

FIVE

The impromptu dance recital in the embalming room happened on Wednesday. Kevin spent the rest of that day and most of Thursday resting and sleeping in silence. Despite the recent boost in business, he had since only called the funeral home twice to check on things.

By Thursday evening, he had become so curious as to whether his condition had disappeared or not that he couldn't help himself. All day long he had resisted the urge to turn on his stereo and subject himself to the effects of music. He never played music on his stereo; he used it exclusively for news, sporting events, and talk shows. He hadn't set its dial to a music station in years.

As the hours of that Thursday passed in his house, the idle, silent stereo seemed to gradually assume a looming, taunting persona, whose presence became increasingly pronounced with each minute. On several occasions that afternoon, Kevin sat on the couch, directly across from it in his living room, resisting the temptation to test it.

By seven p.m., he was feeling brave. At least that's what he'd convinced himself. He'd been staring at the stereo for twenty minutes, debating, flexing his

muscles, and practicing holding his arms and legs perfectly still. He hadn't taken his medication at all that day; he would rather deal with the aches than try to tolerate any side effects that produced a rhythmic influence over his limbs, if that was in fact being caused by the medication. The bottle certainly didn't have any indication of such a side effect. Nevertheless, he wasn't taking any chances.

He'd had plenty of sleep. He was well rested. He'd eaten his favorite meals for lunch and dinner—primarily because they were easy enough for a bachelor with limited culinary training to prepare: a corned-beef Reuben sandwich and chicken parmesan, respectively. He capped his dinner off with a delicious, semi-moist brownie with walnuts and a cup of coffee. He was not under any influence whatsoever: he hadn't had any alcohol or drugs. He hadn't had any weird diet drinks like that kale, spinach, and pomegranate mix that once caused him to hallucinate about talking faces on his fingers.

At seven p.m., he was himself. As far as he was concerned, it was just him, Kevin McCormick, slayer of all banal pop culture creations: the true clean force of mankind against the depravity of music.

It was time.

He walked to the stereo, steadying his hands, and turned it on. The first sounds were of voices from a sports talk show, one of Kevin's usual programs.

The bitter show hosts were speculating about which Red Sox players were causing the most disruption in the clubhouse, and they were attributing the latest slide in the team's performance to the manager's inability to corral his players.

No music at all. Nothing.

Kevin took a deep breath and hit the "seek" button. He took a step back, into the middle of the room, his fists clenched as he stared in anticipation at the stereo. Scratches and noise sounded from the speakers as the stereo's display panel flickered calling numbers of stations just out of reception. Kevin swore for a moment that the stereo was laughing at him. He relaxed his shoulders and closed his eyes.

Nothing's going to happen. *Nothing*.

Finally, the sound of a buzzing synthesizer along with a forceful drumbeat erupted from the speakers. Kevin had recognized the sound, as he had heard the song at some point just about everywhere: walking through the mall, putting gas in his car, visiting his doctor, and even once crossing paths with a kayaker while canoeing along the Saco River. Secluded hiking trails and rivers nestled in the mountains of New Hampshire were among his favorite escapes from urban commotion...and from pop music. That day on the Saco River, however, he felt violated as the kayaker skimmed passed him, bouncing up and down in his

kayak, rowing along to the beat, blasting the sounds of his radio so loud that it seemed to reverberate from the trees that lined the river. Kevin remembered how his skin crawled that summer day as he listened to the kayaker's radio polluting the otherwise perfectly fresh, clear, quiet New Hampshire mountain air. It was Lady Gaga's "Just Dance."

As much as he especially disliked these types of artists, most known for both chasing and defining pop art itself, they were impossible to ignore. Even the most reputable news outlets typically opened their roundup of top stories with updates on these particular celebrities, and Lady Gaga seemed to be one among news networks' chief concerns: what she was wearing, what she wasn't wearing, where she was playing, who she was with, who she wasn't with, what she was eating, what she thought about the weather.

Describing her urge to dance, Gaga's voice bounced from the walls of Kevin's living room.

It was only fitting, Kevin thought, that he would break his new dancing curse against perhaps the ultimate contemporary exploiter of popular art, and also to what he felt was perhaps one of the worst songs in years. "Just Dance" had absolutely no poetic merit whatsoever, he believed, and it contained the

simplest of melodies, with a childlike arrangement of only a few basic notes, requiring barely any singing capability at all.

Nothing was happening. He smiled. He had vanquished Lady Gaga. It was over.

Until he reached for the power button.

No sooner was his arm outstretched than it had lurched backward. In one fluid motion his elbow bent as if the music had literally hooked it, followed by a jerky chain reaction from his neck, along his shoulders, down his back, and into his hips. Kevin gasped as his feet took over from there, pitter-pattering in a senseless pattern coordinated only by the notes of the song, his arms abandoning all decorum, recklessly joining the rhythm.

He was petrified.

His feet suddenly shifted together and sent him hopping along to the chorus. He had no control of what or where his body was going. Each time the movement carried him closer to the stereo, he could only helplessly stare at the power button, as his arms and hands worked from a mind of their own. He was certain that he was going to die. He imagined his mother and Boyd preparing his obituary, trying to figure out the best way to explain what had happened. They would never understand.

Cause of death: dancing to Lady Gaga.

The only way out of this, he thought, was to hang on until the song ended; perhaps there would be a silent pause before the next one. He closed his eyes, tried to block out the music as best he could, and prayed to God to spare his life.

Sure enough, his prayers were answered, and the song finally ended. The DJ began to regurgitate Lady Gaga's recent Tweets. Sweating and panting as he crawled across the floor, Kevin took advantage of the merciful break to punch the power button, silencing the stereo. He fell onto his back, fighting for air. He watched the stereo and speakers in terror, as if it might suddenly burst into sound again. With a sudden revelation about how to prevent another episode, he lunged forward and yanked out the stereo's power cord.

As soon as he could speak, but still breathing laboriously, he called 9-1-1. A middle-aged woman's voice responded, "9-1-1, what is your emergency?"

"I'm dancing. I can't stop dancing," Kevin wheezed.

"Excuse me?"

"I'm dancing. Out of control. I need an ambulance."

"You're dancing?"

"Yes."

"And you need an ambulance for that?"

"Yes, right away, please."

Pause. "Is this some kind of a prank, sir? 9-1-1 is for real emergencies only."

"I know, I know, it sounds crazy, but this is a real emergency. Please."

Longer pause. "Have you been drinking, sir?"

"No, no, no. Nothing like that."

"Have you been taking any kind of drugs or medication?"

"No, I'm telling you, this is serious. I need help, right away."

"Are you a mental patient, sir?"

"No, no!" Kevin said, raising his voice. "You don't understand! I hate music! I really hate music! I don't dance! At all! But now I can't stop dancing! Listen to me! My body is doing it all on its own!"

The woman sighed as if irritated. "All right, I'm listening. I'm sorry: did you say you hate music?"

"Yes."

"Well," she murmured, "maybe you should be in jail for that."

"What did you say?"

"Nothing."

"Please! I was just dancing to Lady Gaga!"

"That's not a problem, sir. Lots of people do that every day. I am actually a Lady Gaga fan myself. But, please, try to remain calm. I am trying to help you. Now, I'm assuming you're not in any physical danger at the moment?"

"No, not unless I start to hear music again. You've got to believe me: I could have been killed!"

“‘Killed,’ sir? By what?”

"By Lady Gaga's song. Or any song!"

"All right. Then I'm sending over a cruiser first. Just sit tight. Block your ears or something, and find a quiet closet or something. Someone is on the way to help."