

1. THE MUSIC BOX

EL PASO, TEXAS

ROAN TOOK OFF HIS GLOVES like a man about to duel.

He slid the supple black leather away one finger at a time. He had not been planning to touch anything today, but the enameled singing bird box set with pearls was proving too irresistible—he wanted to make sure the music box was what he suspected it to be.

Earlier in the day, he'd flown to El Paso and rented a car to drive to Hueco Tanks, the low-lying mountains in El Paso County. On the way, a strip mall antique store off the highway caught his eye and he pulled over. Stuart wouldn't be at their meeting point for another two hours and Roan had time. As a general rule, he never missed an opportunity to visit an antique store, the more out-of-the-way the better. Some of his most exciting finds had been in unassuming places such as this.

The elderly shopkeeper glanced up from behind the counter when Roan entered and after a minute offered a greeting.

Roan hid a smile at the man's appraisal. He was used to getting that look, being well over six feet, with dark hair that cut a dramatic swath to his shoulders. He always wore black, a severe choice, but he found it also helped detract from the fact that he always wore gloves.

Before Roan walked in, the man behind the counter had been

squinting hard at an account ledger, tallying numbers while he ate an egg salad sandwich, but his attention was divided now that Roan was in the room. The only sound breaking the silence was the relentless ticking from a wall of cuckoo clocks and the drone from the rusted fan on the counter.

The shop owner finally got up the nerve to ask him, “Just passing through?”

Roan gave a distracted nod, his eyes surveying the showroom. Most pieces appeared to be from the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the majority Texan and old Americana from Mexico all the way south to Panama. Not an inch of wall or table space was wasted. A dozen well-oiled saddles were on display next to rows of vintage typewriters, assorted crystal, and ceramics riddled with chips and hairline cracks. Old bar globe oil lamps stood clustered in the corner and antique country quilts hung on the wall like tapestries. Behind the register a cabinet with glass doors showcased guns from the Old West.

No other customer was in the store, and Roan doubted anyone else had been in that day. The entire space felt stale and forgotten, like a shoebox full of relics no one wanted. The old man looked to be in his early seventies and ready to retire—perhaps he would have years ago if he could afford it.

Roan’s eyes took in every bauble, knowing each one held a story. They were all doorways to the past, to histories tucked away. No item was immune, no matter how small. Even the copper spoon collection for ten dollars contained the moments of every hand that had ever held them.

The vintage costume jewelry glittering in the glass display under the register caught his eye. On top of the counter a delicate gold box, no bigger than a woman’s hand, sat like a crown on a piece of velvet.

Roan approached the box in amazement. He had no idea how it had made its way to Texas—or to the United States for that matter. The music box had to be the oldest antique in the store.

He tried to contain his excitement, already deciding he had to touch it.

“That’s French I believe, and real pearls,” the old man said, clearing his throat.

Roan studied the box, knowing it was from Switzerland, not France, and that if he turned the music box’s handle, an exquisite lifelike miniature bird would pop out. He could tell by the masterful craftsmanship the musical bird box had been made by Jaquet-Droz & Leschot—and not only were the pearls real, so was the gold.

“One of my finest pieces.” The man nodded, beginning to sound nervous.

A handwritten price tag dangled from the dainty wind-up handle with \$1,200 scribbled in blue ballpoint pen. Next to the Civil War cavalry rifle hanging over the man’s head, the music box was the highest-priced item.

Roan bent down to continue his appraisal, not quite ready to touch it yet, not with someone standing so close to him.

“What brings you to El Paso?” the old man asked.

“Rock climbing,” Roan murmured.

“Oh, you must be heading to Hueco Tanks.” The man visibly relaxed now that he could peg Roan as an out-of-town climber. “We get all sorts of interesting folk visiting up there. You in some kind of rock band?”

“No.” Roan smiled at the man’s curiosity. He didn’t tell him he was in the same business as he was—antiques—though Roan handled one-of-a-kind rare items and by appointment only. He had sold a Jaquet-Droz musical bird box once. If his instincts were correct, this one would be worth more.

The phone behind the counter gave a shrill ring. The old man excused himself to answer it.

As soon as his back was turned, Roan seized the opportunity. He would touch the box quickly and be done before the man could turn back around. What the shop owner didn’t know was

that he was a master psychometrist who'd been born with a rare gift.

With the speed gained from a lifetime of training, Roan brought his hands together in an elegant Surabhi mudra, a complex finger lock to help his mind break through the barrier.

Inhaling deeply, he placed his hand on the music box, wrapped his mind around the scrim of time, and pushed past it.