

A cruise-ship piano player becomes involved with the supernatural and comes to faith in Jesus.

From Keys to the Kingdom

By Glen Ellington

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GLEN ELLINGTON

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Chapter 1

The cool tropical breezes of Lost Cove Cay bathed the upper deck of The Wonderland with pure delight. This newest cruise ship of High Seas Cruise Lines rocked ever so gently at anchor by the concrete wharf, awaiting the return of 2000 guests who had disembarked for a day of fun and food on the corporation's private island in the Bahamas.

Just another day in paradise, thought Vic Weston. He was sprawled in a reclining deck chair, a tall tropical drink on the adjoining table. It was only 2 o'clock and he didn't have to start playing until 9. Plenty of time to drink and relax, he thought. Besides, by the time those lobsteresque tourists finished dinner they would barely have the energy to wait in line for the elevators, let alone climb the stairs to their staterooms.

That's what this first day ashore did to most of them. They left as pasty, middle-aged grandparents and returned needing medical treatment for sunburn and heatstroke. A few hearty souls would straggle down later to The Ebony/Ivory Lounge for some more watered-down drinks and a few tunes from Vic Weston, Keymaster Extraordinaire, but those that did never stayed long.

The Keymaster Extraordinaire part was Vic's way of feeling he was really in show business with an actual act, rather than just being a hack piano player who could entertain non-musical folks for a few hours with oldies from the ivories. Now while Vic was certainly no slouch at the Steinway, he always felt like the real piano player would show up some day and he

would be out on the street again, playing in Nashville honky-tonks and sleeping in motels that were better left unnamed.

A few key changes, a flourish here and there and a climactic glissando and the cruising crowd was satisfied. He sang with most of the songs unless some drunk patron wanted to. It was always a game to see how long he could get into his set before someone requested Billy Joel's "Piano Man". Just took 8 minutes last night, he remembered, but the crowd was fresh from their first on-board dinner and excited about what the next 5 days would bring them on the high seas.

High seas. The irony of that phrase amused Vic since he tried to play in the key of C as often as he could. He could transpose and play in lots of keys but everything was simpler in C: "The People's Key!" he called it. If he sensed that there might be musicians in the crowd, he could traipse through several complicated chord progressions to make it seem like he was in a new key but no one could ever tell without watching his fingers. "Cheap tricks in the key of C" he always told the crowd and they laughed and drank some more. Vic got a 20% kickback from the bar for every drink, and he would occasionally detour into 'Drink! Drink! Drink!' from Romberg's "The Student Prince" to encourage the happy boozehounds to drain their cups and demand another round.

But right now, the breeze was cool, the drink was cooler, and all was right in Vic's world. This was his 14th cruise with High Seas but only his 3rd on The Wonderland. It truly was a magnificent ship and most of the 500 employees felt lucky to work there. Vic did too, having been beating the ivories most of his adult life in one bar or another. He had about 2/3 of a

music degree but quit to follow a girl out to Las Vegas with the promise of a job playing in a new club bankrolled by an unknown celebrity. The decision to bag college and hit the road had been easy for Vic because he just wasn't a student. He loved playing, especially jazz, but music history and advanced theory left him cold. It seemed like the more he found out about music, the less he liked it. He began to envy most of humanity that knew nothing of music but definitely knew what they liked: no Italian words and chicken scratches on the pages, just simple enjoyment from a catchy tune or visceral beat. So, rather than lose his first love, Vic bade the books farewell and went off to seek his musical fortune.

Ten years of piano lessons had prepared Vic for being a legitimate pianist, but he couldn't see spending countless hours mastering the classics when all he wanted was to play some tunes and get high. Alcohol, pot, it was all the same to Vic. He just needed something to give him that little glow, something that took life and rounded all the edges until everything got distilled down to just Vic, the piano, and the music.

He chuckled when he thought of how much he had hated to practice when he was a kid taking lessons. Vic had a natural talent for the piano, having grown up listening to his mother play, but he hated the weekly lessons in one of several different methods books. Each week a particular skill was introduced and then there was a 2-score piece designed to reinforce it. The drop/roll he hated the most. While it made for a smooth and lyrical hand movement, it always seemed to him to be a girly thing which he wanted no part of. The irony was that his older sister Christina played better than he did, and she never used

that technique either. So much of piano technique seemed like a waste of effort when strong chords and a walking bass made people listen and maybe want to dance.

He had discovered chords in 6th grade when the family changed teachers. Mrs. Farris had been very nice, of course, but very precise and frankly, a bit boring. When she retired, Mr. D. Wesley Dexter took her place. He taught Vic how chords worked and how most were available in any octave. You just had to find them. That was the coolest part for Vic. He had been taught to see the piano in two clefs divided by middle C like opposing armies lining up for battle but seeing the keyboard in chords made the music seem more like a neighborhood ball game where everyone could find their place on the team.

Vic's mother used to say, "You might have to play in an ice cream parlor someday, so practice." In the realm of maternal prophecy this had turned out to be true. When the Las Vegas club gig went bust because the unknown celebrity's capital dried up, Vic got a job playing ragtime piano at Uncle Billy's Ice Cream Emporium. Complete with bowtie and skimmer hat, he would provide the tinkly piano background for folks engaged in consuming massive quantities of frozen confection. A microphone, kazoo, bass drum and siren whistle gave Vic all the toys necessary to make sure the near-diabetic crowd had a grand time and told their friends. There was an enormous concoction called Uncle Billy's Monster Trough which featured 8 kinds of ice cream and 6 different toppings plus sprinkles, whip cream and cherries. The staff would sound a huge "ooga" horn, insert three 3 dazzling sparklers, and bring

it out to the table with multiple long-handled spoons to the accompaniment of Vic and his arsenal of noisemakers. Uncle Billy's was located just off the strip and served as a family-friendly oasis in that desert of gambling and booze.

"Another drink Vic?" He looked up to see Marcy, the cocktail waitress. Her eyes twinkled and Vic enjoyed seeing her smile.

"Oh, hey Marcy. Don't you look perky today?"

"Just for you, Vic," she laughed.

"No, I'll pass on the drink. Time for my afternoon nap before I go clobber the keys."

"You know where to find me, Vic." And with a wink, she turned and walked away, her hips sashaying more than necessary.

"Well, finders-keepers!" She turned her head and winked again, then she was gone.

Vic truly enjoyed what he did on the Wonderland. The hours were great: 9-11 pm 4 days a week on a 5-day cruise or 6 days on a 7. He enjoyed the people, too. They were just America's middle-class folk that got a deal through Triple-A to spend some time away from the rest of their lives.

The price was less than other cruises as well. The top deck balcony suites could go for \$1000 a person but cabins below decks could go for less than \$200. That was a great price considering all the food and entertainment that came with it.

Vic made great money as well. His salary from the cruise line was \$3K a week but some weeks he could make half that again in tips. With nowhere to go and nothing else to do, he had banked most of his earnings over the last few years and had

considered retiring early-- but to do what? He didn't own a house or a car. Since his parents died, he and his sister were the only family left and she was a sociology professor at a small college out in Seattle. They had not seen each other in years and except for an occasional email, Vic was alone in the world. He had never married and after several relationships went South, Vic decided that women were too expensive, too demanding, and too dangerous.

Vic enjoyed his nightly playing, but he had mixed feelings about his bi-weekly Tea-Time concerts. These were from 3-4:30 and patrons could have all manner of luscious and decadent desserts while drinking a plethora of teas and coffees. During this time, he did not talk or sing; he was just the background noise. He played a lot of Cole Porter, Burt Bacharach, or Carole King and occasionally a Chopin nocturne. Nobody paid attention to what he did, but they appreciated him doing it. He put out the tip jars but rarely found anything in them. The good news was that when it was over, he could have a drink and take a nap before the evening show.

Vic looked at his watch. "Naptime!" he said out loud to no one in particular. He quickly descended the 4 staircases to his below-deck cabin and flipped on the small lamp. Vic had learned to be comfortable wherever he was, and this small cabin was just fine for him. A closet full of clothes for work and play, a few pair of shoes, coffeemaker, ice bucket and liquor cabinet were all he needed. Because he was below decks and close to not only the other crew cabins but directly over the two massive ship's generators, Vic had had to be creative to get some sleep because the ship never did. A pair of quality

headphones and an alarm watch which would vibrate him awake was all Vic needed to check out for about 4 hours. And this he did in short order.

In real life Vic had long since given up on youthful dreams of fame and fortune but the sleeping Vic was another matter. He sometimes found himself a sexy adventurer in a jungle movie, on the hunt for fabulous cities of gold or the rescue of a beautiful princess. These dreams were the best and he oftentimes could recall many details upon awakening. Other times his dreams were just fragments of life as a student, a drunk and of course, as a piano player. Most of the time, however, he just closed his eyes and the alarm went off. No dreams, just out for several hours, like anesthesia. Not that Vic had ever had major health issues despite his sometimes-rowdy lifestyle, just some ambulatory sinus procedures or the put-off colonoscopy.

So having been vibrated awake, Vic showered in the small bathroom. “How small was it? It was so small you had to wash your feet in the toilet, your arms in the sink and your butt in the shower...and don’t even ask about the shampoo!” Not a good punchline, but he vowed to think of a better one to use in his act. He was always looking for observational humor which the passengers could relate to on the ship. It wasn’t easy coming up with jokes because everything about the cruise was so perfect for them so he concentrated on telling “below-decks” stories which they could never verify anyway.

Showered, shaved, and looking quite the bon-vivant in his white pants, light-blue open-necked shirt and blue blazer, Vic chose some black shoes to complete the ensemble. He looked

very 40's Hollywood but, alas, he couldn't tap dance. "No Gene Kelly for me, tonight," he chuckled. And so, a tired and a bit tipsy Vic Weston went into the cabin at 3 o'clock but a suave and dashing Vic Weston, Keymaster Extraordinaire, emerged at 7. There was just time to eat a light dinner in the crew mess and get to the Ebony/Ivory Lounge for some quick warm-up behind the fancy keyboard doors before the magic hour of nine. It was going to be a good night.

Chapter 2

“Closing time...” Vic intoned just before his last chords. The lounge was almost empty. Just the older couple from Milwaukee and the wannabe piano man who Vic had let play and sing an old Tom Lehrer tune about shooting anything that moved in the woods. Vic was glad the crowd had liked the song and Vic tried to engage anyone who could play and allow them to command the bench a bit. This guy had done a lot of simplification on the original piano arrangement but since most people had never heard of Tom Lehrer it hardly mattered. Vic made a note to at least prepare a rendition of “Poisoning Pigeons in the Park” before the next cruise.

“See you tomorrow night, folks. Be careful on those elevators and enjoy a fantastic voyage on the Wonderland!” Occasionally someone would comment on the 1960’s movie reference in his closing line but those who were still there usually told Vic how much they enjoyed his playing and singing and hopefully slipped at least a ten in the jar. He smiled and joked as the audience left but when he was alone his shoulders slumped and he drew a deep breath. *One more night I dodged the bullet. They still don’t know I can’t really do this stuff.*

“I think you did quite well, myself.” Vic looked up to see a tall blonde standing at the keyboard doors. “Your choice of songs was appropriate, and your technique was above average. Except for playing in C most of the time, I thought it was very entertaining.”

“Do you play?”

“Enough to know that those flowery modulations out of C just led right back to it.”

“Well, it’s good to know that someone is paying attention, I suppose.”

“Bridgette Winnemore,” she said, extending her gloved hand.

“My name’s on the door,” replied Vic.

“I know. That’s why I came here tonight.”

“I don’t remember your being at one of the tables.”

“I stood outside for a while. I hate crowds.”

“So do I but it pays the bills. Buy you a drink?”

Bridgette walked over to the keyboard. “May I?”

“Mi bencho su bencho.”

The tall blonde pulled out the bench and sat down. “One of my favorites.” Then she proceeded to give Vic a flawless rendition of Debussy’s “Clare De Lune”. He noticed that it was the original in Db not the “easier” one in C.

“Very impressive,” said Vic, “do you also juggle and eat fire?”

Bridgette laughed. “No, just some keyboard musings. Lots of lessons a lifetime ago.”

“Like I said, buy you a drink?”

“Sure. What’s open?”

“5 bars, two restaurants, pizza-to-go and an ice-cream parlor.”

“Lead the way.”

Vic escorted Bridgette down one floor and across the hall to the Sloshed Parrot, an intimate little bistro whose last call was dawn. He slipped the waiter a fin and got a secluded table by the window. There was a full Caribbean moon and the sea was like glass. They ordered drinks, for Vic a Miami Vice and for her a Shirley Temple. Then they sat in silence for a long moment.

“Your first cruise?”

“Sort of. I had heard about you being here and wanted to meet you.”

“Meet me? What on earth for? I’m a hack piano-player on a cruise ship. Nobody special.”

“My employer thinks otherwise.”

“Your employer? And whom would that be? Are you one of Charley’s Angels?”

“Close, but no cigar. My employer will remain nameless for now. His identity is strictly on a need-to-know basis.”

Again, more silence, then the drinks arrived.

“Cheers,” she said.

“Here’s salt spray in your pancakes.”

Vic studied Bridget as she took small sips from the virgin drink. “You want to tell me what’s going on here and why I am so important to your employer?”

“We know that you have been doing the cruise ship piano gigs for a while and decided that you were the very man we needed.”

“Needed for what?” Vic felt like he was in a film noir scene.

“For an important mission which could change the world.”

“Whoa, sister. All I know is your name, if that’s even right and you and your Mr. Need-to-know have decided that somehow the fate of the planet is in my hands?”

“That’s about the size of it.”

Vic sat back in his chair for a moment. “I will tell you this just one more time before I call ship’s security. I am Vic Weston, hack piano man on a cruise ship. That’s all. I ask very little from this life and I am fine with what it delivers. I don’t need a mission. I’m not a cloak and dagger secret agent and I am certainly not the savior of the world. So, if there’s nothing else, how about leaving me to finish this drink before I have another. I’d say it’s been real, sweetheart but it hasn’t so, before we get into any more Bogart dialogue you can make like a tree and leave. And take those limbs with you.”

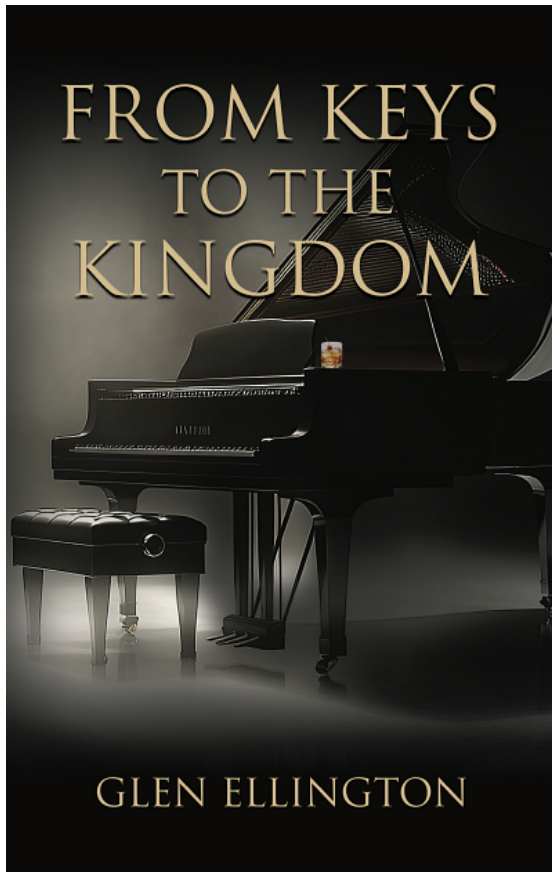
“I understand your reaction, but this is not really a request. My employer has made certain plans and he doesn’t like to be disappointed.”

“Did he also hire you because you didn’t understand the King’s English? Now blow!” Bridgette got up, left a fin on the table.

“I’ll see you around, Vic. Don’t take any wooden octaves. And don’t drink up the whole circle of fifths.”

And with that she sauntered out of the lounge and disappeared down the hallway.

“Keep ‘em comin’, Sanchez. I gotta drink some more quick.”



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