

Meet **The Annas**

A musical novel by Robert Dunn

Chapter One **The Ring in the Rubble**

THE NOTE WAS PASSED to me by Punky Solomon himself—a surprise because here I was in this New York courtroom suing him—and its thought-you-should-know message was simple: Our old recording studio in L.A., SilverTone, was being torn down to make way for a minimall.

The note was an unexpected kindness, and I gave him a nod of thanks while we sat there in the courtroom. I spent the rest of the day fidgeting as my lawyer, Sandy Kovall, worked through preliminary motions, but by the time Judge MacIntire finally slapped down her gavel, telling us to be back in court promptly at nine Monday morning, I knew what I had to do. I dashed out into the rainy March afternoon and did my damndest to get a cab. Sheets of water crested up my legs as I waved my new black umbrella. Finally, one pulled up, and I told the driver: Two stops, Midtown, the Edison Hotel; then Kennedy.

That morning, without any real reason, I'd made sure I had a few things in a small suitcase; my instincts were working again—they'd mysteriously fired up, like a long-damped coal burner, once I'd committed to my lawsuit—and I guess I wanted to be ready for whatever the weekend might bring. I never expected I'd be heading to L.A., though. Fortunately, I was able to get an 8:10 p.m. flight, which would get in about eleven their time. I'd worry about a room when I got there.

All this was a rush, and my head, as it had been for weeks now, was spinning uproariously between the present and the past. It would be an exaggeration to say that sometimes I didn't know when or where I was, but there had been moments when the long dammed-up memories—of New York in the early '60s, then the move to L.A., and all the while of the

Annas, the bouffanted, exotic-eyed, hip-swaying girl group I'd written hit songs for, tunes like *He's So Bad (I Love Him!)*, *Lost Memories*, and the one at the center of my life now, *Love Will Cut You Like a Knife*—sent my head whirling into places I hadn't let it for decades.

SilverTone Studio was my destination. Once I got to L.A. and rented a car, I took the 401 north, then got off at Sunset and turned east toward Hollywood. I hadn't been back to Los Angeles in over 30 years, living my quiet music teacher's life in Scottsdale, Arizona; and even though it was after midnight here, and for me on East Coast time, after 3 a.m., I was way too jazzed to stop.

A few miles along Sunset the curvy, tree-lined road straightened and I hit the Strip, still full of glitzy boutiques and record company offices, where in my day Dean Martin's rat-pack boîte, Dino's, held sway. SilverTone Studio was nowhere near them. It was on the flats east of Highland, a low-slung, nondescript building between a car wash and a Spiffies coffee shop on the nonglamorous part of Sunset. But I always liked this beat-down Hollywood better than sleek West L.A.; it had always felt like home. I used to joke to Punky about how I could drive from my apartment in the Hollywood Hills down here blindfolded, every turn of the wheel so deeply imbedded in my shoulders.

Now it all looked quite different to me. This section of Sunset was being built up, and there were chain-link fences around construction areas everywhere. I kept my eyes open for the Spiffies that had been our hangout, but I never saw it. Likewise the car wash. Then I'd driven so far I was certain I'd passed SilverTone.

I could see it so well, though. The studio door was scuffed, battered wood adorned with brass numbers for the five-digit address (two of them missing). Inside was a waiting room, of peeling-up linoleum, brown Naugahyde chairs, and rusty floor-standing chrome ashtrays, that was even smaller and more austere than the one next door at the car wash. No one would ever be in there waiting, though. Then through another plain door and . . . you were into the womb itself.

As I turned the rental car around, it all came rushing back to me, everything about that room where we'd recorded thirty-some years back. The high sky of stippled white acoustic tile, the gray baffles crashing like waves, the wobbly little wooden chairs the players would squinch into, the boom mikes swaying like lost cranes, the control room (where I'd always be) lined with polished aluminum-plated outboard equipment and the huge Neve console—grander and more complex than an airplane cockpit. Rich Armour would be in their twiddling dials; Punky, too, feet up on the console, his blond goatee tilted onto his cupped hands, his

preternatural blue eyes glowing, a thin black Nat Sherman cigarette skirling smoke . . . all ears. It was one stroke of Punky Solomon's genius that he could suck out notes from inside other notes, hear overtones that dogs would miss, feel chord changes bars ahead just like a chess grandmaster; and there he'd be, leaping out into the studio to move a mike just so, reaching over the bass player Karen DeWilder's shoulder to show her a double-stop run he wanted leading to the bridge, whistling a riff to the horn guys, Jimmy, Kirk, and Steve, or walking straight to the singer on the session and going up on the tiptoes of his Italian Beatle boots, tearing into their face like a drill sergeant on Parris Island. Barney Fredericks the guitar player called Punky Napoleon behind his back, and one day Punky heard him. From then on, when things in a session were going well, we'd see him standing there, listening, *listening*, with the fourth button on his handmade pirate shirt undone and his right hand slipped inside; and none of us could ever tell if he was doing it as a quiet goof on us or out of his pure subconscious.

In truth, though I worked with Punky Solomon for five years, our work starting in New York City, just up around the Brill Building, at 1650 Broadway, or in the rat- and prostitute-infested firetrap in the West 30s in which Punky had his first studio built for him, the true music we made was right here in Hollywood. When he called me out to L.A. to do that final Annas session, Anna Dubower's hair was down from its famous teased-high beehive and the girl-group sound was close to dead. But only close to. . . . *Love Will Cut You Like a Knife* was going to keep it all going, be the greatest song ever, Punky's greatest production (that was why Punky and that gangster Manny Green slipped their names onto it). As Punky put it at the time, "You and Princess wrote me a song, Dink, that's gonna kick open the gates of fuckin' heaven."

And it did. Punky pulled out everything he had, celestas, trumpets, French horns, cymbals, and tympanis all churning and bucking like God's own tempest, and the Annas' voices cracking through the sonic storm like lightning flashes. It was rock 'n' roll first, but it was the *Ride of the Valkeries*, too. When the tune was finally mixed and Punky had airmailed me the first pressing in New York, I was blown away. Punky had taken our simple piano-voice demo and blown it up till it rang like Yahweh's cymbals at the end of the world. And yet, there was no question it was Princess's and my song, no one else's—and I'm going to prove that if it takes the last damn breath I have.

There it was. I was sure of it. I pulled up across Sunset in the rental car and fixed the location from the air pumps that had been at the car wash, the only part of the block not yet

knocked flat. All I could see were heaps of broken concrete, steel cable, and—now that I could focus better—chunks of what had been the persimmon-red tile roof on SilverTone Studio.

I wasn't there the month they recorded *Knife*. I was back in New York. (Punky's and Manny's lawyers were planning to use that against me now, though Manny evidently wasn't at the session either.) But my heart was in that studio. And more. My grandmother's ring.

I was moving too fast to bother to lock the car, and I jaywalked across Sunset. There was a chain-link fence around the whole block, and it was topped with razor wire that caught the light from two floodlights at the corners of the lot. Nobody was inside, as far as I could see. Just the rubble.

It was the ring I wanted; for 30 years it had been the ring that I've wanted. It was Grandma Helene's. Nothing fancy, just a plain gold band with a small but elegant diamond. A Tiffany setting. Her engagement ring.

I looked for a way into the sealed-off construction site. On the side street off Sunset was a wide gate, locked with two padlocks, and when I stood in front of it, I could see the razor wire had been pushed aside atop the gate. Not very far, but there was a good two-and-a-half-foot opening.

The jump down to the other side jarred my old knees, but I landed clean. The two bright floodlights beamed down, and cars were running steadily along Sunset, but nobody seemed to have seen me vault the fence, or cared. I crouched low though, just in case.

Around me were waves of detritus, seeming to buck and toss under the floodlights. I gingerly walked over a large concrete wall, now splayed on its side, only to find more blocks of concrete everywhere I looked. Did I have a hope in hell of finding in this sea of rubble the ring I gave to Anna Dubower?

Can I stop here and tell you a little about Anna? For those of you new to her legend?

Anna Dubower was a true soul of America. Her father, jazz musician Gerry Dubower, was descended from fighters in the American Revolution; on her mother's side she was a mix of black, Native American, and Cuban. She'd spent her first six years in Greenwich, Connecticut; then, after her father's death, moved with her mother and sister to East Harlem. (Quite a tumble, and far from the middle-class Kew Gardens where Princess and I grew up.)

From 1963 to 1965 the Annas (Anna singing lead, with her sister, Trudy, and cousin Doris (Sweet) McClain on backup) had five Top 5 records, two going all the way to Number 1. When the group toured England in the fall of 1963, they were, next to the Beach Boys, the

biggest act going. That year, right before the British Invasion, Anna, with her long legs and wild hairdo, found herself the toast of young, mod England. On that trip Anna slept with John Lennon (and fended off Mick Jagger).

Think about it: This fact is far more significant than wagging tongues now would have it. The Beatles and the Stones were beginning their magnificent alchemy, turning scratchy, imported American rhythm and blues records into performances so vital kids around the world would explode in hysterics before them. The two groups were making records so intense that even now, over thirty years on, you put them on the CD player and the room jumps. They were prescient, too. While we in America were listening to white-bread music (and God knows, Princess and I wrote our share of pop drivel), the young Brits were going straight to the source: Muddy Waters, Chuck Berry, Arthur Alexander, Smokey Robinson, Little Richard. They were searching for the soul of American music, and sure Anna Dubower was an exotic, mixed-race hottie, and sure she was already a star whose records John, Paul, George, and Ringo covered in north-of-England tours, but both John and Mick went at her, I'm certain, because for them she was it: the haunted-eyed, raven-haired incarnation of the true church of rock 'n' roll.

Look at her pictures. They're easy to find on the Web, in the plentiful tribute sites; or perhaps you still have the famous poster up on your wall: Anna in that slinky gold-sequin dress, with her wild bangs, dangly blue earrings, with her cat's eyes and pouty pink lips, radiating the absolute certainty that she can see just what you want—and show you how to get it.

Millions loved her back then. Many cherish her memory even now. I . . . I know I still do.

Of course it's the image, the sound, the transporting magic that the Annas still have—in the harmonies of their voices, the brazenness of their performances, the way Anna *devoured* the air around her—that is timeless. And certainly anything I felt then or feel now is caught up in that; how could it not be?

But yet, of all of us who worshipped this glorious, distant host of the true church, I'm the only one I know who took it further; who loved the real Anna Dubower, the *natural* woman, as our pal Carole put it so well. Even now I can remember her warm, swirling scent; that heady mix of hibiscus, rose, and tangerine off her pale brown skin. Even now I close my eyes and feel her touch along my arm, my hand, my fingers. . . .

And though for years I hung back, writing their songs, doing my job, revering her from afar, on one star-bright night, with Anna trembling before me on that New York rooftop, I was the one who stepped up and did what was right: I fell to my knees and gave her my grand-

mother's ring, with nothing but love and devotion—and as I tell myself to this day, a true vision of a life together—in my heart.

Anna's answer? She kissed me and loved me but needed time to think. So much was going on. A week after my proposal, she flew back to the Coast for the final *Knife* sessions, promising me an answer when the recording was done.

I never got one. From what I'd heard, when Anna arrived, she'd shown off the ring with pride and enthusiasm. Then something happened; I've never known what. By the end of the *Knife* sessions Anna had left the ring behind on a shelf in SilverTone's small, shared bathroom.

Rather than a cleaning lady take it away, Punky took the ring and put it in a box in the control room. Later I heard he'd been saving it for me, next time I was in L.A. That's where it stayed, I presume. Three months later Anna Dubower was dead. And when I was back that one last time, for her funeral, the ring, and all the furious promise it held, was more than I could deal with.

I was lifting chunks of concrete now, looking for a spectral glint. Did I have any real hope? I found broken reels of Ampeg tape, found whole sections of the pin-point-pierced acoustic tile. A cracked plastic knob caught my eye: This could be where the control room had been.

I started digging at the concrete. I caught the side of my hand on a particularly jagged piece, and blood flowed. Still I pushed on. O.K., I knew it was probably futile—maybe the ring wasn't even there, and if it was, how could I find it?—but I at least wanted, after all these years, to give it my all.

I should have come for the ring earlier, but I couldn't. I couldn't easily face what happened in the three months after the *Knife* sessions. I was devastated by Anna's death, and all the death around me, and that, coupled with the resounding failure of *Love Will Cut You Like a Knife*, spun my life like a diabolical merry-go-round. I quit New York, left the music biz, wandered for a while, then ended up in Scottsdale, where I've lived all the years since, teaching music at Porter Graves High School and carrying on the on-again, off-again, not quite ever settled relationship with my wonderfully patient fellow teacher, Misty Warren.

I knew I wasn't going to find the ring, but I kept looking . . . looked until I did find half a 45 record, black wax with Punky's distinctive San Remo label. I picked it up carefully and peered closely at it under the yellow sulfur lights. When I made out the few telling words, LOVE WILL CUT YOU, my heart jumped.

God, how I'd loved this record. Even if the session meant I'd lost Anna for myself, at least

there was this disc. The record should have stormed to the top of the charts; should have been the Annas' third Number 1. Two years earlier it would have. (And now, thirty years later, in a resurrection unimaginable at the time, *Knife* was all over commercials and movie soundtracks.) But by 1966 everything had changed. Irony of ironies: The Beatles and the Stones, our British acolytes, had driven our own music from the charts—the music they'd worshipped, loved, and emulated.

I turned the record so its flat-black wax caught the light. This was it: The first official pressing of my last produced song. I had the left side of the record, and there was the blue and yellow San Remo label, with the dainty drawing of the lighthouse and its thin-line beams of light shining forth. I also made out the record's timing: a crazy-long for 1966 three minutes, fifty-two seconds. (And even that was a lie by Punky of about forty seconds.) My gaze traced the fine grooves, tripped over the cracked edge. Broken, never playable again. I held the thin plastic for another minute as my head lightened and a swirling roar crashed through my thoughts, then I let it fall back into that wasted concrete sea.