitterly as he rose gingerly from the couch.

Carefully keeping his back to the window he squinted as he searched the room for his sunglasses. He spotted them over by the front door, next to his shoes, the only articles of clothing he'd managed to take off before collapsing on the couch late last night. With his sunglasses on he risked opening his eyes fully and shuffled off to the bathroom. Not bothering to turn on the light, he removed the glasses and set them on the counter. He washed his face and rinsed his mouth with cold water. Then he opened the medicine cabinet, shook out three tablets from a bottle of aspirin, popped them into his mouth and washed them

down with tap water.

Feeling a few degrees above sub-human, he put his shades back on and headed to the kitchen, intent on brewing a pot of strong, black coffee. He supposed he ought to be grateful he hadn't yet descended to the level where he started the day with a beer - - or something even stronger.

Picking up the carafe he threw yesterday's remains down the sink, rinsed it out and filled it with water. He poured the water into the coffee maker, removed and disposed of the old grounds and inserted a fresh filter. That's when he noticed the empty bag of Starbucks House Blend. There it lay on the kitchen counter, its pathetically crumpled state alerting him to the fact that he was out of coffee.

"*Shit! Just frigging perfect!*" he thought as he realized he'd have to venture outside sooner than he wanted to.

With a sigh of resignation he dragged his body over to where his shoes lay and put them on. About the only good thing he could say about this crappy apartment was that there was a Starbucks within walking distance; which was just as well because he'd had to take a cab home last night. He'd left his car in the parking lot of a sports bar a few blocks from the hotel he worked at, playing guitar and singing all the latest pop drivel for the Happy Hour clientele to get hammered to while they mostly ignored him.

Check that - - the hotel he *used* to work at.

He swore at himself when he remembered how he'd screwed up what had been a halfway decent paying gig. A gig he really, *really* needed. And now he'd blown it. One more step on what seemed to be an inexorable descent into complete ruin. He hadn't quite hit rock bottom but it was looming in sight. Like a great, yawning chasm it seemed to be beckoning him to take those last few steps.

He left his apartment and walked out onto the landing. It was a second floor unit in a complex that, to Michael, looked more like a motel than anything else. There was a small, kidney-shaped swimming pool directly below him and it was currently full of screaming, splashing kids enjoying the unusually hot November weather that the Santa Ana conditions tended to bring to Los Angeles

around this time of year. In fact, it felt hotter today than it had at any time during the summer. Michael briefly debated going back inside and changing into shorts and a t-shirt. Then decided against it. It wasn't worth the trouble.

A short walk later found him standing on the sidewalk opposite the strip mall that housed the neighborhood Starbucks. The crosswalk was at least a couple of hundred yards further down from where he stood and being in no mood for the extra effort it would take to cross legally, he waited for a break in traffic and then trotted across to the other side of the street. Once inside the coffee house he paid for a Grande bold and a cranberry-orange scone and then found an empty table in a relatively secluded part of the store.

By the time he'd finished the scone and drunk half of his coffee he felt a little better - - - physically, at least. Mentally was another story. He'd screwed up big time last night and he knew it. It was highly likely he'd jeopardized, if not completely ruined his chances of working in any of the better hotels in the Los Angeles area; possibly nationwide. After all, Broadview were a national chain and word got around quickly in those circles, he was sure. Damn it! Just when things had started to get a little better; when it looked like he'd be able to pull himself out of the *deep shit* hole he'd gotten himself into - - - he'd screwed it all up. Again! Just like he had *every frigging time before!*

It was the nightmare. He was certain of it. He'd finally come to the realization that whenever it reared its ugly head, it was always succeeded by an awful, irresistible compulsion to destroy anything and everything that mattered to him. And then he would find a way to make everything go wrong - - just as he had last night.

This time had been different, though. Because this time the nightmare had shown him the witch. The witch who had, without a doubt, cast a spell on him. And in her words he'd found an explanation for the wreckage his life had become.

He'd been cursed!

Los Angeles, California

The Previous Night

As Michael waited by the hotel elevators, guitar case in hand, he looked at the promotional poster in the display case that hung on the wall to his left. Staring back was a smiling image of himself. Light-brown, medium-length hair framing the face of a handsome brown-eyed, up-and-coming rock star. The picture was only a few years old, taken when he was twenty-one. Back when his life held the promise of a bright future. But whenever he caught his reflection these days, he saw a gaunt, pale face with haunted eyes. So much had changed in such a short time.

Below his picture had been printed:

***NOW APPEARING IN THE SKY LOUNGE
RECORDING ARTIST MICHAEL EASTON
MON THRU SAT 5PM TO 8PM
(Happy Hour drink prices 5pm to 7pm)***

The "recording artist" part of it wasn't strictly true. He *had* signed with an Indie label at one time and he'd actually started recording an album of original material. But, as with everything else in his life to date, he'd managed to screw that up. The project had eventually been abandoned and his contract terminated. He still wasn't sure if the record company was going to file a lawsuit. So far he'd heard nothing from them and he was content to let sleeping dogs lie.

In an alarmingly short space of time he'd gone from being a promising rock star, with a slew of potential hit songs ahead of him, to a has-been - - or more accurately a "never-was". And now here he was playing in The Sky Lounge of The Broadview Hotel to audiences who could really give a shit if he played or not.

Michael always showed up at the hotel half lit; it was the only way he could summon the barest amount of enthusiasm for a gig he'd come to absolutely hate. For some time now it had been his normal practice to start drinking in the afternoon. Just to "smooth out the rough edges". Today was no exception. He'd stopped off at a nearby sports

bar and slammed down a few before continuing on to experience the "thrill" of playing the Sky Lounge. The thing was, as much as he hated playing here, it paid pretty well and he needed the money. Plus, he was a musician - - that's where his talents lay. This gig might suck but it was paying the bills and at least he was still playing music. As long as he was doing that there was a glimmer of hope that things might someday change for the better.

The muted, mid-range chiming of the doors opening caught his attention and Michael stepped into the empty elevator. Once inside he pushed the button for the top floor. The doors closed and, as the elevator started its ascent, he mentally prepared himself for what he'd come to think of as "three hours in musicians hell".

Michael preferred to arrive at least an hour before he was scheduled to play. It gave him time to set up at a leisurely pace and then load up on a few cocktails before he started. He was entitled to two free drinks, then paid 50% per drink thereafter - - and he always took full advantage of it.

The small stage he performed on faced the bar and it was obvious from the indentations in the carpet that it had once been home to a baby grand piano. Now all that stood on it, other than the sound mixer that amplified his guitar and voice, was the bar stool he sat on, a guitar stand and a solitary microphone stand. Everything was pumped through the house speakers that dotted the ceiling of the lounge and the amplifier had been preset to "an acceptable volume" that Michael was not allowed to alter.

After setting up, briefly testing the microphone and tuning his guitar, he wandered over to the bar, found a seat and ordered a vodka on ice with a twist. When his drink arrived he swiveled around on his bar stool and for the umpteenth time, admired the view through the large windows that surrounded the lounge. As much as he hated playing here, he was forced to admit that the Sky Lounge offered a remarkable view of the Los Angeles landscape and beyond.

Right now the lounge was fairly empty but that would change over

the next half an hour or so. Once 5 o'clock rolled around it would fill up with businessmen and women. Some came to unwind, some to get good start on the evenings drinking and others, perhaps, felt the need to fortify themselves before going home. Whatever their reasons they flocked in and after a few drinks, the soft murmur of voices became a virtual sea of overly-loud conversations interspersed with empty, raucous laughter - - laughter which Michael suspected, in some cases, covered up the fear or despair that lurked beneath the jovial, alcohol-flushed faces. Eventually the noise level would reach a point where he could barely be heard over it when he was performing.

Michael threw back the rest of his drink and ordered another. He knew he was drinking too much, too fast but he didn't care. He'd been on edge ever since he'd woken up this morning. The nightmare had returned last night for the first time since he'd begun working here and he'd leapt out of bed screaming at the top of his lungs. It had taken a good amount of the vodka he kept chilled in his fridge to send him into the depths where the nightmare couldn't reach him. Even then he'd left the light on, not wanting to trust himself to the darkness.

The nightmare. He'd been haunted by it, on and off, since he was eleven years old.

He's looking down a dark, almost pitch-black tunnel. A distant, pinpoint of light emerges from the depths, accompanied by an ominous, earth-shaking rumble. He is consumed by stomach-turning, panic-stricken terror as he is completely engulfed by a thunderous roaring. Next comes the terrifying, ear-piercing cry that becomes lost in the deafening screech of metal grinding against metal. And finally, he's running. And screaming, and screaming, and screaming!

Then last night, as he'd tossed and turned, desperately trying to claw his way to wakefulness and away from the terrifying nightmare, a new horror had manifested itself. For the first time he'd seen the witch, cursing him. Her ugly, twisted face spitting venom at him in a harsh, sibilant whisper. Most of what she'd said had been unintelligible but a few phrases had come through with crystal clarity. With a shock, he'd recognized them as part of the destructive impulses

he'd struggled with these last few years. They'd apparently lived inside him all this time. Triggered by the nightmare, they would emerge from his sub-conscious and compel him to self-destructive action.

He shuddered involuntarily as fragments of her hateful incantation paraded through his mind: *“Little by little..... ruin your life..... destroydestroy your dreams.....destroy everything you care about..... curse you.....curse you.....CURSE YOU!”*

Whatever spell she had cast had been powerful enough to override any attempt he ever made to resist it. It always succeeded in turning him against his better nature. Looking back it was obvious the curse had been ruining his life, little by little, until it had cost him, among other things, his wife-to-be and a promising music career.

Michael looked down at his hands. They were shaking. Forcing himself back into the present he downed the remainder of his drink and ordered a double to take up on stage. It was almost 5 o'clock. The sooner he started the sooner it would be over.

He stumbled a little as he weaved his way through the tables and chairs that stood between him and the stage and it occurred to him that he hadn't eaten anything since breakfast. The booze had gone straight to his head. Ah, the hell with it! He was a pro and he'd performed in far worse condition.

He took a healthy swig before setting his drink on top of the amplifier behind him. Picking up his guitar he settled down and gave the mic a quick tap to make sure it was still on. There was a time when he would introduce himself and start building a rapport with the audience. He didn't bother anymore. Most of these assholes wouldn't have noticed the difference between him and a chimpanzee sitting up there jerking off. So without the slightest preamble, he launched into his first song.

It was towards the end of his second set that the trouble began.

The crowd had been louder and even less attentive than usual and Michael, who had continued slamming down double vodkas during his break, was becoming increasingly irritated. To make matters worse

there was a particularly obnoxious group of suits sitting right in front of him, their jackets removed and ties loosened, who seemed to be in contest with one another over who could shout the loudest.

During a pause between songs, one of the suits, a burly red-faced man in his fifties, looked up at Michael and yelled out drunkenly, "Hey asshole, play 'Smoke On the Water'!" - - a song completely unsuited for a solo performer - - and proceeded to guffaw at his own "wit".

Michael laughed sarcastically and said, "Yeah! I remember *my* first beer!"

This drew a laugh from the others at the table and one or two people nearby. The heckler waved his hand dismissively. "Ah, you suck! You can't play for shit!"

Michael's hackles rose as he shot back, "Maybe so - - but you're butt ugly - - and I can always practice!"

One of the heckler's friends roared with laughter and slapped him on the back.

"Screw you!" was the best response the red-faced man could manage.

"Sorry, you're not my type, sweetie!" Michael said sarcastically.

Another laugh from the heckler's table and a few more people who had become interested in how this little episode might continue to develop. Something was happening here. The singer might be making humorous remarks but there was no humor in his eyes. Instead, there was a hardness in them that implied he wanted to sting and hurt with his words - - and in that, they were right. Michael was using this exchange as a way of venting the frustration and bitterness that had been building up long before he'd started working at the Sky Lounge; it was merely the catalyst that was bringing things to a head.

"Don't get smart with me, asshole!" the heckler fired back.

"Am I getting *smart* with you? How would *you* know?"

More laughter as the crowd started getting into it. Michael was pissed but he was also taking perverse pleasure in his ability to handle the heckler. The red-faced suit was looking visibly angry now but couldn't seem to find a clever comeback. He glared at Michael in open hostility as he shouted with finality, "You'd better watch your mouth,

funny man. You don't know who you're messing with. I could get you fired. Why don't you just shut up and play and maybe I'll let you keep your job - - *asshole!*"

At that the heckler turned his back on Michael in a way that suggested the game was over and that, despite the points he'd scored, he had still lost. It might have been the fact that he'd been on edge all day, or that he was drunker than usual but whatever the reason, Michael was unreasonably infuriated by this. Unable to match wits with him, this frigging Neanderthal buffoon had resorted to threats - - hinting that he somehow had the pull to get Michael fired. He wanted to scream at this idiot and tell him that actually *wasn't* a threat. He'd be doing him a favor. Rage simmered inside him and threatened to boil over. He'd had it with this shit gig! Who needed it?

That's when the now familiar, self-destructive impulse arose in him. As usual, there ensued a brief moment of internal struggle while the more rational part of him tried desperately to fight against it. At times like this he could swear he felt some sort of "presence" trying to help him overcome these compulsions. Urging him in the direction of sanity and survival. "*Let it go, Michael. It's not worth it. You need this job. Please, just let it go!*"

But it was useless. There was no winning. He should know that by now. The compulsion to continue to wreck what little remained of his career and his life was just too strong. He knew what he had to do. *Destroy!*

The battle for rational thought lost, he reached behind him and turned the volume of the sound mixer up far beyond the "acceptable level" to a point just below feedback. Then, positive that for perhaps the first time, everyone in the room could hear him, he announced loudly: "You know, I realize I owe dick-weed down here an apology. He really brought it home to me just how much I fucking *hate* playing here."

As he spoke he indicated the red-faced heckler, who turned angrily and attempted to get out of his chair. His colleagues restrained him, shaking their heads. They could see the reckless madness in Michael's eyes. The Happy Hour crowd, almost stunned to silence by this

completely unexpected admission were looking at one another with eyebrows raised. Was the singer going "postal" on them?

Michael continued his rant: "And I want you all to know how much I loathe having to perform for a bunch of self-absorbed assholes who wouldn't recognize talent if it was shoved up their asses. So..... not that any of you give a shit, I've decided to quit. But before I go I'd like to leave you with one last song."

It was in the contract Michael had signed that there was to be absolutely no profanity on stage. Having already broken that rule with his brief farewell speech Michael compounded the breach by performing the David Allen Coe classic "The Rodeo Song" - - intentionally playing and singing as badly as he could. The humorous, profanity-laden country two-step was the perfect Sky Lounge swan song. If he hadn't already decided to quit, performing this tune would almost certainly have gotten him fired.

Ironically, after months of ignoring him, people were finally listening, some of them even laughing at the lyrics to the song and clapping their hands in time to Michael's tasteless guitar bashing. Just as he was winding up the song he caught sight of the hotel's Food and Beverage Manager entering the lounge. He'd no doubt been notified by one of the staff that the singer was having a meltdown on stage. The stern look on the manager's face told Michael he was in big trouble but, at this point, he really couldn't give a shit.

With a final flourish Michael hit the last chord of the song and screamed into the microphone: "Thank you one all! Goodnight and good-fucking-bye!"

Los Angeles, California
Saturday November 13

The worst of Michael's hangover was fading but, unfortunately, it was being replaced with pangs of regret when he recalled last night. What the hell was he going to do now? Probably kiss his last week's salary goodbye. He was in breach of contract and they could legally tell

him to take a hike. Hans Brummer, the German Food and Beverage Manager, had been furious. And Michael had only made matters worse by goose-stepping down to the elevators and yelling, "Sieg Heil!" as he was escorted off the premises by security. He shook his head despairingly. After that little performance he doubted there'd be any chance of throwing himself on Hans' mercy and asking for his job back.

He briefly considered calling his parents. They were only 45 minutes away in upscale Orange County. Maybe a change of scene would help. He could move back in, regroup and then.....

He shook his head. No, he couldn't - - *wouldn't* - - let them see him like this. He'd made it to the brink of stardom under his own steam and no matter how low he'd sunk, what little pride he had left wouldn't allow him to give up completely. Somehow, someway he'd figure out how to beat this thing and regain everything he'd lost.

He supposed he ought to call a cab and go pick up his car. It was a miracle that he hadn't been pulled over driving from the hotel to the sports bar where he'd spent the rest of the evening getting completely blitzed. Thank God he'd found an ounce of common sense remaining and not tried to drive back to his apartment. He searched his pockets and cursed himself silently. *"Shit! I left my phone at home!"*

Swallowing the last of his coffee he rose from the table and exited the store, resigning himself to the walk back. As he approached the sidewalk he passed a mother and her daughter going in the same direction. The girl, who looked to be about eleven or twelve years old, was dressed in soccer gear and was bouncing a ball expertly from knee to knee. Michael was impressed with her level of skill.

His side of the road was clear of traffic and he walked briskly across to the median and waited while several cars passed. He was just about to cross when he saw something out of the corner of his eye. A soccer ball came bouncing into view. At the same time he heard a woman's panic-stricken voice screaming, "Susan!"

As he turned in the direction of the woman's voice the whole world became a slow-motion movie. The girl's mother was running towards the street, waving her hands and frantically calling her daughter's

name. The little girl, racing across the road, had her attention fixed on the ball she was chasing. Hurling towards her was a silver Ford F-150. The driver of the truck hadn't seen the child yet and, even if he had, there was no way he could've stopped in time.

In the midst of all this, Michael uttered one, solitary word - - almost reverently: "*Redemption!*" The moment he said it he wondered what the hell he was talking about. Of one thing he was certain, though - - he could save her!

In less than a heartbeat he assessed the situation. There was no time to pick the girl up and carry her to safety, so Michael did the only thing he could think of. In two rapid strides she was within reach and he shoved her as hard as he could, out of harms way.

In the last instant before the truck hit him, a roaring sound filled Michael's head and he saw the dark tunnel from his nightmare one more time. Then there was the sickening sound of almost two tons of moving metal colliding with bone, muscle and sinew.

The last thing he heard was his own voice screaming.
