

EVIE WOODS

THE SUNDAY TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

The Violin
Maker's
Secret



THE VIOLIN MAKER'S SECRET

EVIE WOODS



HarperCollins*Publishers*

HarperCollins*Publishers* Ltd
1 London Bridge Street
London SE1 9GF
www.harpercollins.co.uk

First published in Great Britain by HarperCollins*Publishers* 2026

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A catalogue record of this book is available from the British Library

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Source ISBN: 9780008696603
Ebook Edition © February 2026 ISBN: 9780008696597
Version: 2025-11-19

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‘Without music, life would be a mistake.’

Friedrich Nietzsche



Prelude

On any given day, there are thousands of items slowly gathering dust in the Lost and Found of Heathrow Airport. A bag stuffed with £50,000 in five-pound notes, a diamond-encrusted Rolex watch, the keys to a Porsche, and two wedding dresses, to name but a few. The more bizarre include a set of false teeth, several crutches and an artificial skull. After ninety days, if the items are not reclaimed by their owners, they are auctioned for charity.

Unbeknownst to anyone, there is one very special box that holds an item with an ancient provenance. This object can change the fortunes of those who possess it – sometimes for good, sometimes for ill, but all on the whims of a young woman, who can read the hearts of those who possess her. The object is a violin, one of rare beauty and with a strange, intoxicating power. Awakening desire in the hearts of musicians for almost two hundred years, she is built of birdsong and promises, crafted from wood and bone.

Now, as if by chance, she has fallen into the hands of three unlikely guardians, hopelessly lost and yet connected by a melody only the violin can unlock. However, just as there are four strings on a violin, there is a

fourth stranger, waiting in the shadows for their chance to reclaim what once belonged to them. Bound as we all are by the same universal laws, and, just like the leaf that has fallen from the tree, there are some things you can never get back.

Chapter One



London, 2025

he day had started off so well. Another busy morning at Heathrow, with the sun shining high in the bluest of skies, criss-crossed by the white trails of jetliners carving their way through the atmosphere. Devlin worked as a baggage handler in Terminal 2. He was the right build, or so the interviewer had told him, and he took that as a positive. It was around the same time he had met Melissa, who didn't always see his build as a positive. She introduced him to juicing.

When most people thought about airports, they thought about leaving. But Devlin always thought about the people coming home, reuniting with loved ones and feeling that sense of familiarity. He liked working there. It was as far away as he could get from his old life. It was steady, reliable. Like the scheduled flights that arrived and departed on time (for the most part) his days had the kind of predictable structure that he could follow with his eyes closed.

And yet a confluence of two significant events was about to change the course of Devlin's life. Namely his girlfriend's birthday and a recent arrival at the Lost and Found department. Devlin had always thought that there was

something a bit lonely about the Lost and Found; a room for unclaimed treasures that washed up like flotsam from discarded lives. He could imagine the passengers setting off with their prized possessions and then for some reason, along the way, being parted from them. Were they forgotten or simply abandoned?

On his morning break with his co-worker, Karim, he spotted it. It looked rather inconspicuous in its black case, battered by age and rough handling. The shape was unmistakable however, the gentle curves betraying the contents.

‘That’s it, it’s perfect,’ he said, running his hands along the edges of the case.

‘Eh, am I missing something here? You planning on a career change, Devlin?’

‘Nah, mate, it’s for Mel.’

‘Does she ... play the fiddle? She doesn’t seem like the musical type.’ Karim’s wonderfully full eyebrows formed an apex shape, giving him a perplexed look.

‘It’s a violin, Karim.’

‘There’s a difference?’

Devlin wasn’t entirely sure what the difference was, so he said nothing.

‘I thought you got her some perfume from the duty-free?’

‘Yeah, but this is THE gift. She mentioned it years ago; how she always wanted to play the violin but her parents couldn’t afford the classes.’

Judging by the case, this one probably needed a bit of tender loving care, but if he could get it at the right price, he could take it to a repair shop. Or a music store. He really knew very little about violins.

After some lengthy negotiations with Pete, the guy in charge, who insisted that every item had to be kept for three months before it could be sold – ‘In case the owner comes back’, he’d explained – Devlin had bought himself a violin. And somehow, he just knew it would change everything.



The evening took a turn for the worse when the paramedics arrived. After that the guests had made a hasty escape from the party and Melissa opened a bottle of champagne that Devlin could not recall having bought. In fact, he couldn't remember ever having bought an ice bucket either, but there it sat, on the kitchen counter, floral bouquets reflecting in the gleam. Now *those* he could explain. The multicoloured arrangement that resembled cuttings from an exotic forest was from James at the hair salon. The plant was from her mother, Francesca, practical as ever. The dozen red roses were his own contribution. He had planned on getting thirty, one for every year of her life, but they were all under strict orders to avoid any reference to numerology.

'Do you think we should have brought your mum to the emergency room?'

'She'll be fine, you know what she's like,' Mel answered dismissively.

He did know. Melissa's mother was often prone to heart palpitations at moments of high drama. *Fit of passion*, her father would say, with a tone of admiration for his wife's Italian roots.

Melissa sat rigidly on the bespoke window seat she and Devlin had built together the summer before. She'd watched a couple build something similar on Instagram and insisted on filming it for her socials. In the end, she had to cut most of it out, as they'd spent the entire time swearing at each other. The whole apartment was an Instagrammer's dream: white walls, clean lines, and countless framed prints of botanical drawings and motivational quotes. Devlin was surrounded by other people's words: *Let your smile change the world, but don't let the world change your smile*. At least that made more sense than the nonsensical advice of *Follow Your Karma!* Surely it was karma's job to follow you?

He liked it, though, even if nothing in it belonged to him. The last of his possessions to go was the wicker coffee table he had brought from his old bedsit, replaced by a glass table that always threatened to bruise a leg if approached from the wrong angle. He missed the way his table tended to sag in the middle, as though the wicker was forming a protective hug around whatever items he put on it, including his feet.

Plus, second-hand stuff felt like less of a commitment. *Easy come, easy go*, it seemed to say. There was no point clinging on to things. Or people. Melissa called him a drifter and saw it as her personal project to de-drift him. Or un-drift him. They lived in the flat above Melissa's hair salon, Haute Couture. It had all been part of her master plan since she got her first summer job as a hairdresser. As Francesca's catchphrase went, 'People will always need their hair cut!' Based on this sound business advice, Melissa built up her empire. He admired her vision, her determination. Everyone did. Her life worked like a well-oiled machine and Devlin understood, not for the first time, that he was the spanner causing the whole thing to malfunction.

'I've never been so embarrassed,' she said, swallowing half a glass of champagne and filling it up again.

'What do you mean?' The violin lay quietly in its case on the gleaming coffee table. She hadn't looked at it since she'd opened it in front of all of their friends and family, letting out a high-pitched shriek.

'Are you really that clueless?'

There were tears now, which she immediately wiped away roughly with the back of her hand. Devlin ran his hands through his hair, as though he might find the answers there. He couldn't understand it; he thought he had outdone himself this time. Really listened to her. He stood halfway between the kitchen and the living room. He knew this because there were different coloured rugs marking out the areas.

'What's wrong, Mel?' He tried to strike a tone somewhere between concern and mystification.

'Look around you; look at what I'm wearing.'

Devlin blinked. He was never any good at cryptic clues. Just as he raised his shoulders helplessly, she got up and waved the back of her hand in his face.

'The manicure? Surely that gives it away.'

He noticed that one of her fingernails was a slightly different colour to the rest and had some sparkly stuff on it.

'Oh, for God's sake, Devlin, I thought you were going to propose. We all did. It's my thirtieth!' Her voice cracked when she said her age, the

disappointment plainly evident and the blame laid squarely at his feet.

‘Mel, I ... I...’ The words wouldn’t come. Because the truth was, he had known. Deep down. He had thought about it every year. Every Valentine’s Day, Christmas Day, birthday, equinox. As time marched on, the inevitability of it was beginning to choke him. He challenged himself to come up with increasingly thoughtful gifts, over-compensating for the lack of a marriage proposal. He spoke to Karim about it at work. Younger than Devlin, he had been married for five years already. And was a father to two kids.

‘Do you love her?’ Karim asked during one of their shifts, taking off his protective headphones.

‘Of course I love her!’ Devlin responded, throwing a bulky suitcase into a luggage bin.

‘Then what’s the problem? Afraid she’ll say no?’

That wasn’t it. He’d even got as far as the jewellers on the high street once, spoken to the assistant. But his mouth started to go dry and his heart suddenly started hammering, as if he’d been running a marathon. He began feeling dizzy, and when the assistant went to get him a glass of water, he ran out of the shop. It took a good ten minutes for his breathing to return to normal. He wanted to move on with his life. He wanted to settle down; he wanted stability. He wanted kids and he knew that Mel wanted them sooner rather than later. And he wanted to be the one to give her all of that. Yet when the moment came, he bottled it.

His awareness returned to the present, where Melissa was now shouting and gesticulating. Phrases like ‘*mortified*’, ‘*marriage material*’ and ‘*not getting any younger*’ snagged on his conscience. It was all his fault. He had caused all the upset; or at least that’s what she was telling him, and he had no defence. How many more times would they go through this routine before she dumped him for good and found someone who *would* marry her? Without breaking her flow, she reached down and took the violin out of its case, shoving it into Devlin’s arms.

‘I don’t even play the bloody violin!’

He held the instrument tentatively, with arms outstretched. For reasons he couldn’t quite explain, it felt like he was holding a living, breathing thing. He had only peeked at it earlier, making sure it was actually a violin he had

bought and not an empty case. But now he brought it closer to him. It had the deepest amber hue that looked as though you could dive into it and lose yourself forever. It seemed both powerful and yet strangely fragile. Without thinking, he held it protectively to his chest. A peculiar feeling rose from within him, a strange sense of certainty. With this, his mind began to clear. His shoulders straightened. Suddenly, he found the words.

‘Last Christmas, we had coffee in that place in Covent Garden, and there were those buskers, remember? And you said you’d always wanted to play the violin.’

Silence descended. A brief respite.

‘What?’ she asked, cocking her head to the side.

Just as Devlin was about to add more details to the memory – it had been snowing, it was the day before Christmas Eve, they’d gone in to see the lights – Melissa threw her hands up and left the room. The echo of the front door banging confirmed that she had gone out.

Devlin sat down on the sofa and held the violin in front of him, turning it this way and that. It had been a long time since he’d held a musical instrument in his hands. Nine years, four months and seven days, to be precise. It was a day in his life that he couldn’t permit himself to think about. Yet now, he felt oddly calm. Relaxed even. The opposite to how he should have felt, given the fact that Mel had just walked out on him.

He let his thumb pluck the first string. The sound it made was unexpectedly rich and golden. It resonated around him like a forcefield. He plucked it again and without thinking, he hummed the note. G. The vibration of sound in his throat was both familiar and strange, opening up a chasm inside of him. The before and after; two parts of him that never communicated. Until now. It felt as though, after years of travelling further and further away from himself and everything he knew to be true, he was finally back home. A place that had been inside of him all along.

Chapter Two



Devlin had been on his coffee break when he spotted the headline that would change everything. Up to that point, he'd been feeling more sure of himself than he had done in years. It was as though something had unlocked within him, freeing him from an invisible cage. Or like those fairy tales that his mother used to read to him as a child, where a curse had been lifted from the land. And all since that night he had held the violin in his hands. Superstition ran through his Irish DNA as surely as the blood through his veins, but even he wasn't sure how possessing the violin could alter his very being.

Devlin had always felt jinxed. Even his family name, Devlin, translated from old Irish as 'unlucky'. He was nevertheless reluctant to use his first name, which was also the result of his mother's sense of unfairness.

'Matthew, Mark and John, they're the trendy apostles. What about poor Luke?' she oft lamented. For a brief moment at school, he'd earned himself the nickname 'Skywalker', but that all changed on the day a new kid arrived and challenged him to a fight in the yard after school. Devlin hadn't a clue how to fight and, in a sort of detached way, assumed the skills would just come to him when the moment required. They didn't. And just like that, he was cast out of the group. That's when he turned to music. Playing the guitar

had been his saviour, until the day it all stopped. But he didn't like to think about that.

Yet the moment that he took the violin case in his arms, everything felt different. He couldn't explain it exactly, only that his life story, the one where he was jinxed and unlucky, didn't feel like his story anymore. The bad luck felt like the early chapters in a very long book that now held the possibility to become any kind of story he could dream of. Instead of knowing every word on every page by heart until infinity, the paper was suddenly blank and waiting to be filled. The feeling was that of pure weightlessness. And although he couldn't and wouldn't explain it, he could trace it all back to the day he bought the violin. Now all of that felt under threat.

Someone had left a newspaper in the canteen and he picked it up while the man behind the counter made a rather elaborate production of making Devlin's coffee. He stuffed the first of his two doughnuts into his mouth while waiting to pay and flicked idly through the pages, when a headline almost jumped out at him:

PRICELESS VIOLIN STOLEN

He paused mid-bite, causing the jam to squirt out and fall splat onto the article. Grabbing serviettes from the silver container, he tried to wipe rather than smear the mess, which now resembled a bloodstain. An unfortunate omen, to be sure. He threw a tenner at the man who had eventually returned with his coffee and found a table in the corner. He scanned the canteen, suddenly paranoid. Satisfied he couldn't detect any undercover operatives making themselves known, he returned to the newspaper.

The highly valuable violin was stolen from Christie's the evening before it was due to go up for auction. 'These were no opportunists,' said the director of Christie's South Kensington office. 'Our security systems are top calibre, and this theft was planned down to the minutiae. The violin was in our pre-sale storage facility at Park

Royal. We are cooperating with the police's investigation and that is all I can say for the moment.

Devlin felt his stomach swell and clamped his hand over his mouth. He instantly broke out into a sweat that felt both hot and cold. He knew from the moment he saw the photo of the violin below the article that he was now in possession of a very valuable and stolen instrument. He read on.

Two years after Margot Clement's death, a rare violin was discovered at her 42-room apartment on Fifth Avenue. Possibly dating back to the 1700s, the violin's provenance is still something of a mystery. It was expected to fetch upwards of £10 million at auction.

Miss Clement was the daughter of mining magnate, William Andrew Clement, one of America's richest men. She died aged 104, leaving a \$300 million fortune.

Devlin looked up and tried to ground himself back into reality. He watched other people sitting at the tables opposite, pouring milk into their tea, buttering scones, chatting on their phones. None of it seemed real, as though he were watching a film. Or maybe it was him – *he* didn't feel real anymore. His mouth was so dry he almost scalded his tongue when he downed his cup of coffee. He pushed back his chair with force and it screeched loudly. A few people looked up, then returned to whatever they were doing. Devlin suddenly realised that he had two choices – return the violin and risk getting caught up in a police investigation, or go on the run and hope that whoever stole the violin in the first place would never find him. The obvious choice was the former. It was the right thing to do. Yet, somewhere deep inside, he knew that meant losing the violin and he wasn't ready to give it back. Not just yet.