

B. J. H O F F

*A Distant
Music*

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One

Jonathan's Children

Even the children are old in such a place.

From the diary of Jonathan Stuart



Jonathan Stuart watched the faces of the children as they filed into the classroom and slid behind their desks.

He had always thought of them as *his* children, as if they were a special gift, temporarily entrusted to him by Providence—and accompanied by an almost frightening responsibility. As his gaze came to rest on first one, then another, he couldn't quell the bitter question that had nagged at him for days now: *Who among them could have done such a thing?*

And why?

He found it unthinkable that any one of his students might have had so little regard for him or for something that belonged to him. Yet he realized that in all likelihood the one responsible for the theft of the flute was right here, in this classroom.

He watched Kenny Tallman take his seat—and discounted him

almost immediately. The narrow, bespectacled face was that of an unhappy child who, in spite of belonging to one of the few financially comfortable households in town, never seemed quite at ease with the other students—or with himself, for that matter.

The boy glanced up, giving the uncertain smile that never failed to touch Jonathan's heart. No, not only did this reticent youth have no reason to steal from his teacher, but of all the children in the room, Kenny was probably one of the very few who wouldn't have had the daring—nor the motivation—to attempt such an exploit.

Jonathan had long wondered about the Tallman boy's home life. Quieter than any other student in the class and possessed of a reserve that gave him a presence much older than his years, Kenny seemed to be liked well enough by the other children, though he was something of an outsider. Perhaps it had to do with the fact that his father, Judson Tallman, was superintendent of the mines and known to be a hard, uncompromising man. Certainly, he was one of the least popular men in the small community.

He and his son lived alone at the foot of "the Hill," as Dredd's Mountain was called by the miners, in a neat, two-story house. Tallman periodically hosed their home down to rid it of the coal dust that blackened it and every other dwelling in town. Some of the miners were known to joke that Tallman's frequent hosing of his house was the mine super's effort to wash away his sins. Others would counter that nothing but a flood would accomplish *that* feat.

Kenny's mother had left Skingle Creek before Jonathan arrived. Although she'd been gone for years, rumors still circulated as to why Charlotte Tallman had abandoned her family.

Jonathan had heard most of the tales by now, but the one that seemed destined to survive all the others was that Tallman's wife had fled to escape her husband's cruelty. Speculation was that Judson Tallman might have ill-treated his wife, perhaps had even been violent with her. But rumors often ballooned into flagrant exaggerations, and Jonathan fervently hoped for Kenny's sake that such was the case with the stories about his father. A man who would mistreat his wife would almost certainly be capable of the same abuse toward his son.

Two of the older boys who had been whispering between themselves when Kenny came in now turned their attention his way. Billy Macken, a tall, heavy-shouldered youth who delighted in tormenting the younger children, muttered something to his buddy beside him. Orrin Gaffney, another troublemaker, leaned forward to Kenny, seated in front of him, and thumped him on the shoulder. "Billy wants you," he said, smirking.

Kenny looked around.

"Pick up my pencil, Four-eyes," the Macken boy ordered.

Kenny looked at him and then at the floor. "Where? I don't see any pencil."

Billy grinned and dropped a pencil to the floor. "*That* pencil, Weaselface."

Jonathan rapped his pointer on the corner of his desk, but neither youth seemed aware of his presence. He waited, deciding to see how the Tallman boy would handle the situation.

Kenny stared at the pencil on the floor for a long time. Finally, he bent over and picked it up, handing it to Billy without looking at him.

Jonathan wasn't surprised. Most of the younger children gave in to Billy Macken's bullying. The boy was the biggest student in the room and had an air of meanness about him that, combined with his size and rough behavior, was nothing less than intimidating.

He'd been held back more than once, and so he was one of the older students in the room. At fourteen he could have gone into the mines—it wasn't unusual for much younger boys to leave school and join their fathers in the coal mines. But Jonathan suspected that sheer laziness had kept Billy aboveground so far. Laziness and an overly indulgent mother, who had apparently talked her husband into letting their son stay in school for a while longer.

Jonathan tried not to warm to the idea of the Macken boy leaving school, even though it would make his days considerably easier. Billy had routinely rebuffed every attempt to interest him in learning. The boy was a daily discipline problem and a continual aggravation to the other children. Even so, Jonathan was loath to see Billy or any other boy go into the mines at such a young age. But if something didn't

change, and change drastically, he was going to have to fail the boy again this year, and no doubt that would be the end of Billy's education. He couldn't see Buck Macken holding still for his son to stay out of the mines much longer.

He went to the boy's desk, waiting until he had his attention. "Billy, I want you to go outside and come in again, this time with a different attitude."

The boy met Jonathan's eyes with a defiant sneer, but finally he stood and sauntered down the aisle to the door.

Jonathan sighed and, ignoring the urge to give Kenny Tallman a reassuring pat on the shoulder, turned and went back to sit down at his desk.

When he glanced up again, he saw Lester Monk trudging up the aisle, brushing snow from his hair. The boy stumbled—a common occurrence with Lester—and shot Jonathan a self-conscious grin as he righted himself and squeezed in behind his desk.

Jonathan smiled back, studying the boy. Certainly Lester's family could use the money that an underhanded sale of the flute might bring. But somehow Jonathan couldn't envision the plodding, awkward Lester as the culprit. The youth simply didn't have the imagination to concoct such a scheme, much less the mental acuity to carry it off. Lester was clumsy, often inept—but he was no thief. Of that Jonathan was confident.

Behind Lester came Maggie MacAuley and little Summer Rankin, great friends who, admittedly, were two of Jonathan's favorite students. Both of them looked his way and smiled. Even though he had always tried to discipline himself against the folly of having favorites in the classroom, it was hard not to be partial to these two, different though they were in age and temperament.

Maggie MacAuley, with her riot of fiery copper hair and sharp little chin, was probably the brightest child in the one-room schoolhouse. The girl was unfailingly cheerful; her quick, eager smile would have melted the ice under Dunbar's mill in mid-January. Moreover, she had a keen wit, an insatiable curiosity, and a hunger to learn that challenged even Jonathan's love of teaching.

Maggie's parents were Irish immigrants, the family as poor as any other in town. Even so, Maggie and her two older sisters were invariably dressed in clean feed-sack pinafores, and the parts in their neatly combed hair appeared to have been cut with a straightedge.

Jonathan knew the MacAuleys to be good, principled people who did the best they could with the little they had. Maggie's father, Matthew MacAuley, was a leader of sorts among the miners—a man others respected and heeded, a man from whom his coworkers were likely to seek counsel.

It seemed to Jonathan that Maggie was very much her father's daughter. Possessed of a generous heart and a fiercely loyal nature, she could be counted on to help look after the younger children in the classroom and come to their aid whenever needed. She also exhibited a measure of common sense rarely encountered in one so young, a trait that more than once had led Jonathan to entrust her with considerable responsibility.

Yes, he was fairly certain that Matthew MacAuley's daughter was, like her father, a natural leader.

But not for a minute did he believe she was a thief.

As for poor little Summer Rankin, Jonathan's heart ached for the child, whose frailty seemed even more stark when reflected in the glow of Maggie's vitality. He found it absurd, and somehow obscene, to consider this small girl even remotely capable of wrongdoing.

Summer was a mere wisp of a child—a tiny, fragile creature whose white-blond hair and pale skin would have given her an almost spectral appearance had it not been for the angry flush of fever that more often than not blotched her hollowed cheeks. Jonathan had it from Dr. Woodbridge that the girl had a rheumatic heart and failing lungs. Of late, she was out of school more than she was in, and even on the days she was present, a distracted, distant stare glazed her eyes, causing Jonathan to wonder just how aware she really was of her surroundings.

Nine years old, Summer lived midway up the Hill in a rough-hewn cabin crammed with people, both children and adults. Jonathan almost always came away from his visits to the Rankin home feeling

somewhat dazed by the number of family members who seemed to inhabit that cramped, raucous dwelling. Aging grandparents, aunts and uncles, and three of Summer's siblings—all under the age of six—lived there. It struck him as truly remarkable that a delicate, dreamy child like Summer could exist in such shabby bedlam, albeit an apparently *happy* bedlam.

For a time, until he had come to know both children better, Jonathan had puzzled over the bond between Summer Rankin and Maggie MacAuley. The twelve-year-old Maggie was as strong and self-assured as Summer was frail and shy.

While Maggie preferred rousing stories of adventure and sensible, precise lesson assignments, Summer responded mostly to art and music. In fact, this fey child was the only one of Jonathan's students he had ever allowed to touch his silver flute. A shyly whispered plea in the fall of the year had moved Jonathan to comply, even to demonstrate the basic rudiments of technique. To his amazement, within minutes Summer had managed to evoke a simple but plaintive folk melody he'd played for the class upon occasion.

But that had been months ago. These days, the girl had neither the breath nor the energy to play. Indeed, Jonathan suspected that most of Summer's strength now had to be conserved for the mere effort of existence.

A condition which he was beginning to understand all too well...

He watched the child take her seat, his throat tightening as she smiled up at Maggie MacAuley, who bent over the desk to button the top of Summer's sweater before scooting in behind her own desk. Maggie was fiercely protective of her ailing little friend. Even those inclined to bully the younger children were reluctant to incur Maggie's wrath by teasing or otherwise harassing Summer.

The weight pressing on his heart squeezed even harder as Jonathan questioned just how much longer Maggie's young friend would *need* her protection. He could almost see the girl failing. He wondered if Maggie saw it too, and he rather hoped she did. Otherwise, it would only go harder for her when she had to face the truth.

One after another the children slipped into their seats, Jonathan

dismissing each as a potential thief with little more than a glance. These children were better than that. Other than Billy Macken and Orrin Gaffney, he couldn't believe any one of them was capable of deliberate treachery—or cruelty. For surely it might have been cruelty that motivated the theft. As much as he tried to avoid the thought, there was always the possibility that the flute hadn't been stolen for its monetary value at all, but rather to deliver a personal wound to him.

In that event, the offender would be someone with a grudge against him or, at the very least, someone who disliked him intensely. Was it possible that one of the children—*his* children—could actually bear such animosity toward him without his knowing?

Billy Macken now walked back into the schoolroom, and Jonathan's eyes went from him to Orrin Gaffney. Was it possible?

While the very idea appalled him, Jonathan wasn't in the least ignorant of human nature's capacity for meanness or duplicity. His years of association with children and their families had introduced him to a dismaying range of cruelties, of which both the young and their elders were capable. He had lost his youthful naïveté and much of his earlier belief in the innate goodness of man some time ago.

Yet with all their faults, these children were like family to him. Indeed, he loved them almost as much as if they were his family, in no small part because he had recognized their need for love and attention.

Much of the time, even the two troublemakers, Billy and his chum, Orrin, could evoke an aching compassion in him. He made a determined effort to dismiss his suspicion of the two. He mustn't judge them without evidence. Who could say what motivated their rebellious behavior, aggression, and spitefulness? Certainly, they shared the same needs and the same deprivations as any of the other students in his schoolroom.

It hadn't taken Jonathan long to realize that the children of Skingle Creek had known little in the way of affection or gentleness in their young lives. Nor had they been exposed to much in the way of beauty or the arts. This dark cavern of a town, carved from the bottom side

of a mountain, seemed to exist in the shadows. If the coal dust from the mines hadn't smudged the face of the entire community, the lowering gloom from the surrounding hills would have. It was a gray, hopeless place in which to live, and sooner or later, many of those within its confines became a gray, hopeless people.

Survival seemed the only real ambition of the town's residents, their only visible achievement. Many were uneducated, even illiterate. The men—and most of their sons—broke their backs and punished their lungs by hammering and picking away in the bowels of the earth. They seldom saw daylight except on Sunday, going below-ground before dawn and emerging, half-blind and hunched, well after sundown.

Although they created small joys wherever and whenever they could, for the most part mining families seemed to live grim, even bitter lives, from which escape was virtually impossible. The mining company had structured a brilliantly ruthless system that worked entirely to the company's advantage.

It was a system that bordered on enslavement. Not only did the company own the store that represented the miners' only source of food and clothing, but they also provided the only clinic where medical treatment could be obtained. They even owned the building that presently housed the school.

The truth was that the company owned the town.

And, for all intents and purposes, the miners themselves.