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The Lilac Cube

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THE LILAC CUBE

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
in
The Department of Drama and Communications

by

Sean Murray

B.A. Mount Allison University, 1996

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CHAPTER 1

When the judge asked me who I wanted to live with, I didn't hesitate. It didn't matter that both of my parents were sitting in the next room, or that I knew whom my brother Travis would probably choose, or even that I was nine years old. It was Dad who had taken me all over the Maritimes in his giant black Kenworth. It was Dad who had paid for my piano lessons for the last two years, always encouraging me but never pushing me. And it was Dad who had held me in his arms and told me in a broken voice, tears standing in his eyes, that he and my mother were not going to be living in the same house anymore. Dad was a big man, but at that moment he looked as if he were going to collapse right there in front of me, all six feet and five inches of him, and just decide never to get up again.

I want to live with Dad, I said, almost as soon as the judge finished speaking. She looked a little like the housekeeper in the Scrooge movie that I watched every Christmas Day. Nicer dressed, of course, and without the Cockney accent. She seemed a little surprised at how easily I'd come to my decision, but she didn't question me about it. She just gave my shoulder a squeeze and walked me back out of her office and into the antechamber, where the rest of my family was waiting.

Somehow I felt I had to prepare myself for a violent flood of emotions as the judge sat me down and told me to wait with my brother while she spoke to my parents. I waited to be slammed like a stream of water from a fire hose, but nothing came. I watched my brother, but he had turned far inward, looking down at his folded arms, his thumbs working furiously at the sleeve of his gray Sunday shirt. I knew enough not to expect him to show much anyway. He was seven years older than me, a sophomore in high school, and he was never around on weekends anymore. I only saw him at dinnertime lately, and he was usually more concerned with wolfing down his food so he could meet his friends at the mall than in talking to a ten-year-old girl.

Travis and I sat at the table in the judge's antechamber, each of us lost in our own thoughts, neither willing nor able to break the silence between us. At that moment, I hated everyone: my parents for divorcing, the judge who'd forced me to choose between them, myself for choosing, my brother for not caring. I wanted to go live with my grandparents in Annapolis Valley, where I could wake up in a huge brass bed to the smell of apple pie. I wanted to take back my choice, maybe even rewind my life back to the moment when Dad first knelt down and caressed my cheek with his huge, rough hand. I closed my eyes and replayed the moment in my mind: him kneeling down before me, hand touching my face, but then, instead of giving me the news, reaching into his pocket and pulling out a Hershey's Kiss. Or maybe a dollar coin.

put a lump in my throat. I realized I hadn't given her a single thought since I spoke to the judge. I knew I'd broken her heart, as completely as if I'd stolen her wedding ring and sold it for drugs. The look on her face was the look of someone who was watching a tidal wave approaching and knew there was nowhere to run. The black enormity of that thought caused her face to waver and blur as tears I hadn't realized I'd been holding back filmed my eyes. As she hugged me, I let them spill, wanting to confess how quickly I'd made my choice, but I couldn't speak. She quieted me tenderly, whispering how much she loved me in my ear, telling me not to cry, not to feel bad, that she would never leave me. I'd never felt closer to my mother than at that moment.

A month before my parents got their divorce, Dad sold the beloved Kenworth W900 he bought in 1979 and finished paying for seven years later, and took a job as a dispatcher with the company he drove for. I guess he wanted to show my mother how committed he was to saving his marriage. It was sad. At nine years old, I'd seen most of the Maritimes and Newfoundland, gone all the way out to Alberta and down the Eastern seaboard, knew most of the waitresses in the truck stops along the way, even tinkered a little bit under the semi's huge hood (okay, handed Dad his wrenches). As much as Dad wanted me to go to university and become someone important, I knew that a tiny part of him, buried deep and out of sight, was tickled by the idea of me following in his footsteps and becoming a trucker, maybe even driving the same black Kenworth. And now, all that was left was a dried-up oil slick in the gravel driveway of our bungalow.

So, I stayed with Dad while Travis wound up out at my grandparents' apple orchard in the Annapolis Valley. My mother had grown up there, and had decided that the best thing for her was to go back home and try to get a fresh start. Travis would have to start at a new high school, but my mother compensated for this by giving him permission to drive her car to school. This smoothed things over, and by the time he and my mother were packed and ready to go, Travis almost jumped into the driver's seat, eager to get onto the highway before the sky grew dark.

Walking back inside after watching my mother's taillights disappear into the dusk, I was amazed at how completely she'd erased herself from the house. She'd packed up most of the glass ornaments that she loved so much, emptied out the closets (most of the clothes were hers anyway), and taken down almost all of the family photographs from the walls. She and Dad had argued softly about those pictures for most of the previous night as I listened through the door of my bedroom.

My brother's room was even more barren. He'd stripped his bed of its blankets and pillows, and he and Dad just loaded the dresser, clothes and all, into the U-Haul trailer. The only trace that he'd left were the tape scars on the wall from all of his AC/DC and Metallica posters. I could only look into that room, with its bare mattresses and pillows for a couple of seconds before slamming the door and running back into my own room to bury my face deep in my collection of stuffed rabbits. As I fought back tears, I could hear the floorboards creaking under Dad's weight. There was a knock on the door. Hey, sugar. What do you want for dinner?

The pizza came at 7:00, the biggest pie they had, and the two of us ate more than half of it in total silence. It was a strange meal, made stranger by the fact that Dad forgot to turn the kitchen light on.

Dad had quit drinking about three years ago, but that first night alone, he stayed in the living room, drinking glass after glass of whiskey and strumming his guitar. He wasn't very good at it, and he mostly played trucking songs by Red Sovine, Porter Wagoner, and Hank Williams, but I stayed up with him to sing along until after midnight. We sat together in the darkness of the living room, me wailing along on top of his slurred baritone, until he finally closed his eyes, went silent, and let the guitar slide down from his lap to the floor. I picked it up, tried to strum it, but my fingers weren't strong enough. I ventured a tiny sip from his unfinished glass, sputtered at the hot bitterness of the whiskey, then decided to haul myself off to bed, leaving Dad alone in his favorite armchair.

Dad never once stopped paying for my piano lessons, or gave up his dream of one day seeing me perform a solo at Carnegie Hall, probably sitting at my custom Steinway between a full orchestra and a packed house. I had been taking lessons since I was eight, going over to Dr. McCaskill's music store every day after school. Dr. McCaskill (Dr. M to me) ran the biggest music store in Truro and he gave cheap lessons to kids from all over town, most of them high schoolers in the CEC band.

Dr. M was a small man, an ex-professor from the music department of Dalhousie University. He wore bifocals and had a tidy little wrinkle-lined smile when he talked with my parents, anyway. With me, he could be an unmovable, meanspirited villain, forcing me to recite my scales over and over for an entire session, or getting me to play the same piece at different tempos until I went home with the eight-year-old pianist's version of carpal tunnel syndrome. But whenever he dropped by the bungalow to make sure my parents planned to continue my lessons, he was the picture of easy dignity and literate charm, sipping black coffee from my mother's best china as if he were a visiting diplomat. Although both of my parents considered it their duty to keep me at my lessons, Dad was the one to actually make sacrifices in his own recreation budget to accommodate them. Summer after summer, he was forced to give up his precious membership at the Truro Golf Club so I could practice six days a week instead of four. I hated him for it.

But, by the time I was eleven, I was starting to see the results, and actually began to think that being a concert pianist might not be a lifetime of torture. I started to enjoy wearing my cute little frocks to Dr. M's store, showing off a bit to the other parents who were dropping their own kids off or picking them up. It helped that for those two years I was the youngest kid studying with Dr. M, and I became almost his prized student during that time. Not really because I was more talented than any of the others, but because I was so young, Dr. M preferred to spend a lot more time working with me one-on-one.

By the time my parents got divorced, prices had gone up, and my lessons were costing the family \$10 an hour, a lot more than we could really afford at the time. Dad's golf club

was just hoarding the money for beer), Dad's motorcycle fund, and our Sunday night dinners at the China Rose Café.

After the divorce, money got even tighter. Dad's new job as a dispatcher gave him a raise, but there was a lot less overtime, and the money he'd made from the sale of his truck had gone straight into Travis's and my college fund. He didn't make much money on the sale—the truck was fifteen years old and not exactly in peak condition. Of course, I understand these things better now than when I did when I was ten. So, looking back, Dad's reaction to the demand I made one winter afternoon, as we drove back home in the middle of the first snowstorm of the season, bordered on heroic aplomb.

Dr. M had gotten after me for not concentrating, but I just couldn't help myself. It had been snowing steadily all afternoon, and someone was playing the drums down the hall. Between the falling snow out the window and the sound of cymbals crashing, I got too distracted to continue. Several times I just stopped to listen to the drummer or run over to the window, knowing that Dr. M was getting redder in the face, until finally he realized what I was listening to and laughed uproariously. So, you want to play the drums, eh? Trust me, that instrument is not for you, Sonya. Stick with what you're good at, right here. He looked back over his shoulder at the door and chuckled again, as if the thought of a little girl like me trying to play the drums was just too funny to hold in.

When Dad came to pick me up, I was furious. I yanked open the door of the red Oldsmobile, slammed my book bag into the back seat, and flopped into the car, in as much of a huff as I could sustain, until Dad finished talking with Dr. M and got in with me. His whole side of the car sank a little as he settled down behind the wheel.

I was slouched down in the passenger seat, arms crossed tightly against my bulky winter coat, giving the frosty windshield my best glower. You're not your chipper little self today, sugar, he said in a casual voice, pulling out into the street. I looked over at him. His head brushed the ceiling, and even though the front seat was pushed back as far as it could go, his knees were still bent at an awkward angle on either side of the steering column. Flakes of snow still hung from his bushy mustache, where they had gathered as he talked with Dr. M while I was putting on my boots.

I turned back to the windshield. We were driving along Prince St. now, and the rows of clothing and furniture stores looked like derelict buildings through the falling snow. I want to play drums.

Hmm, Dad said, without elaborating. Neither of us spoke for nearly a minute. Dad turned right at the town library, and pulled the car up to the curb.

What are we doing? I asked.

We're going to have dinner at Murphy's, Dad replied, turning off the ignition and opening the door. Make sure you lock your side. He got out, dug in his pockets for some coins, and fed them to the parking meter.

I followed him out, and the two of us walked side-by-side, trudging through the snow. It was coming down heavily now, and few were out in it. The forecast had said we would be

only to pick up some groceries at Cavanagh's or just grabbing a sandwich at the Mini Mart and maybe a six-pack at the Liquor Commission.

Murphy's was nearly deserted. We were the only customers apart from an elderly couple at the table in the corner. The old man was eating a bowl of chicken soup, spilling half of each spoonful on the napkin tucked into his plaid shirt. I watched his trembling hands navigate the spoon while Dad ordered a hot turkey sandwich and a bottle of Schooner. "What do you want?" he asked me.

"A hot fudge sundae," I said. "I'd gotten a little too used to getting what I asked for when it came to food, so I thought I'd see how far I could go."

Dad sighed. "Get her a bowl of chicken soup with lots of crackers," he told the waitress, who dutifully scribbled the order down, glancing at me through her oversized glasses. Judging from their thickness, I figured I must look about ten feet tall and weigh about thirty pounds.

The big front windows of the restaurant looked out onto the sidewalk, and I busied myself in watching the street gradually fill up with snow. Suddenly, I couldn't wait to get home so I could get out in it, maybe see if my best friend Susan and her brother Tyler were around, so we could have a snowball fight. Dad sipped his beer and watched me attentively for a while, sometimes looking like he was about to say something, then retreating back to the bottle as he tipped it up to his lips. He finished the first one before our food arrived, and ordered another. When he'd drained his third bottle (and I'd gotten the hot fudge sundae I'd wanted but couldn't finish) and set it carefully down, placing it directly back into the ring of condensation it had left on the tablecloth, he pulled out his wallet and examined it. I couldn't see how much money there was, but I could tell by the way he closed his eyes and put it back in his pocket, that it wasn't much. I wondered if there was enough to pay for dinner and instantly regretted ordering the sundae, which I'd stirred into a puddle the color of a spring mudslide.

"So now you want to play the drums," Dad said. "Well, I talked with Dr. McCaskill about that. He said you'd been listening to somebody playing drums in there while you were supposed to be practicing. He nodded and turned to look out the window at the brewing snowstorm. The buildings had gone from looking abandoned to almost forbidding. The private clinic across the street from Murphy's had almost vanished into the surrounding whiteness. A few cars pushed their way along, their headlights looking like desperate yellow eyes in the gathering gloom."

I hadn't replied to what Dad was saying, but just kept listlessly stirring my ice cream with my long-handled spoon, my cheek propped up by my palm. "He doesn't think it's a good idea. If you keep getting distracted by every little thing that catches your eye, you're never going to learn to concentrate on anything. Why don't you just stick with your piano lessons?"

"Oh man!" I groaned, rubbing my face with my hand. "That'll kill me!"

"Look, I don't want to argue with the guy. Don't you think we should listen to him? He is the teacher, after all & His voice trailed off as the waitress stopped at our table long enough to place the check at his elbow. "Well, if you really want to play drums, you're gonna have to prove yourself. We can cut the piano lessons back to six hours, but no more than that. If you

The conversation didn't interest me anymore. What I really wanted was to get out in the snow before it got too dark to see. Okay, I said, not sure what I was agreeing to. Can we go home now?

Dad dug out his wallet again and picked up the check. Our waitress was pulling out a mop and bucket from the broom closet, figuring that we were the last customers she'd get that night. When we approached the register, she wiped her hands off on her faded green apron and greeted us with a tired smile. The black nametag pinned to her blouse read Sally. There was a white smiley face beside the letters, and underneath the name tag, the girl's blouse looked old and threadbare. I wondered where Sally would go after she closed down the restaurant, and felt sad all of a sudden. Dad took his change. As we passed our table, he leaned down and put a loonie beside his last empty beer bottle. He moved as if to leave, then stopped, took out another loonie and put it down beside the first one. Good night, now, he said to Sally, giving her a warm smile. And you better get home quick before those roads are packed solid.

My boyfriend should be here any minute now, she replied, following us over to the door so she could turn the OPEN sign around. The boss told me to close up early. My lucky night, eh? She held the door open for us, then started to close it as we stepped out onto the sidewalk. You got a real adorable little girl there, Sally said from behind the door. I felt a blush of pride and grabbed Dad's gloved hand with my mittened one. You take care, okay?

We bundled ourselves up to ward off the cold long enough to get into the car. In the time we'd spent eating dinner, the temperature had dropped noticeably. It had to be about ten below now, and the snow had turned into biting sleet. Dad crawled down to the main intersection, where three different gas stations competed for most of the downtown business. We crossed the Bible Hill bridge, passed the King Lam restaurant and Tim Horton's donut shop, passed Cavanagh's, as the town gradually gave way to the marshlands that surrounded it. The old Victorian houses, separated by convenience stores, thinned out, becoming ghostlier in the storm, until the only part of the long U-Lock storage facility I could see were the gray doors.

Out here, the landscape was barren and mostly treeless, Highway 311 laying a straight strip of pavement through the subdivisions of North River, where we lived. From the nondescript little turnoff from the road into town, Highway 311 became the Sunrise Trail, which ran through Nutby, Earltown, Tatamagouche, Wallace, and Pugwash, and on from there into New Brunswick, for about two hundred kilometers. I knew the road so well I could have closed my eyes and said the names of each family home as we passed them. North River was a pretty small community after all, not even a village really, but a collection of bungalows and split-levels along little dirt streets with names like Glendale Drive, Dickson Drive, Saxby Lane, with Penny's Mountain in the middle of everything. It was only a hill, but it was gorgeous on winter nights like this, when the four of us used to go sledding or snowmobiling along its back trails.

Dad finally got us home, although there were a couple of scary moments when I could feel the tires stutter a bit on the highway's slick surface. We didn't meet a single car coming in the other direction, which meant Dad was able to straddle the center of the road so we didn't slide off into the ditch, but when we pulled into the circular driveway, it was so dark out that

So, little drummer girl, Dad said once we turned on all the lights in the house. How about a game of crib before you start your homework?

Sure, I said, wrestling out of my coat and boots.

Get into your pajamas, and I'll put the kettle on.

We each won one game and drank a cup of tea (lots of honey for me), before I went to my bedroom to work on math problems and listen to the Top 9 at 9 on my little transistor radio. When I finished, I listened to Dad moving around in the kitchen. The house was a tight fit for him, and he padded through it like a bear, reflexively hunching his shoulders just the tiniest bit so he wouldn't hit the crown of his on the top of the doorframe. Now he was opening and closing cupboards, and just before I drifted off to sleep, I could hear the sound of the lip of a bottle touching the rim of a glass, followed by a familiar splash.

I never thought that there was anything strange about a girl wanting to play the drums. To be honest, the main reason I decided to learn was because it looked so easy. There were no chords to master, no majors, no minors, no scales, melodies, or even notes. It was all rhythm and tempo, primal and intense. Drums looked like something I could have some real fun playing, whether or not I got very good at them. On the day of my first drum lesson, I was so excited I practically mowed over Dr. M when I raced into the store, throwing off my snow-littered coat and bursting into the practice room at the end of the hall, where the drum kit stood waiting.

I should have known it wouldn't be so easy. My drum teacher sauntered in twenty minutes late with an angry look on his face, muttering to himself. When he saw me sitting impatiently behind the kit, he shook his head with a sigh, as if he couldn't believe how silly I was to think that I'd actually get anywhere near the drums today, and threw his hat and gloves on the ripped leather couch. I was surprised to see that he was quite young, not even thirty. The stubble on his chin seemed like a poor attempt to disguise his youth, and while he introduced himself as Paul Delaney, he looked distractedly about the room, not even bothering to apologize for being late.

He seemed more concerned with trying to justify why he was qualified to be a drum teacher than he was with getting me started on the lesson. To listen to him tell it, he'd mastered every percussive instrument ever made by the time he'd graduated from high school, and had been personally requested by Trooper to sit in on drums whenever they came to town. We spent almost an hour just going over the equipment, and when I ventured to ask if I'd actually be playing the drums today, he laughed and pointed over to the pad over by the far wall. That's all you're getting today, he said, pulling a bag of sunflower seeds out of his coat pocket and munching them.

I thought he was being lazy, and I put my hands on my hips, ready to tell him exactly that, when he abruptly tossed his seed bag onto the couch, rubbed his hands together, and said, Now then, let's stop wasting your dad's money and get to work. He rustled around in his army bag and came out with an array of drumsticks. Choose your weapons. I grabbed two random

Paul was no dummy. Although I was the youngest student he'd ever had (and the first girl), he'd been teaching drums for over ten years, first as an after school job, then as a way to make ends meet during university, where he'd studied just about every form of percussion that existed, from syncopated style to Japanese taiko drumming. And he knew how to handle kids, keeping me just impatient enough to keep my energy and attention bubbling, then giving me the sticks to practice with.

But the real thrill was actually playing. From the time I tapped out my first rhythm on the snare, things just fell into place. The experience was like pushing a canoe into the still waters of a lake—no halting lurches or false starts, just a smooth glide out into the gentle waves. As I began to gain momentum, becoming more comfortable with handling the sticks and listening to Paul's instructions, layers of frustration seemed to fall away from my thoughts. I felt free to just follow my instincts, not worrying about missing the occasional stroke. The metronome was there to guide me, not challenge me. Sometimes, when I played the piano, the keys felt like hurdles, designed to make me fall on my face over and over again. But now I'd found a new friend. I was a drummer.

CHAPTER 2

When I started high school, Dad decided to go back to driving, so he was gone for long stretches at a time, and although he called me faithfully every night at around eleven, it was never quite enough to ward off the night sounds. The bungalow had been built in the early seventies, and now it groaned with every gust of wind, which always seemed worse out here on this side of the marshes.

And lately when he talked to me, I could hear a distracted note in his voice, and I guessed he was probably checking his watch because there was another call he had to make. This past year, he'd started dating some woman named Diane from Truro Heights, and I knew that the moment he said goodbye to me, he didn't even put the phone back in its cradle before dialing Diane's number. It pissed me off a little, I guess, but I was mostly just angry that he was gone all the time. I hated coming home to an empty house and having to cook soup-in-a-can on the stove.

On my first day of school, I went down to the music department to audition for the school band. I really had no idea if they needed a drummer, but I felt I had to join something. All day, I'd been shuffling along in a kind of daze from science/math, to music classes, to English, to French, never quite sure I'd gotten the right classroom, getting the nodes all confused. Most of my friends had decided to take general classes instead of academic, so I mostly only saw them during breaks and at lunch. If I joined the band, I would at least have a ready-made group of people to talk to at my locker.

Cobequid Educational Center was a surprisingly multiethnic school for a town the size of Truro. A Micmac reservation bordered the town, and the native kids went either to CEC or the high school in Brookfield, a tiny village populated mostly by bored teenagers who got their kicks huffing gasoline and racing their pickups from the town's only intersection. There were also two small enclaves of black families downtown, so while I wasn't living in inner-city Detroit, I didn't think I was a total rube either. In fact, the school was a colorful mix of kids from just about every background: metalhead hillbillies from Onslow and Belmont, preppies in Tommy Hilfiger sweaters, blue-collar girls in frizzed hair and clad in acid-wash jeans that had gone out of style years ago, who dreamed of becoming hairdressers at the Style Factory in the K-Mart Mall, skateboarders with shaved heads and dyed-red bangs who listened to bands like the Day-Glo Abortions, wannabe homeboys with Adidas High-Tops and backward baseball caps, and even a few punks, although most of them had been imported from Halifax, like Dave Rasmussen. And then there was me.

I decided on a simple look, wearing the black blouse my mother had given me for my birthday, and a cream-colored skirt. I'd agonized for almost an hour, wondering what to do with

my hair, and finally just swept it back into a loose ponytail, tying it with a long black ribbon. I kept putting blush on and wiping it off, but by that point, I just wanted to get the hell away from my reflection and try to make the bus. Without my mother around to give me tips, I felt completely clueless when it came to cosmetics. All I knew was that I didn't want to go out looking like some painted-up Halloween drag queen, so I went with the less is more approach: mascara and a little foundation, just enough to hide the new pimple under my nose.

Not that any of it mattered much. I probably could have worn a red clown wig and no one would have looked at me. At times through the day I felt like the only freshman in the school. Everyone else seemed to know exactly where their classes were, what period they had lunch, and even their teachers' names. I got crossed up coming out of one node, where I'd just had French, thought I was on the other side of the building, and stumbled right into an economics class that was in mid-session. Everyone in the room turned to stare at me as I tried to find the class number on my schedule. The teacher, who'd been going over his syllabus, peered at me over the rims of his bifocals and smiled. This is Economics 410. Map-Reading 101 is across the hall. I turned five shades of crimson and fled as the class cracked up.

Of course, that meant I was late for my next class, and would have to make another grand entrance, and so on, for the rest of the day. By lunchtime, I no longer cared about finding my friends. I just wanted to hide in the farthest corner of the cafeteria and watch dust gather on the windowpanes. No such luck. Almost as soon as I'd sat down and started picking at my greasy Sloppy Joe, a knot of boys in sweaty T-shirts and shorts sat down beside me. They were either on the football team, or had just come from an intense wrestling match on the school's front lawn. One of them made a gesture with his tray toward the seat opposite me, as if asking to sit down. I shrugged. He sat down and immediately launched into a disgusting story about what he did to his girlfriend at the drive-in in St. John, making sure I could hear every word. His friends lounged on the table and listened, grinning widely and glancing at me every once in a while to see how I was taking it. Without finishing my lunch, I picked up my tray and tried to leave as casually as I could. The storyteller watched me go, then whispered something to his friends that had the four of them spitting raucous laughter into the crooks of their arms. I looked back at them once as I pushed my way down the aisle, and all I could see were small, glittering eyes peering out from under ball caps.

After lunch, I went over to the music department, hoping to find out when I could audition to play drums in the band. When I got there, the only person there was a teacher named Ms. Campbell, who was leaning back in her chair, arms folded across her stomach. When she saw me, she pointed to the blackboard behind her with the sweep of an arm. Auditions aren't until next week, she said in a bored voice. I wondered if I'd woken her up. But her eyes lost their sleepy look when I told her I was a drummer.

Really? Well, be at the auditorium Monday morning right after school. There may be a place for you.

I glanced around the little room. Ms. Campbell's desk had been pushed as far into the corner as it could possibly go, and the rest of the floor was a maze of instrument cases, chairs, and music stands, set up haphazardly around the room. The walls were plastered with scale

charts and anatomical diagrams of various instruments. There were no bookshelves, but textbooks and papers were stacked almost four feet high against the back wall. The room smelled of summer dust, the sleepy kind of dust that you could see dancing lazily in the path of sunbeams streaming in the window. For the first time that day, I felt comfortable in a space. Without stopping to think of how Ms. Campbell might react, I closed my eyes, raised my nose into the air and took a deep sniff. She laughed. Good to be back, isn't it?

I hesitated for a moment, then decided not to correct her. Yes, I replied, flashing her my most charming smile. It's good to be back.

Since there was only one spot in the band for a percussionist, and I didn't want everything to hinge on my drumming ability, I chose three pieces that I'd been working on over the summer: a Beethoven piano etude, one short Bach piece that I'd been working on, and a percussion solo. That Monday, I was so cooked to get into the auditorium and play that I floated through classes in a daze, unable to hear anything except the three short little pieces I'd been working on. During my last class, my fingers dexterously worked my pen, spinning it around and tapping it feverishly against my math book, waiting for the bell. I kept fidgeting, looking at my watch, worried that I wasn't ready, blowing my bangs in exasperation when the teacher broke off his lecture to wander over to the window. The guy behind me tapped me on the shoulder, making me jump a bit. When I turned around, he stage-whispered, You're auditioning today, right?

I looked at him for a moment as the teacher went back to his algebraic droning. The kid was about my age, a bit pudgy, with short curly blond hair and a whiff of cockiness. His wire-rimmed glasses were perched precisely on his freckled nose, and when he saw that he'd hit the mark, he reached up and adjusted them with a satisfied smile. A gold stud glinted in his right ear. I could tell, he said, not bothering to wait for me to answer. Actually, I saw the sheet music under your textbook. What do you play?

Piano and drums, I said, twisting further around in my chair so I could see his eyes. They were a bright hazel, a lovely, summery color that brightened with interest when I told him I played drums.

You're a percussionist? he asked. His stage whisper had grown to a low undertone, not that anyone cared. Most of the class was chattering away as the teacher, whose long years in the classroom had given him the ability to tune out the noise as if it were nothing but radio static in the background of an exciting hockey game, scratched out our daily homework assignment on the board. Derek was our last percussionist, and he graduated to go to the Royal Conservatory in Toronto. Are you first year? When I nodded, he gave a little snort of disbelief. Man, if you can tap a 4/4 beat without missing the drumhead, you'll get in. That's cool.

The bell rang suddenly and the entire class nearly jumped out of their seats, rushing for the door without waiting for the dismissal. The guy grabbed my elbow as I bent to put my books in my book bag. Come with me. I can introduce you. What's your name, anyway?

Sonya.

I'm Chris Mackenzie. I'm clarinet, first chair. He held up his case.

Is this your first year?

He gave another snort. Nah, I just took dummy math last year instead of academic. I fucking hate math. And this guy is such an asshole. We were just going out the door as he said this, and I turned quickly to see if the old man had heard. If he had, he didn't let on, engrossed in straightening up the papers on his desk.

When I walked into the auditorium with Chris, I saw Ms. Campbell talking to a librarian-looking woman on the stage beside her. About fifty students were milling around, some on the stage, some in the aisles, some sitting in the seats with their feet dangling over the seats in the front of them. I could easily tell the freshman from the returning members, who were talking and laughing easily with each other and the teachers. A piano had been rolled onto the stage, with a set of symphonic drums beside it. Three teachers sat in the front row, holding clipboards and talking to a group of three tall girls. When Chris came in, they waved excitedly to him. The tall girls were well-dressed, well made up, looking like they'd just come from an appointment with a stylist.

Chris brought me over to be introduced, and I could smell hair spray and perfume, skin cream and talcum powder. The tallest of the three looked down her sloping nose at me (she was at least two inches taller than I was) and gave me such a direct once-over that I felt my cheeks burn. Nice to meet you, she said in a languid slur, her eyes flicking over to Chris's before she even finished. *Who the fuck is this?* she seemed to be asking him, then answered her own question by ignoring me and laughing at something one of her friends had said. *Not that I give a shit.*

Her name was Carol Mueller, and she lived, as many of the band members did, out on Willow St. I knew her family; the whole town did. But Chris had obviously known her for years. The four of them had spent most of the summer going to each other's parties apparently, so that the more they talked together about their adventures at the swimming hole or beach bonfires, the further into the background I faded, until I had to touch myself to make sure I was still there. Suddenly, Chris remembered he hadn't come alone and looked around, not immediately seeing me at his elbow. They're ready, he said, although I had no idea how he knew. I looked up at Ms. Campbell, who was scanning a list. Then she exited stage left and stood at the lip, waiting for everyone to notice her.

Okay, everyone, she said with authority when everyone finally quieted down. Let's get this show on the road.

Ms. Campbell tried to keep the audition moving at a crisp pace, but with so much tuning, reed-changing, and string-tightening, as glassy nerves made fingers fumble, it wasn't until after 5:30 when she called my name. Chris had asked me to sit with a few of his guy friends until he came back from his performance (the girls had moved off toward the stage to wait their turn), so when Ms. Campbell called my name, I had to crawl over their legs to get to the aisle, and almost fell on my face on the carpet. I climbed up on the stage, feeling like an ass, adjusted my skirt, and rubbed my face with my hand. I grimaced inwardly as my fingers ran over what could only be another pimple forming right where the jewel would be on the forehead of an Indian princess.

But the moment I touched the timpani with my mallets, I knew. It was that simple. I looked up just long enough to see everyone lean forward in their seats to listen, and then I turned away from them and into the music. I pounded with a ferocity that I hadn't shown with Paul, just blazing with everything I had, closing my eyes and bending down so close that the head of the mallet brushed the tip of my nose on the rebound. Beads of sweat popped out on my forehead and trickled into the corners of my eyes, but I ignored them. I ignored everything except the rhythm that pulsed through my body. Then, just as fatigue started to nag at my arms and wrists, I came to the end of the piece, exiting with an extended flourish. I laid the mallets on top of the snare and just stood there for several seconds, trying to regain control of my breathing. No one moved or made a sound. When I finally looked up, students were shifting in their seats and whispering to each other. I looked over at Chris, who gave me a big smile and a thumbs-up. Ms. Campbell climbed the stairs onto the stage. That'll be all, Sonya, she said, her voice flat and strangely hushed.

I was confused. I prepared two other pieces. Don't you want to hear them too?

Ms. Campbell raised her eyebrows. But you're auditioning for percussion, right? I nodded and Ms. Campbell smiled brightly. Then there's no need. Welcome aboard. She stuck out her hand. You're our new percussionist.

I took it, dazed, beaming, dropping my music awkwardly onto the floor. Some of the students snickered at that, but I didn't care. There was only one percussionist in the band, after all.

Chris met me at the bottom of the stairs. Damn, that was amazing! You kicked it up there. It's going to be wicked playing with you.

I was so nervous, I said, grabbing my bag from the floor.

Nervous? He chuckled. If that's what you do when you're nervous, I'd hate to see you when you're chill. Hey, listen, he said casually, me and some of the guys are going out for dinner. You wanna come along?

I glanced over at Carol Mueller and her little clique lounging in their seats pretending not to notice us, then leaned in close to Chris's ear. Thanks, but I don't want to make any enemies today. He looked at me in surprise. But I'll see you later, I added hastily, throwing my bag over my shoulder.

Our first practice is Wednesday afternoon, the librarian said, handing me a folder of practice material. This is what we'll be working on.

I'll be here, I told her, waving goodbye to Chris and fairly skipping out the doors with a goofy grin plastered like peanut butter on my face.

By November, I was disgusted with Chris, the band, school, Dad, everything. I just hadn't been able to connect with the band people, and it wasn't until Christmas that I figured out why. They were their own little society, which probably would have been fine if I'd been allowed in. But being in the band wasn't enough to qualify as part of the society. It was a lot like a club with strict membership rules that weren't written down anywhere but were distinctly understood anyway. The inner circles were all seniors, and for the most part they lived in the same neighborhood—Willow St., Smith Ave., and Truro Heights, with a tiny handful from

Onslow, although they only got invited to parties by hosting them. Most of the members of the inner circle had inherited their relationships—their parents were friends from high school, or had known each other at least forever. They all took trips together, had cottages out at Brule Beach or VIP passes at the Wentworth Ski Lodge, and spent summers guzzling martinis and toasting each other at weekend barbecues.

Other groups circled the outer limits, trying to find a way to break into the ranks, but not quite bold enough to make a real push. They sometimes got invited to parties, usually just to fill them up. They wore all the right clothes, had the same WASP parents, but they also possessed insurmountable character flaws like thick glasses, snaggly teeth, too many zits, or the wrong hairstyles. There was no real hope for these people, but they had their place.

A few others were simply outcasts. They came to practice on time, performed as well as they could, packed up their instruments and left with barely a word to anybody. Whenever someone mentioned one of their names, which wasn't often, it was usually with an eye roll or snide comment. God, did you hear Jody today? She was totally off key. Yeah, she's such a cow.

The only way a freshman could become part of the inner circle was by having an older sister or brother in it already, or living next door to the right person, and even that was no guarantee. Freshman only got invited to parties because sophomores were always trying to gain popularity and impress the seniors. It was really an incestuous crowd—bandies were always dating each other, hanging out with each other, partying with each other, or wishing they were. It wasn't all this cliquishness that I had a problem with. What really bothered me was what boring musicians they were. They could play well enough, I guess, but they didn't seem very passionate about any of it. I liked to shake my head while I played and watch the sweat fly. They sighed in haughty irritation whenever a hair fell out of place.

This was dull. And by the middle of the semester, I found myself nodding off at around two o'clock. It didn't help that math always seemed to be my last class, and as I listened to Mr. Higgins, my gaze would wander from my half-scrawled notes to the clock on the wall, and lazily around the room at the rest of the class, which seemed to be slipping into the same pool of boredom.

Dragging myself into the practice room had become an exquisite torture. The notes were all there, but everyone seemed more interested in each other, spending too much practice time gossiping or sucking up to Ms. Campbell. Chris only invited me to one party, at his place one October night, but the only difference between the party and the practice room was the lack of instruments. He tried to kiss me on his parents' bed, in full view of Carol and her friends, and I pushed him away a bit harshly, embarrassing him. Carol, who hadn't spoken a word to me since the day of the audition, called me a hick and stormed out. I used the phone in the bedroom and called Dad to come and pick me up, slipping out the back door without telling anyone. No one mentioned what had happened, but that was the last party I got invited to until the next spring.

So I began striking back. Nothing too extreme, at least at first—just minor rebellions, like acting irritated whenever practice started late, or wearing jean jackets from Frenchie's Secondhand Clothes to practice instead of dolling up. I'd been letting my hair grow for almost

four years, until it reached my lower back, but now I saw it as a badge of compromise. I decided to butcher it on the night of our first concert.

I guess every musician has a fit of prima donnaism once in a while. We act like divas sometimes, seeing how important we are by measuring how far people are willing to indulge us before they throw up their hands and say we're full of shit. But for me, there was just no one around to listen. Dad was gone more often than he was home, and I know he wasn't always on the road. He'd been spending nights at Diane's house, and even though he still called every night at eleven o'clock sharp, full of apologies and promises to be home the next day, I found myself paying more attention on the echoes the receiver made when I hung up on him.

My hairdresser couldn't believe what I wanted to do. She told me to sleep on it, for God's sake, think it over before I committed myself. I thought this was a little unfair, with her own pink and blue two-tone hair. I've been thinking about it for weeks, I said. Judy, it's just hair, for Chrissake. Get over it.

All right, it's your hair, she said with a sigh, and began cutting in resigned despair, like a firing squad soldier told that his best friend was a deserter. Chunk after chunk of chestnut-colored hair fell to my feet, building into a pile high enough to worry me. Of course, I wondered if I'd made the right decision. Of course, I regretted it. Of course, I realized it was too late to anything about now. And, of course, when I looked at myself in the mirror when it was all over, I smiled. Julie had chopped my hair right up to the earlobes like I told her, leaving only my bangs, which were long enough to completely cover my eyes. Then she dyed it black, the glossiest jet black she could manage. My head looked like it had been dipped in shoe polish. As a final touch, she added a lightning bolt of blonde at my temple.

I peered at my reflection and shook my head in amazement. Through my bangs, my face looked like it was sitting behind a black veil. My eyes looked bigger, darker. More intense. *Was it me?* I asked myself. *It was me. It wasn't me.* Julie, is it possible for you to make me ugly?

Julie seemed genuinely hurt. God, I hope not. Don't you like it?

I love it! It's so you! I said, giggling.

For fifty bucks plus tip, you better love it, she snapped back. I'm just sick you wanted to cut off all that beautiful hair, but it's my job, right? I did what I could. Your father's going to kill you, she added, in a wistful murmur.

I shrugged, looking down at the mess of hair littering the floor. For a moment, I thought about asking Julie if I could take a lock of it. I opened my mouth to ask, then shut it again, immediately creeped out by the idea. Besides, why hold on? I just dug out my wallet and paid her.

As I left the salon, I noticed the shop just across from the food court. The sign outside said Piercings \$35 Nose, Ears, Eyebrows, More! I looked in my wallet. There were three tens and four fives left. The last of my summer lawn-mowing money. It was only November, but the summer felt like some distant childhood memory. I pulled out the tens and a single five and walked into the shop. Go big.

I had dinner at the mall and spent my last ten dollars on a taxi home. The circular driveway was empty, as I knew it would be. The maple tree in the backyard had shed most of its leaves, scattering them around the lawn where they now lay, forlorn brown scraps that reminded me of the hair I'd left on the Style Factory floor. Without realizing it, I brushed a hand through my new do. A bitter wind had sprung up, biting through my denim jacket and making my teeth shiver. When I got inside the bungalow, I went immediately over to the thermostat in the living room to crank up the heat. It was nearly night already. I stood in the kitchen, debating whether to put the kettle on, and listened to the wind whipping around every corner. Somehow, the house felt too small for me now, the walls as thin as my jacket. How was it going to last through another hard winter?

My nose was aching where the woman had driven in the stud, a little silver ball just above the little fold of my nostril, and I had to remind myself not to touch it. The woman had said it would take at least three months to heal, but three months of the dry throb I was feeling now would surely drive me insane, like being tapped repeatedly in the center of my forehead by one of those rock-breaking hammers that sculptors use. *Should've thought of that before*, a nasty little voice piped up. Yes, I should have thought of *everything* before. Wouldn't life be perfect then?

My hand was resting on the handle of the teakettle, and now, barely aware of what I was doing, determined *not* to be aware of it, I reached down to the cupboard beside the stove and opened it. Tucked away behind the cookie sheets and muffin tins we never used, was Dad's private stash—a half-full quart of Jack Daniels. I seriously think Dad didn't know I knew about it. Of course I knew. Just like I knew he wouldn't be coming home tonight. He'd taken a load of refrigerators to Toronto two days ago, and he could never make the eighteen-hour trip in a single day. Not anymore. These days, it was hard enough for him to haul his huge frame up into the cab.

Without thinking, trying not to think, I unscrewed the cap from the bottle of bourbon, took down a juice glass with daintily laced daisies circling it, grabbed some ice and pop out of the fridge, and poured myself a glass. I had no idea how much alcohol to use, so I filled the glass about halfway up and filled the rest with Pepsi. The Pepsi weakened the jarring aroma of bourbon just enough for me to take a large gulp. When the heat hit the back of my throat, my teeth locked together and I made a sound like a cat coughing up a hairball. *You're gonna be sick*, that same needling voice informed me, but it seemed to be speaking from far away, thoughtfully.

Dad still kept a record player in the living room, an old RCA turntable with an orange art deco-style cover. I poked through his bluegrass records, flipping past names of men and women that were so familiar to me they were like uncles and aunts of an extended family—Bill Monroe, smiling cheerfully from under his white Col. Parker hat, Flatt and Scruggs, the Stanley Brothers, Molly O Day, Jim & Jesse, others. Trucker music. I came to Hank Williams' Greatest Hits and slipped it over the spindle, then settled back into Dad's recliner, holding my drink with both hands. I risked another mouthful, swallowing quickly so the taste wouldn't linger. It tasted like pop that had gone wrong somehow, maybe left out in the sun too long. But it eased the pain in my nose.

When Hank Williams began to sing *I'm So Lonesome I Could Cry*, I knew I'd chosen the wrong record. The ancient hurt in his voice pinned me to my chair, glass glued to my fingers, and it took everything I had to keep the tears locked in. Underneath the alcohol daze, I knew it was just temporary, a sudden collection of moments—my disappointment with the band, my drastic new look, the pain in my nose, being alone in the bungalow, the wind and darkness, all coming together at once. But on the surface, the bourbon was giving the music a holy power.

Song after song rolled by, each one disappearing into the black silence that followed, before coming back to life with a lurch of twangy guitar. As I listened to each new tale of heartache, I started to focus on the silences. They seemed to contain a hurt too deep to give a voice, while the actual songs were only respites from it, like lonely truck stops on a deserted stretch of highway. Can you truthfully say with your dying breath, Williams sang in his whiskey-scarred voice, that you're ready to meet the angel of death?

I watched my hands pour out another glass, wondering how they could do it without being told, fascinated by the way the soda bubbles let out a last carbonated gasp before dying, one by one. The rhythm of the music was starting to feel distinctly snaky, the slide guitar twining around the ticking drums. *So this is what it feels like*, I thought. *Like going crazy. But slow enough to notice it.* My third glass went down faster than my first two, hardly tasting like anything now, but it roiled around in my belly and immediately hinted that it might want to come back up again.

I pushed myself out of the chair to my feet, took an unsure stutter-step forward, and took a step forward, suddenly aware that the sofa and rickety rocking chair, which were behind me when I stood up, were now in front of me. I tottered, trying to steady myself, and started moving toward my bedroom. The needle on the record player was now bumping against the spindle, but I had just enough presence of mind not to try to take the record off. Actually, I think the idea of bending over was just too bothersome. I found my bedroom at last and collapsed on my bed, still fully clothed. My eyes, half-lidded, rested on the poster on my door, a dancing couple I got in the poster store at the mall. The woman was wearing a flowing white dress, her arm thrown back over her head, basking in the attention of the square-jawed man, suave in his tux, his hand tucked into the crook of the woman's back. Roses were scattered all over the cobblestoned alleyway. I waved my own arm back and forth from the bed, in time with the accordion music I heard coming from the somewhere just out of the cameraman's range. My head whirled and my thoughts were a slippery chatter, sliding in and out of my mind before I had a chance to grasp them. In this confused jumble, one thought kept flashing like a beacon in a storm—tomorrow night, tomorrow night. My first concert. What had I done? Unggh. I slipped away into murky dreams, too far gone even to hear Dad pull into the driveway in his truck.

CHAPTER 3

I was already half an hour behind when I dragged myself out of bed the next morning. I actually felt okay, head not pounding too badly, a bit woozy in the stomach. My teeth also felt fuzzy, as I hadn't brushed them the night before, and my new hair was plastered to my cheek, pasted there by drool. When I straightened up and stretched, my clothes rubbed my skin uncomfortably, making me feel like I'd spent the night wrapped up in a burial shroud made from Welcome mats. I decided to take a steaming, hot shower, as hot as I could stand, and scrub myself raw.

Dad was waiting for me when I finally made it to the kitchen. I stood in the entryway, heart in my throat. In the second before our eyes met, I could see his expression change from carefully neutral to a look of bewildered shock. His hands were folded on the kitchen table, but when he saw what I'd done to my hair and nose, he splayed them on his lap, his mouth dropping open. I'd seen him angry before, like when I was eleven and decided to live in the maple tree (Dad kept threatening to call the fire department), but I'd never seen him like this, at a total loss. The table was completely bare, except for one thing—the open bottle of Jack Daniels, now nearly empty. I'd forgotten to put it away last night, not that it would have mattered. Dad didn't mark his bottles, but he was bound to notice the difference between half-full and nearly empty. Until that second, the idea of discovery had never even occurred to me.

We stared at each other without speaking for nearly a minute. His eyes glanced over to the liquor bottle, then back to my hairdo, as if he had no idea what to scold me for first. His confusion saved me.

Your hair & he began, then stopped, shook his head slowly, closed his eyes, and massaged the bridge of his nose. He was so ready to be angry when I walked in, and I'd trumped it almost as if I'd blown gently on a house of cards he'd just finished building. When he recovered his bearings, he looked back up at my face. I hope your goddamn head's pounding, his said, in a soft voice. So this is how you entertain yourself when I'm gone & I busted my ass making it back in time to see your performance tomorrow, and & Are you even gonna be able to play? He seemed to be trying to relight the fury he'd been stoking before I poked my head into the kitchen, but suddenly his expression changed to total deflation. You didn't think I'd make it, did you? You were pissed off at me because you thought I was going to miss your first performance.

He nodded and turned to look out the frost-etched window. I followed his gaze and stared out of it too. Instantly, the smell of alcohol came back to my nose, the first hot, nasty whiff of it when I unscrewed the cap. I fought to keep my gorge down. Through the frost on the window, I saw the hulking silhouette of the Freightliner Dad drove. You were listening to my Hank Williams record, Dad said, mostly to himself. You left it on all night. I was going to

turn it off, but I decided to listen to it for a while myself. I wanted to go into your room, but you had your door closed.

Know what your grandfather told me? He turned to me again, smiling a little now, eyes faraway. He caught me and Ted Traynor out in the woods when we were both seventeen, out behind the house. I thought he was going to tan my hide, but all he said was, Hope you enjoyed that drink, kid. Because if I ever see you drinking again, I m going beat you all the way up Penny s Mount ain and down again. And he went away. I could never figure out why he didn t give me a beating. Until now.

I hadn t spoken a word during his short speech, or tried to interrupt him. I couldn t think of a damn thing to say except & I m playing tonight, Dad. I m gonna be there.

But why did you cut off all that gorgeous hair? He asked, his voice sounding a little watery. He didn t seem to hear what I d said.

I shrugged. It s just hair, Dad.

He nodded at that. You better get ready. The bus ll be here soon. You know, I ll have to tell your mother about this. Your nose is a goddamn mess. I don t think that was a smart move. Then he broke into a broad grin. You re gonna feel like shit when you start banging those drums.

How did you get home so fast? I hope you didn t drive all night.

Dad sat up straight and arched his back, trying to work the kinks out, as if my reminder had brought back the pain. Damn right. Made the trip back in seventeen hours. Told the cop about you.

I ve got to get ready. The concert starts at 7:00. I lingered in the entryway, wishing the sun would melt the frost on the windows, wishing the dead brown grass would magically turn green before my eyes. But that wouldn t happen for at least five more months.

I got a lot of strange looks when I walked into the auditorium after school, a lot of raised eyebrows and phony indifference. Billy Bartlett, one of the boys who held up the wall at popular kids parties, was the only person who even came close to complimenting me on my look. The stud, he said, with genuine respect, must have hurt like a bastard, eh?

Ms. Campbell took me aside at the end of our warm-ups. Possibly inspired by memories of her first bowl cut, she put a motherly arm around my shoulder. Sonya, I know you re going through some difficult times right now. The first year is always the hardest.

I looked at her, frowning a little. What makes you think I m going through a difficult time? We were standing in the wings, where the rest of the band was psyching themselves up for the performance. Ms. Campbell maneuvered me to a more secluded spot in the corner, trying to make the arrangement as inconspicuous as possible, but, by isolating us from the others, she created exactly the opposite effect. My cheeks burned under the poorly hidden stares and stage whispers.

Ms. Campbell sighed. Look, Sonya & You re a very talented musician. I want you to know that. But & She stopped, unsure of how to continue. This is our first concert. A lot of parents and grandparents are coming &

I listened in mute distaste, looking down at my dress through my bangs. I wanted to speak out, tell her I knew what she was getting at, that I was an embarrassment to her, to the band, to the school, talented musician or not. Talented musician! We were playing the school march, for Chrissakes! Any idiot who could hold a mallet could bang it out, and face it parents were a pretty forgiving audience. & have a certain image, Ms. Campbell was saying. And I can't in good conscience let you go out there wearing that nose ring.

For a moment, her words were a disorganized jumble of noise, and I had to sort the syllables out into a coherent sentence. Are you saying you don't want me to play tonight?

Ms. Campbell gave me what passed for a sympathetic smile. No, that's not what I'm saying. She pushed a lock of gray hair behind her ear, trying to find the right words. All I want you to do is take out the nose ring.

Without thinking, my hand went up to touch it, then immediately fell back to my side. Discipline. I closed my eyes then opened them again. Ms. Campbell was watching me steadily, waiting for me to say *Okay, whatever you say, Ms. Campbell*. I nodded, wondering if I had enough time to get to the janitor's supply closet for rubbing alcohol, and opened my mouth to ask for a piece of tissue paper. Maybe George can take over for me, I found myself saying.

Both of us stood there, unable to believe our ears. Are you backing out of the concert? Ms. Campbell asked, stammering slightly.

Yes, I replied. My lips were moving, but they weren't matching my words. Yes, I guess I am.

Well, if that's how you really feel & Ms. Campbell began slowly. She didn't seem very eager to talk me out of it. George, she called over my shoulder, gesturing with an exasperated flick of her wrist. George was a tall, thin-faced blond boy, a multi-instrumentalist, and someone I quietly hated. He played Ms. Campbell's lieutenant, always turning her suggestions to orders and rolling his eyes every time someone screwed up. He kept people constantly feeling like they were one bad chord away from being kicked out of the band. But outside the practice room, he was all silken smiles and friendly words, as if he didn't like to be a hardass, but it was all for the good of the band.

He also had a disturbing knack for showing up at moments of humiliation, especially mine, it seemed, and now he was hovering over my shoulder, smiling with his customary false jollity. I think Sonya wants you to do her part tonight, Ms. Campbell said.

George looked inquiringly at me. Really? Why? I mean, I'm glad to help out, but & Ms. Campbell gave him a look that closed his mouth in a hurry. I pushed him aside, tearing past the stage curtain and thumping down the steps. People had just started filing into the auditorium, staring at their programs with bemused puzzlement. I tore down the aisle, not caring who saw me, and burst through the back exit and out into the hall. I leaned up against the wall, still not entirely convinced that I'd just done what I'd just done. My nose was throbbing again, as if responding to a cue from some metaphysical sadist.

I stood there for a while, watching clusters of students wander around with their parents and grandparents, debating whether to go back inside and plead my case with Ms. Campbell (not that I had a case, per se), or go hide somewhere in the parking lot. Maybe hitch a ride back home and crawl into bed. I figured it'd be easy for me to get a ride, in my prim schoolgirl black

dress and white blouse with flower embroidery. It didn't go well with my halfpipe-reject hair, but I thought my look had a weird, lopsided charm. I straightened up, smoothed my dress, and got ready to run, when Dad walked in.

All I could do was hold my hands to my sides, palms up, and shrug. He looked at me in surprise, and I kind of slumped against the wall, tempted to give way to a torrent of tears. He came over and put a huge, calloused hand on my shoulder. "What's wrong?"

I don't wanna talk about it. Let's just go home.

Go home? What for? Aren't you going to play?

I wiped my eyes. "Dad, I'm sorry. Ms. Campbell decided to go with another drummer. I'm not going to play." The lie slipped out smooth and cold, without hesitation. There was no way I was going to tell him the truth, not after he drove seventeen straight hours to make it home in time to see me. And definitely not after finding me a hung over train wreck barely able to stand up. The hurt look on his face was enough to make me feel like a selfish idiot. Why had I run off like that? All because I wouldn't take a tiny chunk of metal out of my nose? The cost of my unwillingness to compromise stood in front of me, a tower of disappointment in a charcoal suit, the weddings-funerals-anything suit that fit a bit too tight around the wrists and chest.

He looked uncertainly toward the door of the auditorium, then back at me. "Are you out of the band?" he asked.

No, I replied emphatically. "No, no. Just this concert."

Did you and Ms. Campbell have a fight about something? I don't understand why she'd kick you out now, with & Then a slow smile crossed his face, as if he suddenly realized what had probably happened. He didn't say anything, just nodded and turned away from the auditorium door. "Comon, he said, "You've taken enough shit for one day. Let's go to Dairy Queen."

Two weeks before Christmas, my friend and fellow outcast Mandy Maynard introduced me to Dave Rasmussen, who, in turn, introduced me to the Ramones, Black Flag, dope, Great White, playing in a rock band, civil disobedience, alcohol-soaked sex, and just about every other rite of passage that terrified parents read about in Reader's Digest. Dave was kind of a bad-boyfriend starter kit, a guy who prided himself on finding people's buttons and jabbing them with malicious glee, posing all the while as a truth-teller, the only one who wasn't afraid to pull the curtain back from sordid suburbia to show what (he thought) were open wounds festering behind Truro's well-manicured lawns and pristine two-stories. Or maybe it was just his own house he was referring to. But for a while, it was pretty amazing.

Dave and his band, the Laughing Corpses, played at Top Ten every Friday night, the youngest band in town to have a regular gig. Top Ten was a cramped, low-ceilinged space plugged into the downtown strip mall, with barely enough room on the stage to set up. On paper, it must have sounded great—a place for kids who wanted nothing more than somewhere to slam dance to live music without having their parents calling the cops on them. But with strict bans on alcohol and tobacco, the place was doomed to be sunk by the endless bottles of rum-scented Coke, the fights in the parking lot, the Great White-induced vomit on the dance floor, the graffiti on the bathroom walls, and the smashed windows. I never did find out who owned the

place, but I really felt sorry for him. All he wanted to do was provide a service to Truro's disaffected youth, but his efforts brought him constant threats from the police and furious parents who actually moved to have the place shut down.

Still, for a few months it was the hottest spot in town for anyone under nineteen. The Laughing Corpses may have only known four chords between them, but they played like they were possessed, shoving everything from Suicidal Tendencies to Velvet Underground to the Clash in a feverish blender, pulping it into one glorious shredded mess and spewing it at the headbanging crowd. Dave thrashed at his guitar and swung his long, lank hair like a sweaty pinwheel, furiously trampling his effects pedals, and creating such an unholy noise that listening to him was almost a form of Zen scream therapy.

The band could only play in short bursts of about twenty minutes, ending each set in a horrendous squall of feedback, before sneaking off the stage and out the back door without so much as a thank you to the kids in the crowd. Mandy took me by the wrist and pulled me through the dance floor, making me spill my paper cup full of pop. C'mon! I want to introduce you to Dave. She pushed her way through the crowd, never once letting go of my wrist, and maneuvered her way out into the parking lot. Dave's van was parked in the darkest corner he could find, as far away from the lone street lamp as possible. A dim orange glow lit up the windshield from inside and I could hear raucous laughter. Several kids were clustered around their cars, talking and play fighting, but no one seemed drunk. Now and then a police car cruised by, like a shark circling a life raft, just to let us know we were being watched.

Mandy marched right up to the van, dragging me in her wake, and banged at the door. A few muttered curses and shufflings followed, then Dave rolled back the door and peered out at us in all of his bloodshot glory. He stared at Mandy. What the fuck do you want? Oh, it's you. He studied me from head to toe, stopping and smiling at my nose stud, as Mandy introduced me.

C'mon in, girls, he said, stepping aside so we could climb into the van. I was just able to glimpse the open-mouthed envy of a gaggle of girls before Dave slammed the door shut on them.

The other two band members were huddled around a small kerosene lamp in the middle of the floor, swigging Crown Royal straight from the bottle. The orange light lit their faces from below, making them look like cavemen in the middle of some ancient rite of passage. Dave sat down and leaned against the door, waving his arm in a make-yourself-comfortable gesture. He popped the tabs off a couple cans of Schooner and handed them to us. It was my first taste of liquor since my adventures on the high seas of Jack Daniels, so I sipped hesitantly. Mandy, who was practically squirming with delight at having gotten into the van, slugged back a healthy mouthful, choked it down with a grimace, then tipped her head back and chugged again, letting loose with a soupy belch. The guys cackled. That's Steve over there, Dave said, pointing to a guy with a face like a potato. Steve lowered his bottle long enough to wave a hand in our direction. The other sad-looking motherfucker is Carl.

Carl looked up with an expression of sublime absence, sheepdog hair hanging into his bleary eyes. Pull it together, man, Dave said, a wrinkle of disgust twisting his voice. We gotta hit again.

So what? Carl responded with a shrug. Buncha preppies pretending to be cool.

Dave shook his head and gave me a tired see-what-I-gotta-put-up-with grin. It don't matter, fucknuts. Gotta pay the bills. Let's go. You girls wanna come out to my place after? My parents are out in Bass River for the night, so I'm having a little party in my garage. Steve snorted against the back of his hand. Dave ignored him, fixing his deep gaze on me. Yeah, I know it's a shithole, but what am I gonna do, right? Move back in with my parents?

Well, I began, glancing over at Mandy. She widened her eyes and mouthed the word yes. Sounds cool.

You're in the band, Dave mused, as if he'd just remembered. How can you hang around with those nerds? He clawed a hand through his hair. What bands are you into?

I don't know. I desperately tried to think of some rock band I'd heard recently on the radio countdown. I guess Bon Jovi's all right, I said, and groaned inwardly.

Jesus, Dave said, giving the others a sidelong smirk. It's all right, you're young. C'mon, let's move.

Steve blew out the lamp, throwing us in inky darkness for the time it took Dave to slide the van door open again. Just meet us here after the show so you don't get lost. He jumped out the door and stretched out his kinks as a group of teens came over to talk to him. Steve and Carl followed him out of the van, Steve turning to us as he stood in the doorway.

You coming or I gotta come in there and get ya?

Mandy seemed to be waiting for me to say something. Why had she suddenly put me in charge? I didn't even know these guys. Yeah, we're coming. *You little weasel*, I added, under my breath.

After the show, Dave rounded up a posse of about a dozen kids, stuffed them all into the van, and peeled out of the lot, half the bunch trying to stick their heads out whatever window they could find, screaming into the night and beating the side of the van as it rolled past the mall, past the bowling alley, past the retirement home, and out toward the marsh. Mandy and I sat huddled against the back door, both trying to become as small as possible, hoping we didn't hit a bump and fall out into the road. Suddenly, I wasn't sure about the party. I didn't know anyone in the van (they seemed to mostly be dropouts and metalheads, along with a couple girls who couldn't have been more than fourteen), although I did smile to think how the band snobs would have reacted if they knew where I was.

As Dave sped out along Farnham Road, the van rattled ominously, making me feel like I was the only one holding it together. The fan belt whined like a crow-sized mosquito, and every time Dave geared down, some wounded groan croaked out of the transmission, evidence that the gears had been stripped until there was nothing left but the stick. I closed my eyes and thought of band-Aids, masking tape, splints made of Popsicle sticks wrapped up with twine and barbed wire, trying to paste a rhythm over the clicks and creaks, a rhythm that would carry me to the end of the road. All around me were guffaws and slurred curses, rough with arrogance and alcohol. How drunk was Dave? I ventured a peek. He seemed in control enough, one elbow slung over the back seat. Beside him, Carl navigated by occasionally jerking the arm that was holding the wheel, pulling the van back to the center with a lurch. Through the windshield, the yellow line reeled to the left and back to the right as the grill kept swallowing it like a fish on a

hook. I started to feel a little nauseous, and buried my face into my knees for the rest of the trip.

Dave was right about one thing his garage was a shithole. Posters of guitar heroes adorned the walls, most either hanging askew or peeling off at the corners. The whole place was lit with a single fluorescent tube, muted by a red curtain that had been nailed awkwardly into the ceiling. Dave had converted the long workbench into a makeshift kitchenette, with a Coleman stove and filthy dishes piled up into mini towers of Pisa. A blue plastic tub sat on the floor, under a dripping faucet with a short length of garden hose attached to it. Apparently, the tub doubled as both a sink and a shower, if the heap of towels beside it were any indication. There was hardly any furniture in the garage, except for a ratty couch and an abused-looking television set, but I guessed what he spent his money on when I saw the collection of guitars and amplifiers in the far corner. Well, three guitars and two amps hardly counted as a collection, but it wasn't as if Dave were making rock star money either. Truro's general music tastes ran from country if you were over twenty to dance pop if you were under,

Mandy and I seemed to be the only ones who'd never been inside Dave's garage. Everyone else just flopped down on the couch, or sprawled out on the floor. Others yanked open the icebox and started passing around cans of Molson, Schooner, and Oland's. I wound up with a bottle of Labatt's I couldn't open, while Mandy abruptly stood up and quit the only clean spot we could find to go talk to Steve and a couple of his leather-clad friends. Dave came over and plopped down beside me. How'd you like the show?

I think you need a better drummer, I chided.

Gimme that, he said, taking my beer and popping the top with a lighter. Drummers are hard to find.

What are you talking about? There's one right here.

Where? He looked around the room, then back at me. You?

I've been playing since I was ten.

No shit. Maybe we should give you a tryout. He slugged from his bottle. That stud's too cool. I've been thinking about getting one. A nice fuck you to the bandies. I like that. He leaned closer and whispered into my ear. Wanna come and see the house?

I looked around the garage. Steve was entertaining Mandy with his shotgunning abilities, spewing foam all over the floor in a gusty heave. Mandy played it cool, expertly flipping her impossibly blond hair at Steve's piggery. When I caught her eye, she made a little jerking motion with her head toward the side door. I couldn't tell if she was looking for an escape route or trying to get me to accept Dave's offer. Not that she could have heard it, but I knew she'd been scoping the situation from the moment Dave sat down beside me, and, judging from the looks she was throwing at us, she would have relished the chance to trade places with me. Mandy was fun to hang out with, but tonight she was acting like a groupie-in-training, looking over the shoulder of the guy she was with at someone else.

Dave was staring at me coolly, waiting to see if I'd take him up on his offer. Sure, I said, swigging a decisive gulp of beer.

Dave grinned and helped me to my feet. Don't wreck the place, he said to Steve on the way by.

Dave lived in a house that seemed aggressively at odds with his persona as a ragged punk hero. I never found out exactly what Dave's father did for a living, but it was lucrative, whatever it was. Dave's house was a spacious two-story with a well-manicured lawn and hedge running around the limits of the property. We went up the back steps, his hand on mine, helping me navigate my way through the laundry room and into the kitchen without turning on the light. My eyes, assaulted by the intense white glare of the fluorescent tube in the garage, now fought to coax out the slivers of gray moonlight reflected from the smooth surfaces in Dave's kitchen. When he turned the light on, I had to screw my eyes shut for several seconds, opening them when I heard Dave opening the fridge door. He was holding a bottle of champagne.

A little of Dad's bubbly. The thought of more alcohol made my stomach pitch a bit, and I held up my hand to say no. Dave came over to me, looking like an intruder in his own house, a black grease spot in this immaculate suburban kitchen. But when he lowered his head, his eyes caught the gleam of the light and his lips parted in a razorblade smile. Let's go upstairs.

For a moment, I didn't answer, listening to the faraway sounds of the party in the garage. I was preparing to go a step further and I felt totally okay with it, a natural current that I could glide into, smooth as silk, and let it take me wherever it wanted to. Dave put the bottle down on the kitchen table and ran his hand through my hair with practiced ease. He started kissing me and I pushed myself into him, taking hanks of his hair in both hands. I tasted beer, something much stronger, pizza, sweat, and spearmint gum, all mixed up in an alcohol swirl, while deep in the back of my mind the bitter little schoolmarmy voice reminded me that Dad would have my ass if I didn't come home tonight. I didn't care.

Dave led me upstairs, kissing me all the while, until we mounted the top floor and pushed our way into the master bedroom, grappling with our clothes, which were becoming a tangle of sleeves, buttonholes, and zippers, then collapsed on the bed, pulling our shirts over our heads and throwing them in a heap on the floor. I tried to remember what happened in the few music videos I'd seen, wrapping my legs around Dave's waist and kissing hard, but he seemed to get a bit impatient with my fumbblings. Obviously, I had no idea what I was doing, and Dave responded to that with a tenderness I didn't expect, caressing me softly and occasionally whispering calming words into my ear as he pressed up against me. I was sure we'd both be exposed. Dave's parents were going to throw open the door any minute, or someone from the party would burst in with a video camera, to capture me in all my pathetic clumsiness.

Then, my head swam in and out, my back arched at his touch, all thoughts crowded to the back of my mind, impossible to hold onto. A moan escaped me, a mad rush of sensations, pleasure and pain, the shock of jumping into cold water, and the delirious feeling of total, reckless immersion. It was happening *it* and I wasn't missing a single moment.

Afterwards, Dave lit a joint, toked on it and passed it to me. I didn't want him to know I'd never smoked before either, so I inhaled as hard as I could, immediately coughing the smoke out. Dave looked at me with contempt. Don't pretend you know how to smoke when you don't. I fucking hate that.

I stared at him for a moment, a bit surprised by the cold undertone in his voice. But then he smiled, and the coldness melted away. I hesitated, took another deep drag, managing to hold

the smoke in for several seconds before hacking it out again. Dave took the joint away but continued to look down at me. You've got cute lips, he said. I couldn't tell if he was being sarcastic.

You think so? I took another small hit off the joint and pondered, listening to my stomach gurgling in a strange, repetitive pattern. I like 'em too. But I never know which lipstick I should go with, I don't really like anything bright red.

How about black? He laughed a little, playing absently with my hair.

Why have I never seen you around school?

He snorted, throwing himself back against the pillow. I'm never there. My parents said if I don't graduate this year, they're gonna kick me out of the house, make me go find a job or something.

I studied the patterns of smoke for a while, listening to the sound of my breathing. So when are you gonna ask me to join your band? I giggled. Steve's a crap drummer, you gotta know that. I mean, that last song you played, I don't think he was in time anywhere in that song. I was on the floor, you know, and he was driving me crazy, missing the rhythms all the time. I don't know, I'm kind of weird about stuff like that, like & what's the name of that thing? Obsessive-compulsive. I can't listen to someone who's off-time. It's like & fingernails on a chalkboard. Don't you feel that way? I don't know, maybe you don't care about stuff like that. I know the crowd didn't give a shit. They were just there to get drunk. You planning to go on tour or something? I don't think the Top Ten is going to last very long, it's mostly preppies & I know, you guys should just do these kind of surprise gigs, where you drive around in the van, find a house party, and just jump out and start playing, or something. Or maybe you could hire yourselves out to house parties, like I know Chris Wheaton is having a party next weekend, he didn't invite me, but he never does anymore. I think it would be awesome if he hired us, thinking we're gonna play pop tunes, and then when we get there, just go apeshit, smash the drums and everything, maybe break a few windows & I trailed off, envisioning the delicious look of horror on Chris's face when he saw Dave. Yeah, that's what we gotta do. They'd be so freaked out &

Dave was staring down at me again. Shut up, he said almost tenderly, leaning down to kiss me. His face loomed, touched just enough by the gray moonlight so I could see his amused smile. Sure, you want to be in the band? You're in. How's that? We can move Steve to rhythm guitar. Now & He pulled me toward him. I hope you got some energy left, baby.

I started smoking just so I could join Dave when he went for breaks at school, buying my first pack of cigarettes a week after his party. It seemed like the most natural thing in the world, just walking into the Quik-Mart on the Esplanade and buying a pack of smokes, the same thing millions of people did all over the country. I tried to put on my most confident face, smiling at the young clerk behind the counter with what I hoped was appropriate sauciness, and scanned the rack briefly for the first brand that caught my eye.

Gimme a pack of Virginia Slims, I said, the words slipping out of my mouth as naturally as if I said them every day.

The clerk pulled down a pack and handed them over. That'll be \$5.60.

I nearly choked, but regained enough control to shrug nonchalantly and dig a crumpled ten out of my wallet. The clerk was eyeing me. I know you, he said. I looked at him in surprise. I just can't think where & Then his fatigue-bruised eyes lit up. Oh yeah, you played drums last night for that band!

I nodded. Yeah, I did.

Man, you guys rocked the house! It was awesome! Got any shows coming up?

We're working on it, I said, totally unable to keep from beaming at the guy. A flush painted my cheeks as the guy counted out my change. I need a lighter, too, I added. He reached into a cardboard box beside the register and gave me a blue plastic Bic. I thanked him and left the store, my feet barely touching the pavement as I crossed the parking lot and got into Dad's car. I was a celebrity now, so I lit a triumphant cigarette, inhaling without coughing, and smiled saucily at myself in the rearview mirror. Dave was right I did have cute lips.

CHAPTER 4

My audition took place the next afternoon at Dr. M's store. With school and all my commitments in the band, I hadn't been practicing as often as I should have been, only coming in on Tuesday and Saturday afternoons, and I knew Dr. M was unhappy with me. He was behind the counter when I came in, still on a high from last night, with the three guys in tow, and he stared at us as we trooped past him toward the practice room. I have some news for you, Sonya, he said, his rough voice stopping me just as my hand was on the doorknob. I turned to him. In the past six years, Dr. M had aged like he was making up for lost time, his hair turning from silvery gray to chalky white and thinning to his crown. The wrinkles around his eyes and mouth, which had for so many years underlined the twinkly joy he got from teaching music, now sagged with age and fatigue. His eyes were misty and folded into their wrinkles, and I could barely make them out through the thick frames of his bifocals. I glanced briefly at Dave, then went over to the counter. Below the glass, books of music theory and starter manuals were displayed against a purple faux-velvet cloth, and when I peered at the glass, I could see the fingertip smudges of his students. They often pressed their hands against the glass while he talked with their parents about continuing their lessons.

I have to close down the store, he said, rubbing his bristly chin. When I finally looked up, I could see that his face was puffy, especially under his eyes. His hair, which I hadn't been able to see clearly when I first came in, was sticking up in the back in a little tuft like a duck's butt. He must have been up all night. So I talked to Paul, and he said he'd be happy to continue your lessons, if you can find a place to set up your kit. But as for your piano lessons & He trailed off, as if a new idea had occurred to him. Why don't you come over to our house and practice there? It'd be much nicer than here, and you could have dinner with me and my wife. What do you think?

Well & I said, looking over my shoulder at the guys, who were standing at the door of the practice room, pushing each other a bit and laughing.

Dr. M followed my gaze and cleared his throat. You think about it. I know you're playing in the school band, but you shouldn't neglect your practicing.

Actually, that's what I came to do. That's my boyfriend over there, I said suddenly, pointing him out. Dave saw my gesture and smiled. He's a musician too. He's got his own band, and he wants to hear me play drums.

That's fine, Dr. M said slowly. No one's using the drums today. Think about what I said.

I will. I walked back to where Dave was now trying to smack the back of Carl's hands with his knuckles. Are you ready? I asked, beaming up at him.

Yeah, let's get going," he said, pushing the door to the practice room open. "That old guy looks like he's into you. Do I have to be careful?"

"Comon," I said, punching him in the shoulder. "He's my piano teacher. Have some respect."

"Hey, that's cool," he replied, putting up his hands to parry my blows. "So you like older guys. No prob!"

You're sick. I grabbed a couple of sticks from the plastic tray by the door and stalked over to the kit. With my eyes closed, I breathed deeply for a few seconds, not caring where the guys were, but just trying to work myself into the proper mood. When I thought I was ready, I opened with a simple roll, then gradually let myself go into a more dynamic series of rhythms, trying desperately to not make a mistake --.

When I finally laid down my sticks, all three of the guys burst into a spontaneous round of applause, high-fiving each other noisily. Even Steve, whose job I'd just snagged, let out a whoop of genuine admiration. Dave threw up his hands in a gesture of mock hopelessness.

"She stole it from you, man," he told Steve. "She totally wiped you out! From now on, you're a Laughing Corpse, babe. Get used to it. But &" he continued, holding up a warning finger.

You've got to take the Laughing Corpse pledge.

"The what?" Carl asked with a look of curiosity, like he'd just missed the punch line of a joke.

The Laughing Corpse pledge. Dave pulled out a jackknife and snapped the blade open. I flinched a little. Behind me, I could hear one of the other guys lock the door. In the close atmosphere of the room, Dave seemed to grow taller before my eyes, looking down at me as if from a great height. Barely hesitating, he pressed the knife into the meat of his palm and made a short jerking movement, his fingers clenching in a sudden convulsive reaction. He gritted his teeth as a line of blood welled up, bright red against his pale skin. The cut wasn't deep, just a little slit, hardly worse than a paper cut, really, but it held my attention as if I were watching a trail of fire racing toward me. I thought I knew what was coming and my stomach lurched. The room went almost completely silent -- the only sound was my rapid breathing and the slight crunching sound of Steve's leather jacket as he sat down on the sofa. Dave was studying the red slash on his palm, absorbed in contemplation. Then he reached out for my hand, gently raising it, palm up, until the edge of the jackknife blade touched my flesh. Without thinking, I jerked my palm away, exhaling a sharp hiss of pain and looked down at the cut. It wasn't as long as the one on Dave's palm, the blood forming small beads instead of a slash. I looked up at Dave, not knowing what to say or do, and he grabbed me in a handshake. For one brief moment, I was livid, not because of the pain, but because he'd had the arrogance to know that I'd be too shocked to resist. Then, he lowered his face to mine and kissed me deeply. The hairs on my neck stood on end, and I plunged my hands into his hair, pressing hard against him and searching with my mouth, not caring that there were two other guys sniggering behind me, not even caring if Dr. M were watching. Let everybody see! What did I have to be ashamed about? Last night was nothing compared to this. I felt no hesitation, no butterflies in my stomach, no worries that I wasn't doing it right, or that I was about to be embarrassed in some horrible way. I just wanted to push him down on the sofa and devour him like a wolf!

Before I had a chance, though, he broke off the kiss and ran his hands through his hair. Shit, you got blood all over me, he said.

I stood there, nearly shaking. I thought that was the point, I said softly.

C'mon, Steve said, popping the lock on the door. Let's go get some lunch. I'm starvin' to death.

Dave was looking at me queerly, wiping the blood from his hands with a rag he had in his pocket. Give me your hand, he said, holding the rag out for me. I let him wipe the blood off, then looked down at the cut. I could barely see it now. The red mark had become a small pink welt. He transferred the rag back to his pocket and stroked my face with his fingers in a gesture of hushed tenderness that drew me close to him. Let's get goin', he said. I'll buy you lunch.

Our inaugural gig as a quartet was at the Top 10's final weekend bash in December. The owner, sick of being harassed, had finally given up on giving Truro's underagers something better to do than sniff gas in the mall parking lot, so he gave us \$400 to play until midnight, instructing the wrecking crew to start as soon as we got on stage. Dave gave \$200 to his brother Stan, who was a graphic artist, and Cal made up a bunch of T-shirts with the band's new logo—a picture of the actor Judge Reinhold's head, with the letters of the band's name formed by the blood dripping from his severed neck. We figured we could sell them for \$10 at the door, just to make some extra cash, all totally illegal, of course, not that the owner cared. By that point, he said, he was just about ready to burn the place down for the insurance money, so selling a bunch of T-shirts on the sly didn't bother him at all.

We sold our modest stock of T-shirts within half an hour, and by the time we hit the stage, there were about a hundred and fifty kids in the place, yelling drunken curses and waving their T-shirts over their heads. I was sitting behind my kit, scared shitless, my heart grinding out a rhythm I couldn't hope to match, but I was also shivering all over with excitement. The guys finished tuning. Dave turned and nodded at me to begin. I stared hard at the first song of the set list—a cover of the Dead Kennedys' "Holiday in Cambodia"—sucked in a deep breath, raised my sticks in the air, and brought them down against the skins. We were off!

For the next two hours, we chummed out gut-punching riffs and pulse-pounding rhythms to the surreal accompaniment of the jackhammers and drills that had already started tearing up the lot. I'll never forget the feeling of looking out into the crowd and seeing at least half of them wearing our T-shirts and actually knowing the words to the band's few original songs. I pounded my drums like I was exorcizing a banshee, throwing every ounce of arm strength I had into making as ungodly a noise as I could, as Carl wove around my ferocious assault with simple triangle bass lines, and Dave eviscerated our punk covers on his Les Paul like a wolf tearing into a baby lamb.

To say the gig was successful would be a lie. Successful meant selling all our T-shirts. Successful meant that when we tallied up the expenses (gas money, broken strings and such) and subtracted them from the take, we came out on the plus side. Successful meant ending this gig with the promise of another one. We weren't successful—we were immortal. From then on, we

came shrink-wrapped in a kind of instant cool that magnified with each house party, dance hall, and talent show we played, morphing into A-list popularity by April. And whenever we weren't playing parties (which was about three nights a week, including a standing invitation to gig at the Scotland Yard, even though half the band was underage), we were crashing them, showing up just around midnight whether we'd been invited or not and taking over the place, instantly hogging all the attention and alcohol we could grab.

But the coolest aspect of the whole thing was that I was sixteen years old and my boyfriend was three years older than me, a guy who could go into a liquor store anywhere in the country and buy whatever he wanted, a guy who could drink straight whiskey without screwing his face up and smoke without coughing. And a guy who liked to run his hand up my skirt while we were making out by my locker, totally indifferent to everyone around us. He knew how to make me feel like we were the only people on the planet, and whenever I saw him slink around the corner, the collar of his leather jacket turned up and his hair catching the yellow hall light, my breath caught in my throat and everyone else went into soft focus.

Dave & He didn't look like a Dave. He looked more like a Nick or maybe a Jack, something harder, more suited to a black-clad violator. By now, the bandies had exiled me to the outer circle. They thought I was showing off when Dave came around, and they hated that I didn't need to be a part of their little society. I started skipping practice more and more often, coming in late for class or not at all, and reveling in my new cool status. I was seeing a lot more pierced noses than I had before, and Laughing Corpse T-shirts, which had turned into a small cottage industry for Cal, were popping up in the most unusual places. I even thought I'd seen one of the French teachers wearing one, but it turned out to be a picture of Beethoven.

Prom Night should have been the Corpses' magnum opus, the kind of show that becomes a high school legend, etching our names so deeply into the annals of the school that my kids would be canonized. If Dave had been serious about making a career in music, he would have used the prom as a launchpad to cutting a demo and maybe getting some gigs down in Halifax. By April, we'd crafted a set list almost entirely of originals, with Dave and I splitting writing duties 50/50. Our stage show was gradually evolving into a more professional routine, with a more cohesive collection of songs, even though Dave was a bit too in love with stretching out his awful solos.

But, as I learned early on in the relationship, Dave wasn't serious about a career in music; music was just a more sophisticated form of dress-up. What Dave was serious about was his image—every single decision he made, whether it was about what he wore, how he got his hair cut, what he said, how he responded to what was said to him, how he moved, his gestures—each little brick contributed to a solid wall of personal style. Every action was checked to see how it added to or took away from his cool, like the way he never looked up to see who was coming, as if he either already knew or couldn't care less. So discussions about music bored and frustrated him. If I asked him why he'd settled on a particular chord sequence or key change, he'd respond with an impatient snort and run his hand distractedly through his hair. All of this drove me crazy enough, but he also considered it an image boost to break other people down with snide comments, making nasty digs whenever I wore a new hat to school (I mean, I knew they were a

bit ridiculous, but that was the whole charm) or insulting anyone who tried to talk to me during breaks between classes.

Arguing with him was like fighting with a television set. He just wouldn't let himself get worked up over anything, asking if I was on the rag when I yelled at him. Many of our practice sessions ended with me storming out of the garage, my nerves singing like high-tension wires, and walking the two kilometers back home. The sweaty stink from the garage would stay with me on these long walks, and I'd throw out my arms when I crossed the long, straight stretch of road that divided the marsh, lonely and exposed, letting the constant bitter wind scrape my face a polished-apple red.

I figured none of the guys were going to be very receptive to my prom night idea, so I made sure to get as much as possible done beforehand, to keep them from backing out. The head of the prom committee was a girl named Petra McCain, a senior who had tried out for first chair clarinet on audition day. The extent of our relationship was an occasional nod as we passed each other in the hallway, so she probably thought I'd mistaken her for someone else when I rushed up to her breathlessly as she was putting her coat on one Friday afternoon. Hi, Petra, I said.

Hey, she replied. Her voice was friendly enough, but I could tell she was pretending not to recognize me, seeing as how we'd hardly said two words to each other the past year.

I heard you were heading the prom committee. Have you decided on music yet?

She raised her eyebrows. Well, we were thinking of hiring a DJ. Why? Then she got it. Oh, you're in a band, right. But & don't you guys play, like & heavy metal or something? I mean, do you think that's gonna work?

We can make it work, I said simply. We've got a good lineup of tunes you can slow-dance to, and some party stuff. I let my cockiness have some rein. I think it'd be wicked to have live music, you know, there's so much more energy. It's so much better than disco-in-a-can, we could really get people moving &

I don't know, Petra, turning away to scan the inside of her locker for something. A lost hairclip, maybe. I have to run it by the committee.

Well, let me know what you decide. We just need a couple of weeks to get ready. I had no idea if two weeks was enough time, but it seemed the most I could ask for without being overbearing.

I had no intention of leaving it at that, though, and began a one-girl campaign to herd the Laughing Corpses onto the bunting-frosted prom night stage. I started by designing some posters to put on the walls of the school, advertising the band's weekend concerts at the Mill. The posters were only up a week when the vice principal pulled me into his office for a talk, solemnly informing me that it was against school policy to advertise an entertainment event in an establishment of alcohol purveyance. He also threatened to suspend me if he caught me playing there, even though that seemed to be out of his jurisdiction.

My next tactic was to divide and conquer by singling out different members of the prom committee and buttonholing them long enough to plead my case. I'd never met most of them, but that didn't bother me. I was sure they knew who I was, after all. I was getting to be pretty unmistakable around the school, especially after I'd grown my bangs down to my nose, changed

the stud into a fake diamond, and dyed my hair a rich wine color. I figured they had to give it to us as a reward for my perseverance, or just to shut me the hell up. Either way, I was happy.

Dave, on the other hand, wasn't. He thought I was hijacking the band, turning it into some crowd-pleasing lounge act. Prom night? he snorted when I first told him my idea. I don't want to be anywhere near that school on prom night. Nor did he care for the way I was buttering up the prom committee. What're you wiping their asses for? They don't even come to the shows. He did think it was funny that I got a talking-to from the vice principal, who was no stranger to Dave and his buddies. Even after seven months together I still hadn't convinced Dave that I was for real, not just a bandy slumming with the school rebel. Rebel, right. His family could have bought my house, our land, and Dad's truck, and given it to him for a birthday present.

He was also bothered by the ovations I was getting. Every time I stood up from the drums, to go get a drink or smoke a cigarette, I was instantly surrounded by kids wanting to know if I could come to their parties or play for their birthdays. Dave, meanwhile, sulked in corners and doorways, always turning away whenever I looked in his direction, cracking jokes with whoever happened to be standing closest to him.

When I finally got confirmation from Petra that the Laughing Corpses had scored the prom gig, I ran down to the cafeteria to let the guys know. Steve and Carl seemed less than thrilled by the news, shrugging and digging into their macaroni and cheese with barely a glance up at me. Dave was more interested in what was under my shirt, as he grabbed me when I sat down. I slapped his hand away. Did you hear what I said?

Yeah, I heard you. How much are they gonna pay us?

Not much. A hundred bucks.

He shook his head and pulled away from me. See, that's where I got a problem.

C'mon, man, there's gonna be a thousand kids there! We could play an all-original set & Don't you think it would be cool to get all those kids who never come to our shows, the ones who think they're too cool to care, we can make them all listen.

Dave casually helped himself to some of my fries. Do we gotta dress up?

That's the best part, I said excitedly. They want us to look, you know, presentable. So I'm gonna ask Mandy if I can borrow her sister's wedding dress. You guys can rent tuxedos and &

Tuxedos? Carl interrupted, and uttered a harsh bark of laughter. You know what it costs to rent a tuxedo? It's like a hundred bucks or something.

Don't your parents have something you can borrow? I think that's part of the look. It doesn't matter if it's the right size or not, or what color it is. Just as long as it looks like a tuxedo or even a suit.

Steve was pondering the idea in his typical way, keeping his gaze glued on me, his eyes narrowed, until a smile of enlightenment bent his lips. I wanna do it, he said, unsure at first, but then with more conviction. Let's do it, Dave. Don't you want to rub their faces in it?

Yeah, Carl chimed in. What if we tore down all the ribbons and stuff at the end of the concert. Or maybe try to bodysurf in the crowd. He cackled at the thought. C'mon, let's do it.

Dave was looking hard at his plate, every once in a while stealing a fry from mine and munching it thoughtfully. All right, if you guys want it that bad, we'll do it. But we gotta start practicing. This'll be our biggest crowd ever, so let's try to make the absolute fucking best show we've ever done.

I threw up my arms and gave out a victory whoop, attracting the attention of a group of cheerleaders at the end of the table. Okay, so let's meet this afternoon at 4:00 and go over that new song, Mother Thighbone Stew.

Whoa, hold on a goddamn minute here, Dave said, making a referee's time-out gesture. Who's the leader of this band anyway? I stared at him in surprise. Okay. We're gonna meet this afternoon at four and work on our new song, Mother Thighbone Stew. What're you looking at me like that for? We got work to do!

From that point on, I began to emerge as the driving force of the Laughing Corpses, making sure everyone showed up to our daily practice sessions on time and kicking in their doors when they didn't. The prom committee had given us two weeks to get into shape, and we were still working on about a dozen songs that were long on gruesome couplets but short on tight bridges and key changes. I wanted a more varied set, with some slow-dance numbers to go along with the punk deconstruction and general white noise assault, knowing that this was a much different crowd than we were used to. There would be chaperones to think about, and harsh repercussions if things got out of hand.

Dave fought me on every decision. I expected that. Two years of having his rhythm section perform for him like an organ grinder's monkey had turned his trio into a little cult, with Carl and Steve bowing to Dave on every point, usually not even seeming to have an opinion about where the band was headed. Dave had written the bass lines and drum parts for every original song until I came along and started questioning everything. He covered up his lack of technique with squalls of feedback and sneers of disdain if I even mentioned the concepts of melody or structure, treating the holes in his style as if they were windows to a freer form of musical expression. To me, they were just holes that wound up being plugged either by the rest of us, having to navigate actual chord changes and tempos, or by the crowd, who simply saw Dave as a no-rules art skronker, doing something that anyone else could do with a taped-together Strat and a garage to punish with stacks of noise.

Still, on the night of the show, he looked delicious in his tux, with the little black bow tie and all the tangles combed out of his hair. When it came time for me to inspect him, he stood in the garage like a grubby kid on school photo day, squinching up his eyes when I brushed some stray dandruff off his shoulder. I thought I looked pretty good myself—my skin was clear for once and the little red spot near my mouth turned out to be a lipstick stain. I took that as a good omen.

We arrived at the gym at five o'clock, three hours before Dave would mangle his first chord, and started setting up. The theme for the prom was a kind of 'Guys and Dolls' takeoff, with the prop department offering complimentary fedoras for the guys and Salvation Army caps for the dolls. The decorators had done an amazing job, turning the basketball hoops at the ends of the court into streetlights and laying down a sidewalk scene made from construction paper.

The walls were disguised as moonlit buildings, yellow windows matching the color of the crescent moon hanging from the ceiling. Paper stars wrapped in aluminum foil dangled all over the place, catching the light and sprinkling it around like pixie dust.

I have to confess, I felt a little twinge in my heart as I watched the students start filing in, hanging on each other's arms in breathy little clusters. Most of them had come in groups of six or more, and, although they walked through the big double doors as couples, many of them split off into male and female subsets, the guys converging on the punch table, the dolls taking a tour of the gymnasium to ooh and ah at the impressive decorating jobs. Not many students actually took the complimentary hats, not wanting to mess up their hair, carefully colored and teased, gelled and spritzed that afternoon at salons all over town. I had to laugh at how these same students, too cool for school during the rest of the year, gushed over each other's dresses and dates, ready to melt into a puddle the moment we started playing some gooey romantic ballad like *I Can't Help Falling in Love With You*. After all, they wouldn't be here if they didn't believe in it, at least a bit. And when the lights went down, I couldn't help believing too.

Petra had instructed us again and again to keep the music light and poppy, and switch to a ballad whenever the floor emptied out. I had every intention of following those orders, and when I kicked us off into the first song, the Ramones *Rock n Roll High School*, I caught a glimpse of Petra in the wings, nodding and smiling with exaggerated relief. I suddenly understood that she'd been worried about what would happen, had maybe even regretted letting us play the second she gave us the gig. For some reason that pissed me off, even though I shouldn't have been surprised. I'd never actually seen her at one of our shows.

Our first set lasted forty-five minutes, and although we played well, something was lacking. It was a professional set with, I thought, a can't-miss selection of originals and standards, and we were following each other well, staying on course. But the energy wasn't there, not from the crowd and not from us. We sounded flat and lifeless. I was finding it hard to play in my bridal getup. I was drowning in sweat, my feet kept getting caught up in all the bustle around the kick drum, and my bunched-up sleeves were always flopping around awkwardly.

At break time, I was the first one off the stage and out the door to grab a few lungfuls of crisp spring air. Dave and Carl joined me where I was sitting on a window sill. None of us said anything for a while. I pushed my veil back to light a cigarette while Carl fidgeted with his bow tie. We played good, he said to no one. Not our fault nobody's dancing.

Not our fault they're a bunch of assholes, Dave said, his voice full of disgust. He hawked a loogie on the grass. See them walking off the floor every time we played an original song?

My friend Mandy had seen us and came over, yanking at her dress. She'd lost the orchid from her corsage somewhere, along with her date. Man, you guys are awesome, she shouted, grabbing Dave's arm and giving him a hug. I stared at her. But you know, I think you should go all the way out there and start playing some real headbanging metal.

Are you nuts? Dave snarled, yanking his arm out of Mandy's grip. They hate us. I'm tempted to quit right fucking now and just go back home and get drunk.

Maybe we should just go out there and wake everybody up, suggested Carl.

I'd been concentrating on my cute little bride's shoes, listening without adding anything. Suddenly, I looked up. Where's Steve?

The others looked around at each other as if I'd just asked them for directions to Mars. I don't know, Dave said. I thought he came out with us.

Carl shrugged. Probably taking a shit somewhere.

I was watching Mandy's fingers twine around Dave's, kind of dazed by her audacity.

You know, Mandy, I think that's the best A-fucking-number-one idea you've ever had. What about you guys?

Dave looked at me incredulously. What? You? Weren't you the one who was always telling me to tone down the lyrics and make everything sound nice and sweet? You fought for this gig. You knew it would be exactly like this, right? And now you wanna fuck it up?

I could almost feel my eyes shining with mischievous fury. Why not? I think it's time for a little Mother Thighbone Stew. I looked around at the rest. You with me or not?

Carl grinned, brushed his bangs out of his eyes. I'm always with you, Sonya. You know that.

Dave shook his head, still not sure if I was kidding around or not. Then, he put on his controlled madman act and leaned close to me, enunciating every word. You wanna do this with me, you gotta go all the way. All the way to the fuckin' moon. You understand?

I threw my head back and let out a piercing scream. Dave recoiled. Mandy squealed in delighted surprise. Carl matched my glass-shattering exhibition with a few wolf calls of his own. Fuckin' Christ! Dave yelled, when I closed my mouth again. All right, you're in. Let's go tear it up! Are you ready?

Yeah! roared Carl.

Are you ready?

Ready! Mandy howled. She wasn't even in the damn band.

Allllllll right! Dave grabbed me by the wrist, hauled me up and started off toward the gymnasium again. Steve, where the fuck are you? he hollered at a group of students, a red coal moving back and forth between them. Fuck off, muttered a shadowy smoker.

He's probably stoned somewhere, Mandy offered. Once more I saw her try to snake her hand into Dave's, but he brushed it away as if it were a spider and threw open the double doors of the gym with authority, grabbing guys-and-dolls hats on his way by. When he tossed me a beret, I tore off my veil and jammed the hat down onto my head. I didn't give a shit how ridiculous I looked. In fact & Just a sec, guys, I said, and ducked into the bathroom.

As I stared at myself in the smudged bathroom mirror, all I could think of was Mandy, and those surreptitious fingers, curling like a snake snaring its victim. Hardly aware of what I was doing, I took out my eyeliner pencil and started drawing raccoon circles around my eyes. Then I drew squiggly lines at the corners of my eyes and a lacy question mark between the points of my eyebrows. Now I looked like some dried up Vegas hag, jilted at the altar by a Caddy-driving cowboy, pissed that she'd lost her lucky slot machine. Actually, I looked more like a drunk waitress, jilted at the altar by her truck-drivin' son-of-a-gun, now ready to go toss back more tequila shots in some sleazy bar. Actually, I didn't know who I looked like, but I

certainly didn't look like myself. I looked demented. Fine, I told my reflection. I'm hideous.

A couple girls came in, in the middle of a gale of laughter. They shut up when they saw me, but I didn't know if it was out of surprise or recognition. Hey, one said, taking out a tube of bright red lipstick. You're in the band, right?

It's my last show, I replied, shoving my eyebrow pencil back into my pocket.

Oh yeah? The girls had begun doctoring their overripe lips. Clearly, they couldn't give a shit.

I marched past them and pushed the door open. Actually, you may want to stay in here, I said. We're gonna try and start a riot. I studied the looks of puzzlement on the girls' make-up caked faces. In a moment of black malevolence, I saw them as aging harpies, still engrossed in their empty reflections, slathering on rouge and mascara as if they were troweling up cracks in the wall of a long-abandoned house. So when the cops show up, don't tell them I told you. I walked out without another word &

& bumped right into Steve, who was lurking just outside the door. With no warning at all, he forced me up against the wall and pressed his mouth on top of mine, panting and cramming his tongue far enough down my throat to practically choke me and banging my kidney into a protruding electrical outlet. A bolt of searing pain shot up my back and I cried out, struggling in his sweaty grip for a second, but he'd pinned my arms behind my back and I'd never realized how strong he was. He had a husky farm-boy build that he disguised well with his slouchy walk and hangdog potato face and when I struggled, I was struggling against years of hoisting hay bales and rescuing little brothers caught under tractor wheels. I didn't have a chance.

But just as suddenly, he broke off the kiss and stood there staring at me like a sleepwalker who'd just been awakened at the edge of a cliff. I had my back against the wall, crouched and ready to make a move if I needed to, my face taut in disgust and revulsion. An acne flare-up peppered his forehead and cheeks, highlighting the dips and craters that puberty had left behind. Lost in the shocking suddenness of his act, Steve backed off, mouth hanging open, eyes dull with surprise and incomprehension. He looked monumentally retarded, like his father had dropped him on his head when he was a baby—not once, but repeatedly, and from a highway overpass. Or maybe he was just staring at my face decorations. Whatever power had stopped him in the middle of his lunging was now trying to fuse together whatever part had snapped inside him. His face worked in the dim yellow light of the hallway, his mouth wobbled, mumbling a half-apology, and then, apparently figuring the reward wasn't worth the risk, he turned and practically ran out the side door, leaving me alone with his slightly greasy after-scent. In all that time, the space of about two minutes, no one popped their head around the corner to see what was going on. The girls in the bathroom were still in there, doing God-knew-what-to-their-faces. I closed my eyes and leaned against the wall. My back ached where the outlet had punched me, a sure sign that I'd have a nice bruise to look forward to tomorrow morning. Fuck!

Dave and Carl were in deep conference when I stepped back onto the stage. Mandy was still there, skulking around the perimeters. She didn't see me as I sat down behind my kit and

picked up the sticks. Dave came over to me, a look of rage twisting his lips, and squatted down beside me. Looks like Steve walked out on us. His voice was low, as if he didn't want the others to hear what he was saying to me, and he didn't even raise his eyebrows at what I'd done to my face. His guitar wasn't in the van, and no one saw him leave.

I shrugged. Do we need him?

Dave looked back over his shoulder at Mandy, who was talking with a couple on the dance floor, then turned back to me, eyes narrowed. He seemed about to say something, and I probably didn't want to hear it. My grip on the sticks was so tight that I could feel my fingernails pressing into my palms. Finally, he just shook his head and stood up again. I don't want to do this, he said, more to himself than to me. He walked over to where his Fender was laying by the lip of the stage, picked it up and started adjusting the mike. A whine of feedback shot through the gymnasium. Everyone on the floor, who'd been shuffling to an old Phil Collins song, stopped and stared at the stage. Dave flipped his hair back with one hand while he tightened his guitar keys with the other. We got an original to play for you now, he said with a growl, glaring out at the guys who were milling around the punch bowl. Was it the same group of guys from the beginning of the night? I couldn't tell. This one is called Mother Thighbone Stew. And I want to see you motherfuckers dancing! Mandy, acting as Dave's one-girl pep squad, backed up his request with squeals of delight. I glanced over at the pair of teachers who were standing by the exits. I could almost watch a look of horror leap from the face of one chaperone to the next, as if the music had unleashed a particularly busy imp into the gym.

Mother Thighbone Stew was our signature song. We'd wrestled with it for weeks, trying to get Carl's chuggy bass line to blend properly with my drum patterns. When we'd finally gotten a nice harmony going, we added crunchy power chords and weird, distorted runs until the song sounded exactly like its title: a festering stew of boiled bones and weird screechy noises. Dave's blistering rants and shout-along chorus topped off the unholy mess. It was a huge hit at parties, and we always got requests for it. Now, without Steve, Carl and I had to crank it up a notch to get the right texture for our interplay.

For about thirty seconds, as the song's intro psycho-stomped all over the crowd, everyone remained frozen in a state of comical stupor. And then Dave belted out the opening stanza:

Gonna carve up your momma with a steak knife!
 Gonna cut me a slice of your pretty young wife!
 Gonna boil up some veggies for an hour or two!
 Gonna scarf down a bowl of Mother Thighbone Stew!

The wave started with a five guys near the stage. They'd abandoned their dates along with their tux jackets and cummerbunds, and were now thrashing their heads in perfect time to the song. That did it—within moments, the whole gym was rocking and thrashing, as students in full prom regalia shook their fists and shouted a rah-rah-rah chant that made the Mother Thighbone Stew! Whatcha gonna do? hootenanny chorus into a roiling contest between Dave and a hundred-headed, tuxed and taffeta-ed party monster. Why are you sitting there? You know what to do! Dave was screaming into the mike, his voice a distorted, throaty gurgle. The

crowd lunged and seethed. Carl's bass popped and churned while I pumped at the kick drum, furiously pounding out an ear-throbbing tattoo. You know what to do! Dave shouted again, saying the words over and over like a demented preacher as the students writhed in ecstasy, their responses melding into an indistinguishable blur of noise.

A group of girls jumped up and yanked down some dangling ribbons. A small crowd of boys started ripping up the bunting that hung from the stage. Several students started throwing cups of punch at each other, splashing the girls around them. Other students caught at this idea, and dashed over to the half-full punch bowl. Cups were dunked and came up brimming with sticky pink liquid. From the corner of my eye I could see the students running back over to the stage and was about to shout out a warning (not that anyone could possibly have heard me), when they let fly with punch, soaking Carl and hitting me full in the face. Without missing a beat, Carl shook his head, sending a halo of spray all around him. Dave was still shouting his orders, with his arms spread wide and his tux jacket hanging halfway down his back, lost in the throes of stage madness, oblivious to the new group of punch-bearers creeping up to the stage. I broke the rhythm to shield my face with my arm, but wound up drenched anyway. The sickly-sour citrus fragrance nearly gagged me. Mandy's sister's dress was sticking to my skin in all kinds of uncomfortable places, and my face still dripped with the stuff. Students were crowding dangerously close to the stage, while Dave was pumping his clenched fists in the air and shouting himself hoarse, as if he'd just become the new mayor. All I could make out were words school, burn, teachers, kill and then the guitars died a grisly, squally death. Someone had pulled the plug on us.

Before I could pry the sticks from my aching fingers, several teachers had stormed the stage to put a stop to the show. I saw Ms. Campbell, Mr. Brown, another music teacher, the vice principal Mr. Phillips, others I didn't know the names of. They marched in like government troops called in to squash a peasant uprising and took over the dance floor, herding students off in little groups, regardless of where their dates were or who they'd come with. When the teachers had gained complete control of the gymnasium, Mr. Phillips stalked towards the stage like a stormtrooper.

I'd always thought of Mr. Phillips as a meek little man, trying to conjure authority with owly glasses, brown corduroy suits and the stiff, stilted vocabulary of a lifelong pedant. Watching him efficiently crush our little rebellion changed my mind. When he reached the stage, he brushed Dave aside effortlessly and signaled to someone in the wings to flip the fuse. The mike screeched to life again and the students, who'd been distracted by the sudden silence, were now staring up at the stage. Only then did it occur to me how deep in trouble I was. Had we broken some obscure obscenity or public disturbance law? I knew you couldn't shout Fire! in a crowded theater, but what was the penalty for tearing apart a Guys and Dolls set?

Students, you've disgraced yourselves tonight, Mr. Phillips began in clipped, even tones. You and this excuse of a band. Dave, standing sullenly with Carl, flipped Mr. Phillips off at that. And if you don't think I can suspend each and every one of you, you're dead wrong. Do you care about your fellow students, who worked so hard to make this night memorable for you? Do you even care about the custodial staff, who has to clean up your shit? I was started to hear him swear. A few more teachers came in from the side door, pushing buckets and

carrying mops. You have a choice! Mr. Phillips roared. You can help clean up your own damn mess, or you can be suspended! And you, he said, turning to Carl and me. You two *are* suspended. Dave Rasmussen, congratulations you're expelled.

Mr. Phillips walked off abruptly, leaving the echo of his last few words floating around the stage. Everyone was watching him as if they couldn't believe he was serious, but when he led the teachers in handing out mops, students took them without complaint. Even the punch throwers were gathering up scraps of crepe and construction paper and picking up overturned chairs. As I was led off the stage by Ms. Campbell, I noticed Petra in tears over by the ersatz street lamp. A ragged chunk of the yellow moon dangled forlornly from her hand. I wanted to go over and say something to her, but I couldn't even bring myself to look her in the eye as I went past.

The teachers had done such an effective job separating Dave, Carl and me that I wasn't even aware of what they were doing until Ms. Campbell had almost shoved me out of the gym. I took one last look back over my shoulder at Mandy, who must have seen me being led away because she had her arm looped around Dave's like she wanted a share of his punishment. I saw her lean over and kiss him full on the mouth, with perfectly relaxed, perfectly shameless ease. Then the door closed on them and I was outside.

CHAPTER 5

I decided to walk home. The air still had a bit of bite even though it was getting into June, so I hurried to get my coat around my shoulders. The wedding dress was bonding with my skin now, and the moment it made contact with the air I felt shivers racing up and down my back and arms. The flouncy lower half of the dress nearly brushed the pavement under my feet, and there was no way I could keep it out of the puddles. Not that I tried too hard anyway. All I wanted to do was get far enough away from the school for anyone to see me if they came looking. I pictured myself up ahead, trudging down the strip of road out across the marsh, and kept pace with that figure, staying just far enough behind to make out the drooping silhouette against the star-strewn sky. I wanted to stay where I was, not get any closer, in case the figure turned around and froze me with its dead gaze.

The road was strangely quiet tonight, quiet enough for me to listen to the breeze comb its way through the reeds and sweep across the street. Out toward the abandoned Onslow Speedway, a freight train gave a long honk, muted by the distance and the night air. As I neared the spot where the road bridged a narrow brook, the evening stayed in my memory as a sequence of freeze-frame snapshots—Steve's awkward lunge outside the girls' bathroom, Mandy's fingers twining around Dave's, a crowd of tuxedos with spiky hair sneaking up to launch a cascade of pink liquid all over me, the sudden blackness and the accompanying confusion. A dull ache began to throb in my chest, strong enough to make my breath hitch, and my legs held up just long enough for me to slowly lower myself onto the side of the road. A plank of creosoted wood jutted out beside the culvert and I sat down on it, not caring anymore about getting my dress dirty. Tears blurred my vision, but I refused to let them fall. All I wanted to do was listen to the brook as it echoed through the culvert on its way to wherever brooks went.

A car approached, headlights flashing, beeped once as it passed. I looked up in time to see something whiz by my head from the passenger window. I felt a spray of liquid splash my face, almost knocking me into the water. A hoarse voice screamed out at me. Yo bitch, suck my cock! There was laughter, and the car peeled away, leaving a wake of burnt rubber. The object had landed a little further up the brook, and was now floating past my feet, but I saw it before it disappeared under the road. A beer can. I wiped my face with my forearm, my lips pressed firmly together, determined not to cry. The tears came anyway. Fuck, I hated crying, it was so damn pointless. It didn't solve anything.

I sat and cried for about fifteen minutes, and in that time several more cars passed by me on the way to Onslow Mountain. I knew I must have looked ridiculous, sitting there bawling my eyes out, covered in road dust and wearing a stupid, punch-stained wedding dress, but I couldn't stop myself. The sobs racked my body, cold and bitter, until I didn't even remember what I was crying about anymore. I scrubbed my eyes with the sleeve of the dress and staggered back up to the shoulder of the road. My butt ached from sitting on the cold wood, and I winced as my feet prickled their way back to life. I still had about two kilometers to go, and the only way I was going to get home was to put one foot in front of the other.

Fuck you, Dave! I shouted, as I passed the crumbly old truck garage on the corner. Fuck you, Steve! Fuck you, Carl! Fuck you, Mandy! Fuck the Laughing Corpses! A raggedy junkyard dog, startled out of sleep by my noise, clanked his chain and barked angrily, sounding a bit like a laughing corpse himself. I was struck by a fit of giggles and clapped my hands over my mouth to stifle them. My feet ached, my back smarted, but I felt calmer as I turned onto Highway 311 and started the home stretch. The moon was fully out now, stark white against the scratchy tree limbs that I was looking through and from across the marsh I could hear the North River rushing along, fed by the spring thaw.

When I got to the underpass, I was so tired and wrung out that I had to fight the temptation to climb up the concrete slope and make a nest up there out of beer bottles, Playboy magazines and other j. d. leftovers. But I gutted out the last half-k to the bungalow. Dad's truck was parked in the drive, but luckily Diane's car was not. I had no interest in facing her tonight, not after what my nerves had already been through. All I wanted to do was peel off my clammy clothes, pour hot, soapy water over my head, and sleep until noon.

I could hear Dad snoring thickly even before I put the key in the lock. When I pushed my way into the kitchen, I could see him passed out on the couch, one arm thrown over his face, pulling in oxygen in huge, broken rasps. A tumbler of whiskey was on the coffee table, along with an empty bottle of his precious Jack Daniels. My fury returned instantly, and I threw the veil I'd been carrying on the floor with a curse. Hardly knowing what I was doing, I marched into the living room and began yanking at the arm dangling on the floor. Of course, I had as much chance of moving his huge body as I did moving the Notre Dame, but I kept at it, grunting with the effort. Get up, get up, get up, I hissed between clenched teeth. Christ, Dad, move your ass. His only response was a broken snore and an indecipherable mutter. Panting, I let the arm fall back to the floor and stood staring down at him. Maybe he'd had a fight with Diane.

I cleaned up a little, picking up the dirty dishes and putting the cap back on the bottle. When I put it under the sink, I was shocked to see three other empties beside the garbage can. God, how long had he been on this jag? I washed the dishes, then went back into the living room to try to get him on his feet and into bed. This time, when I tugged on his arm, he came to a bit and looked at me with weepy, bloodshot eyes. Sonya, he said in a slushy murmur. What are you &? I didn't answer, trying to wrestle him into a sitting position. Christ, my head & he muttered.

I draped one of his giant arms around my neck. It rested there like a dead python, heavy and unmoving. C'mon, Dad, let's get you to bed.

He came slowly, lurching and swaying, like a sleepwalker, banging his shins against every piece of furniture in the room. The record player was on, the needle bumping against the spindle, an unwelcome reminder of my own night of debauchery not so long ago. Dad's weight was almost crushing me, but I was able to maneuver him into the bedroom and get him into bed. He looked like a beached whale, his belly sticking out from under his grey work shirt, and under him the mattress sagged almost to the floor. As I watched him settle into the indentation he'd worn into the mattress, my anger drained away, leaving me exhausted again. Oh, Dad, I said softly as I closed the door on him. His chest rose rhythmically, decorated by a bar of light from the garage. Sweet dreams.

Just as I was finally drifting off to sleep to the mellow voice of Sade, the phone rang. I lay under my covers, waiting for it to stop, which it finally did after a dozen rings. Fuck you, Dave, I mumbled, sleep-dulled but still bitter.

I awoke in bits and pieces to sunlight streaming in from the window and the sound of Dad talking to someone on the phone. I couldn't tell who it was, but Dad's hushed voice and too many yeahs and uh-huhs told me that he didn't want me to know who it was. I figured that meant Diane. And it wasn't that I didn't like Diane, it just bugged me that Dad assumed I didn't like her, so he tried to keep her spot in our lives as low-key as possible. So he kept tip-toeing her around behind my back, like a guy trying to sneak a groupie backstage at a Stones concert. Now, he was saying Okay, okay, I'll tell her, almost in a whisper, for some reason forgetting that the acoustics of the house he'd lived in for more than twenty years let me hear every word of the conversation.

I peeled the covers back and got up, stretching and scratching, feeling like I'd just crawled out of my grave, with strands of unruly hair sticking to my face and neck. I hadn't cut it at all since my butcher job a year ago, and now the tumbling mass reached down between my shoulder blades, and I kept having to rake it back out of my eyes. The aroma of freshly brewed coffee wafted down the hall, and I followed my nose into the kitchen to find Dad pulling dishes out of the cupboards. He had a trucker's breakfast going on, with toast, eggs with sausage and bacon, pancakes and maple syrup, marmalade, hash browns, the works. I didn't think I was going to be able to eat much of it, but I grabbed my mug off the sideboard and rooted around in the fridge for milk. Apart from mumbled good mornings we said nothing, just square danced around each other from the stove to the sink and back to the table, accompanied only by the news on the radio and percussive cupboard banging. Dad wasn't a great cook. A lot of our dinners were the peel-back kind, but he did have a couple things he did really well. He could throw a pretty amazing chili con carne together, toss a fine fettuccini alfredo, and cook up the most heart-stopping, cholesterol-soaked, sunrise-on-the-highway truck stop breakfast ever. He only did it once a month or so, knowing how horrible all that grease was, but it reminded us both so much of being on the open highway, coffee out of a thermos, gas stations and truck stops, that we completely forgot the boredom and stress of driving. Mountain climbers probably got the same feeling whenever they ate rice and tofu.

Dad was obviously hurting. He was clumsier around the kitchen than usual, more than once dripping pancake batter on the floor. When he spoke, he barely strung two words together, saying only, Coffee's ready. Your plate.

Only when everything was on the table and steaming aromatically, did Dad seem more willing to talk. But I was nonplused by his first words. That was your mother on the phone. She's coming in for a visit today. Can you believe that? He shook his head and shoveled in a forkful of hash browns. I poured maple syrup on my pancakes and cut my fried egg, watching the yolk slowly form a deep yellow pool under my sausage. She wants to take us out for dinner at the Paesanella. Said she had an announcement to make. What do you say? Was he asking for my permission? I hadn't seen Mom since Christmas, and that had only been for a day of

opening presents in Annapolis Valley and eating just about every variety of apple product that existed—apple pie, applesauce, apple butter, apple cake.

Dad seemed tickled by the idea, which strengthened my suspicion that he and Diane had had a fight last night, but I kept my mouth shut and concentrated on pouring syrup on my pancake. Seeing Mom had gotten to be such a rare event that I never knew how to react to her visits. She was hopelessly behind on what was going on in my life, and it annoyed me when she asked about things that had been over and done with months ago. She never listened much anyway. I don't know how many times she messed up Dave's name or asked me about some girl I hadn't spoken to in a year.

Still, getting together wasn't a bad idea. At least I could find out what Travis was up to. The last I heard, he was at some technical college in Halifax, studying something with computers, but I had no clue what. Also, I was just a little bit curious to know if Mom had found a new boyfriend. She never mentioned anything when we talked on the phone, but she often had that distracted sound, the one Dad used when I knew he had to call up Diane after he finished talking with me, the sound of someone only half listening, just enough to fill in the lulls with questions. I figured she must have a guy stashed away somewhere. She wasn't even forty yet, and she had still kept most of her blonde high school cheerleader looks. When is she getting here, I asked through a mouthful of bacon.

Dad brushed toast crumbs off his plaid lumberjack shirt. She said around six or so. I've got to haul to Calgary on Monday, so I'm gonna be gone for about ten days. Think you'll be all right?

I put down my fork. No, Dad, I don't think so.

He looked up in surprise. What do you mean?

I stared moodily out the kitchen window, watching as a pair of blue jays had a squabble over real estate on a maple limb. I wondered if they were husband and wife. I just mean I hate coming back home when there's no one around. You know, it's dark and empty. I just hate it.

He blinked. You've never told me before.

Never mind. Just forget about it. Anyway, what kind of announcement is it?

I don't know exactly. He was still trying to digest my comments. She didn't explain anything.

Probably wants me to pick apples all summer, I said in a low voice.

Aren't you going to mow lawns again?

We continued pretending that last night didn't happen, and ate the rest of our breakfast in silence. I wanted to ask him what happened with Diane, but every time I looked up at him as he worked at his grapefruit, squirting juice onto the lenses of his bifocals, I shut my mouth again and decided not to press him. His eyes were cloudy, his lower lids sagged, and his hair stuck up in weedy clumps. He looked like a guy who'd been spent the night in the alley behind some dingy bar, who woke up and realized that he was in a completely different town from where he'd parked his truck. He had that same look of resigned befuddlement, like he didn't know what had happened or why, but somehow he knew he deserved it.

I was more intrigued by Mom's announcement. If she was coming all the way back to Truro, she must have something pretty original on her mind. Maybe she got me a job working

with her at the bank. That would be nice. I'd been pushing the same damn lawnmower now for two summers, and, though I liked getting out in the sun, getting a tan, and taking in that intoxicating summery cocktail of freshly cut grass and gasoline, I barely made enough money to keep myself in clothes and CDs. Forget about trying to save something for university. A hundred dollars a week just didn't stretch far enough. I knew I needed to come up with something.

Are you going to Dr. McCaskill's today? Dad asked.

Yeah, this afternoon. Dad &

Yeah?

I slurped up the last of my grapefruit. What would you say to me learning how to drive the truck?

You want some more coffee, or & He stopped abruptly and stared at me over the rim of his cup. Did you say you wanted to drive the truck?

Yeah, you know, maybe as a summer job or something. I could learn this summer, then be ready to drive next summer.

But getting a license is complicated. You have to do a lot of running around before they'll take your application at the school. He was speaking slowly, as if he were trying to figure out why the idea had just popped into my head. But I'm pretty sure they'd hire you at Thomson's. He peered at me. Are you sure you want to? I mean, it seems kind of sudden, doesn't it?

I'm getting sick of pushing the lawnmower, Dad. I want a bigger vehicle. He laughed at that, his first of the day. I could be, like, your co-pilot, bringing that giant semi in for a smooth landing.

It's up to you. But it's expensive. About \$3500, if I remember right. Mowing lawns isn't going to do it. How are you going to raise that kind of capital? Especially if you still want to take lessons with Dr. McCaskill?

Don't you mean we? Dad? The image of him passed out on the sofa came to me in a flash, one arm thrown over his face like a flag draped over a coffin. I don't know why I thought of him like that, his giant frame nearly spilling onto the floor, huge saw-stroke snores rumbling through the house. Dad seemed to be deliberately avoiding last night. I can't do this alone.

We could try to get a loan, I suppose. He went back to his bacon and eggs, closing discussion of the issue for the moment as he listened to the baseball scores on the radio.

\$3500? I hadn't expected that. \$3500 was about twice what I paid Dr. M for a whole year of lessons. It was ten times what I paid for my drum kit, and probably twice my university tuition. At seventeen, \$3500 might as well have been a million, because just about the only hope I had of raising it was to win the provincial lottery. Why didn't I just get a retail job at the mall or something? Or maybe teach some of Dr. M's younger students? I looked across the table at Dad, who was now absorbed in listening to the farm reports on the radio, nodding his head thoughtfully at the increase in price of non-fat dry milk futures. Whatever he really thought about my idea, if he liked it, hated it, thought it the stupidest thing he'd ever heard, he wasn't talking. I started clearing the table, picking up the plates and utensils as quietly as I could, and putting them in the sink. All through the house, the aroma of coffee, bacon and maple syrup

lingered, making me think I was cooking for a bunch of lumberjacks at a logging camp up in Prince George somewhere. Dad's plaid shirt and three-day beard completed the picture, making him look more Paul Bunyan-esque than usual.

As I washed the dishes, sunlight streamed in through the window, having burned off the crisp morning chill an hour ago. It speared the soap bubbles, prisms into tiny rainbow tracers that quivered in the air before disappearing in a soapy pop. Dad had gone into the bathroom to shave, leaving me alone with my thoughts. I kept expecting the phone to ring, half-hoping for Dave to call and ask me if I got home all right, or tell me the whole thing with Mandy was a put on, to make me jealous or something. But the phone stayed silent, as I knew it would, its beetle-black shell hunched on the counter, taunting me. I lost myself in the rhythm of the dishes, gently rinsing them off under the hot water and admiring their glistening sheen in the sunlight. The last dish to wash was Dad's whiskey tumbler. I picked it up, staring at the sticky brown stain on the bottom, then shook my head and put it back on the counter.

When I finished up, I drained the water and wiped my hands on the towel hanging from the oven door. Dad had emerged, freshly shaved, combed, and curled, knotting the Christmas tie I'd bought for him, a deep satiny blue tie with a golden maple leaf pattern. He was wearing his beautiful cream-colored special-occasion shirt with charcoal slacks. The whole ensemble seemed to be an attempt to impress somebody who wasn't in the kitchen. I'll drive you over to Dr. McCaskill's, if you want, he said, putting the milk back in the fridge.

I won't turn you down, I replied. His eyes traveled to the solitary tumbler on the counter, then back to mine, his face unreadable.

What time do you have to be there?

3:00. Are you wearing that to dinner tonight?

Why? he asked, his hand flying up to readjust his tie. Don't you like it?

I grinned. You look gorgeous, you big hunk! Like you just stepped out of TQ.

What's TQ?

Trucker's Quarterly. Mom's going to be amazed.

He cleared his throat, took his glasses off, wiped them clean, and put them back on with a myopic blink. Well, he harrumphed, I sure as hell hope so.

Sometimes Dad's body fit him, but other times he looked like he was wearing a suit four sizes too large for him. I liked him best when he was sitting in his rig, in complete control, his belly neatly nestled up against the huge steering wheel. Now, he was a kid getting dolled up for Sunday school, tugging his chafing collar and wanting desperately to muss up his carefully oil-slicked hair. Handsome, yes, but just a bit & undignified. That thought brought last night's sofa discovery crashing back into my memory, and I wrestled the image out of my head with a frown and a tiny headshake. Dad took my gesture to mean that I wasn't satisfied with something, so he tried pulling the knot a little higher. I came over to him, reached around his neck and smoothed his collar over the tie. There, I said, inspecting him. Perfect. Now go and bring the car around.

My lessons with Dr. M had been in a state of disrepair ever since the day he made his original offer to be my private tutor and now, eight months later, I'd cut back practice time to a

single three-hour block on Sunday afternoons, arriving just as the doctor and his wife were clearing away the lunch dishes and putting my shoes on just as Mrs. M started chopping the dinner vegetables. By May my Sunday practice sessions had become a major annoyance, more so as the decreasing practice time was causing my skills to deteriorate. Some Sundays, all I could do was stare at the keys of Dr. M's prize Kimball upright in frustration, wondering if centuries of fine craftsmanship and symphonic genius had conspired with the sole purpose of driving me insane.

His house didn't exactly create a comforting mood either. If Victorianism had been a religion, Dr. M's house would have been its church—a bewilderingly out-of-date collection of foyers, drawing rooms, parlors, and garrets, decorative antique chairs that no one was supposed to sit on, cabinet after hutch after credenza of virginal Wedgwood china that had never known the pleasures of mashed potatoes and gravy, and Galway crystal glassware preserved like museum pieces. The burnished gold carpet throughout the house was deep enough to brush the belly of their fat little Welsh corgi, Burt. And, if that wasn't quaint enough, perched like a little ivory dinosaur on top of the liquor cabinet by the kitchen entryway, stood an old-fashioned dial phone, its earpiece dangling in anachronistic defiance.

Through this carefully arranged display, Dr. M and his wife moved like two ghosts. Whenever they left their footprints in the lush carpet, within seconds it returned to its former immaculate condition, as if no one had ever stepped on it. In a way, it was creepy. As I worked on one piece or another, the entire house seemed to listen and when I stopped, the heavy silence was like a reproach.

Dad dropped me off in Dr. M's perfectly paved driveway, sending me on my way with a wave and a grin. Mrs. M answered the doorbell, stepping aside to let me into the foyer, standing behind me to make sure I put my shoes into their proper place on the shelf. She was a thin, stern-faced woman, with silvery-grey hair pulled back from her long-chinned face, still almost completely unlined though she must have been past sixty. She seemed to live in an endless state of busy-ness, always making me feel as if I'd interrupted her in the middle of something more important. Now, she was checking her watch and giving her head a brisk shake. "You're late this afternoon, dear," she said in a dry voice. She never used unnecessary words. "Dr. McCaskill is waiting for you."

Sorry. I had a lot to do at home. We're having dinner with Mom tonight.

She waved my excuse away like a troublesome fly. "Would you like some tea or something to eat? We've just cleared away the lunch dishes, but I could heat up some biscuits."

No, thank you. I'm stuffed. I had a huge breakfast. I walked past her, through the kitchen and into the drawing room, where Dr. M was sitting on the sofa, shuffling through a stack of sheet music. He looked up when I came in, then back down at the papers in his hands. I threw my jacket onto the sofa and flounced down beside it with a deep sigh. "So what are we going to work on today?"

He pulled out a sheet and studied it. "I haven't decided yet. It depends on you, really."

Why me?

Well, the way you came in here and threw your jacket down makes me think you've got a million other ideas about how to spend this afternoon. And none of them involve practicing

the Liszt sonata we were working on last weekend. He put the stack of papers down and looked at me, eyebrows raised. Am I right?

No-o-o. God, why do you say that? I'm here, aren't I? I had a bad night, okay?
He nodded and pulled out the Liszt piece. All right, then let's get to work.

An hour later I was outside, having fled from all offers of tea, cake, cookies, and everything else Mrs. M tried to shove under my nose, wanting nothing more than to call Dad again and have him come and get me. Dr. M was being an absolute hardass, making me play the same four bars over and over, barking orders at me and throwing up his hands in frustration when I kept making the same mistakes. But I just couldn't concentrate. Every time I started getting into the piece, making some progress, a memory from last night would invade my mind like a pirate and steal my focus. All I could think of was Dave. In comparison, Liszt just didn't stand a chance.

Dr. M had built an unkempt little tool shed behind his garage, and this was where I usually came out to smoke in peace. I found my little niche among the rusted lawn mowers and dirt-filled plant pots, sat down on a concrete pedestal and lit a cigarette, annoyed with my shaky fingers. Through the open door of the tool shed I could see the McCaskills' garden, about the size of the school basketball court. Nothing was growing yet, but if the weather stayed as nice as it had been, I'd soon be able to see the first green leaves of rhubarb sprouting up.

I smoked my cigarette in silence, sprinkling ashes into a box filled, strangely enough, with moldy children's toys—old plastic dolls that had lost body parts, rubber balls, building blocks, all kinds of leftovers from nieces and nephews that were probably in university now, trading Legos for architects' drafting boards and T-squares. I started to reach down for an ancient-looking puzzle with sliding squares when I became aware that I was being watched. I looked up and gasped with surprise. A blond-headed kid of about thirteen was staring at me from around the doorway. I clutched my chest to calm my pounding heart. Jesus, you scared the shit out of me, kid.

He went on looking at me expressionlessly, watching me blow white clouds into the warm May air. You shouldn't smoke, he said solemnly, large brown eyes unwavering. I studied him through the smoke. His hair was parted on one side and combed down so smoothly that I could see the grooves from the comb. He was wearing a navy blue shirt and jacket with a little yellow tie. His black shoes shone in the afternoon glow of the sun. After his initial statement, he lapsed into silence again, but kept staring at me, a kind of challenge in his blank gaze.

Why shouldn't I smoke? I asked, just to break the odd silence.

Because it's bad for you, he answered immediately and said no more. His eyes had taken on an almost sorrowful cast, and I couldn't help but chuckle at the seriousness of his pronouncement.

You're right, my handsome little preacher boy, I said agreeably. But so are sugar, butter, French fries, red meat, eggs, driving a car, playing in traffic, not exercising, exercising too much, and annoying grown-ups. I blew a coil of smoke rings. So why don't you bug off?

Grampie told me you're one of his students. He persisted. He still hadn't moved from his spot.

Dr. McCaskill is your grandfather? I didn't know that. Where do you live?

I'm from Toronto. I'm visiting for the week. This is my first time in Nova Scotia.

I moved over to give him some space. Well, you know you can come in and sit down. I'm not going to bite you. What's your name?

His face broke into a broad smile and, as if he'd been waiting for me to invite him, he plopped down on the pedestal beside me. Tyson. Wow, look all these old toys, he marveled, reaching into the box and pulling out the little number puzzle. For a few moments we were silent again, me absorbed in smoking and he in rooting around in the toy box.

Where are your parents? I asked.

They're in there with Grampie and Grammie. We just came back from church.

I figured that. But doesn't church finish around lunchtime?

He wrestled out the hulk of a Lionel electric train engine and inspected it carefully.

Mom wanted to talk to the reverend. She likes to talk to people, so Dad and I waited in the car. Hey, maybe I could sell this stuff back home. What do you think?

Is there a market for moldy old junk in Toronto?

Sure, for moldy old Nova Scotia junk. I laughed at that, but he seemed perfectly serious. Some of my friends told me to bring stuff back from Nova Scotia. They'd love some of this.

I butted my cigarette in a flowerpot. You're going to sell trash to your friends? What a pal.

He was looking at my stud, his mouth slightly open in admiration. That must have hurt a lot.

Nah, I snorted. The dragon tattoo on my back hurt a lot more.

He widened his eyes in astonishment. You have a tattoo?

I'm kidding. I stood up and stretched. Let's go back inside.

Okay. He was still fiddling with the toys. You can meet Mom and Dad.

All right. But wipe your ass off, it's filthy.

Tyson's parents were sitting around the kitchen table, deep in the middle of a conversation, and I was immediately able to see where Tyson got his unnatural seriousness. His mother was dressed in a professional-looking gray pantsuit, and as I entered the kitchen, she was tapping her forefinger into the tabletop like a judge trying to preserve order. That wasn't my point at all, she was saying. If you'd just listen to me & Dr. M was the first to notice me, but once he'd seen me, all four turned their heads in my direction and somehow I knew that I was the subject of the conversation.

Don't let me interrupt, I said. Please continue.

Tyson's father had the self-satisfied composure of either a lifelong academic or a successful businessman. He was leaning back a bit in his chair, thumbs hooked into the pockets of his double-breasted suit jacket, and his legs, clothed in expertly tailored slacks, were stretched out and crossed at the ankles in a posture of well-earned relaxation. He was tall and stately, and

as he puffed his pipe, the smoke hung in the air around him like clouds hugging the peak of a craggy mountain. As a matter of fact, he said, in a dry melodic roll, we were just talking about you. You're Sonya, I presume?

That's me, I said, pulling up a chair. And why were you talking about me?

I suppose we should introduce ourselves, Tyson's mother said, holding out her hand. My name is Julie Kennedy. This is my husband, Charles. I'm Peter's daughter, as Tyson may have told you.

Mrs. M poured me some tea without asking if I wanted any. It was some pungent restorative tea, chamomile maybe. I took a tiny sip out of politeness, then gently pushed the cup away from my nose. He told me you were from Toronto. I turned to look for him, but he'd disappeared into the drawing room.

That's right. Peter said he's been teaching you for ten years now. Is that right?

More like thirty years, I think. I glanced at Dr. M, but he was looking out the window at something in the backyard.

Yes, Mrs. Kennedy continued. And you're going to graduate next year?

I hope so, I replied, wondering where all this was going.

Have you given any thought to what you're going to do after you graduate?

After I graduate? God, no! I laughed. I just got suspended last night! Graduation's like, the last thing on my mind right now. I've got summer to worry about, and Dr. McCaskill's lessons &

Mrs. Kennedy exchanged a knowing glance with her husband, who nodded and puffed as if some deep matter had just been decided. I know you must think it's a bit forward of us, to ask you about your future plans. After all, we've only just met. But from what Peter has been telling us, you're quite a talented pianist.

I found Dr. M's endorsement hard to believe, especially after the way he'd growled at me today, but there was nothing but honest curiosity on Mrs. Kennedy's face. I didn't know if she was waiting for me to confirm or deny Dr. M's opinion, so I just shrugged and said nothing.

We've got a daughter about your age, named Rachel. She's a clarinetist. She's just been accepted into the Royal Conservatory of Music, in Toronto. Of course, we don't know what your plans are, but if you're serious about performing, that's the place to go. Have you been to Toronto?

Yeah, with my Dad. But we never stayed long.

Mr. Kennedy cleared his throat. We could send you a pamphlet, if you like. It's up to you, of course, but it's never too late to start thinking about it.

I guess you're right. Dr. M, do you want to get back at it?

Dr. M looked up. Yes, of course, Sonya. Whenever you're ready.

Mr. Kennedy held out his hand for me to shake. Well, it was nice to meet you, Sonya. And let Peter know what you think about our suggestion.

I will. Thanks.

Mr. Kennedy turned to his wife. I suppose we'd better get in town and get our errands run. Collect Tyson, will you? I'll wait for you in the car.

I followed Dr. M into the drawing room and sat down at the piano with a frown. Why did you tell them that? He pretended not to hear me, busying himself by tidying the sofa cushions. I played the first few measures of the Liszt piece, smoothing over the rough spots with hardly any difficulty. The rest of piece unfurled itself along the keyboard, note by note, each one distinct and indelible, each one necessary. For the first time in months, the song seemed to play itself and all I had to do was listen to it. As the last note faded away, I let my fingers rest, letting a warm, triumphant glow warm my cheeks. Do you really think I can do it?

Hmmm?

Do you think I can & get into the Royal Conservatory?

Oh, I don't know. It's pretty competitive.

You don't think I can, do you? I played the first few notes again, faster and faster.

I didn't say that.

You don't have to. I drummed my fingers on the keys without striking any notes.

C'mon, let's get back to work.

He smiled at me, eyebrows arched. Now that's what I like to hear.

CHAPTER 6

When Dad's Chev rumbled into the driveway two hours later, I was still riding the wave of my sudden ability, ignoring the single impatient blat of his horn to keep working on the Liszt piece, and there was no way I was cutting short the most productive afternoon I'd spent in over a year. Inspired by my newfound energy, Dr. M had moved from the sofa to the stool and was jabbing his fingers at the page to keep me on track, shouting encouragement in my ear: You're doing great! You're really feeling it now! Where did all this come from? A second horn blat went unanswered, and a third, until the door chimes finally distracted me long enough to lose my place.

Dad barely waited for me to close the door before ramming the car out of the driveway. I couldn't remember the last time I'd seen him so nervous. He was like a kid going to meet the father of his dream date, yanking at his collar, holding the steering wheel in a death grip. The stifling aroma of cologne filled the car, but either Dad was unaware of it or he'd already gotten used to it. He kept his eyes on the road, fidgeting with the radio, the heater, the mirrors, whatever he could get his hands on and turn, twist, or crank up and down. The radio dial reeled through a chaotic gumbo of country twang, R&B silk, bursts of rock and roll, and random snippets of talk show blather, all glued together with snowy blobs of static.

Dad was even less talkative than he had been this morning, so I decided to give him a quick coaching lesson. OK, Dad, a few tips from Miss Manners, I began. First, don't call the waiter Buddy. Make sure you put the napkin in your lap. Don't wear it like a bib, right?

Yes, yes, I know.

When the waiter gives you the cork off the wine, you're supposed to smell it.

I'm not an idiot, Sonya.

And, do not on pain of death, ask the waiter where you can take a slash.

Sonya! He finally turned toward me and glared. Lay off, for Chrissakes!

God, Dad, I'm just screwing around. I shook my head and watched the cornfields flow by, full of conflicted feelings. Maybe when he and Mom were dating his lovelorn puppy-dog nervousness was cute, but now it made him look a bit—as much as I hated to say it—like a chump. I stole a quick glance at his profile as he whistled and tapped the steering wheel to the honky-tonk ballad on the radio. To Mom he would always be the guy left standing on her doorstep holding the roses and candy while she snuck out the back door with the motorcycle-riding rebel. That act got old a long time ago, but here he was still playing the role twenty years down the road, long after the roses had become paychecks, the candy had become whiskey, and Mom had long since chased the rebel out of town. And suddenly I knew what he and Diane had fought about.

The Paesanella, like the Top Ten, was not long for Truro, even though it was the only decent Italian restaurant in town. Its poor location, disguised as just another rundown-looking old house on the outskirts of Bible Hill, steep prices (real Italian chefs don't come cheap), and pretentious name would conspire to ruin it before the next snowfall. At least the Top Ten had had the style to go out in a hailstorm of twisted power chords and crunching jackhammers. The Paesanella would sputter on for another year, choking on fumes from the putrid creosote plant across the road, its weathered, curlicued sign swinging in the indifferent wake of passing cars. But for one candlelit night anything was possible.

I recognized Mom's car easily enough, as it was the only blue Mazda in the lot. At the sight of the car, Dad was quick to grab the parking space nearest to it, the one closest to the fence separating the restaurant from the next house. He squeezed us in so tight that when I opened my door, a sunflower from the backyard garden bobbed over the fence slats and nearly hit me in the nose. I pushed it out of the way and slithered out of the small crack available between the door and the fence, groping with one hand for a fence post to help haul me out. On the other side of the car, Dad had hoisted himself up, causing a short, unpleasant skreek when his door struck Mom's Mazda.

We were shown into the main dining room by a maitre d' who looked like a high school senior, and saw Mom at the table closest to the kitchen door, sitting by herself behind a glass of red wine, her elbows resting on the pink tablecloth. The candles burning on either side of her face framed her in an elegant soft-focus glow. She looked amazing. When the maitre d' showed us to the table, she stood up like the host of a banquet greeting the guest of honor, with a murmur of pleasure and a hand extended toward Dad as if he were an old business acquaintance. Dad seemed surprised by the gesture, but took her hand and brought himself around the table for a hug. I watched closely, and to me the hug looked phony, like that of a brother and sister meeting to dispute a relative's million-dollar legacy.

You look amazing, Dad said, admiring Mom's smart gray suit with a purple orchid on her lapel. Instead of returning the compliment, Mom looked over at me, beaming. I dreaded her first words.

Sonya, you look lovely tonight. And how's that boyfriend of yours & What's his name? David?

I winced. Mom, please.

Not even my pained expression could shake the look of triumph she could barely hold back from her face. Whatever she had to say, she wasn't going to be put off by my grumpiness. Sit down, guys, don't stand on ceremony.

Dad sat gingerly down in the chair opposite Mom. I took my place beside him. Shall we have a drink first, before we order? Mom asked, and, without waiting for the answer, she poured wine into both of our glasses.

So what's this big news you have for me & us? Dad said, opening the menu and glancing down at the contents.

Mom took a deep breath. I'm getting married in July.

Dad nodded to himself, making me wonder if he hadn't heard properly. He kept scanning the menu up and down, pretending to be trying to decide what to order, but his

trembling hands betrayed him, at least from where I was sitting. Mom was looking down at her own hands, gently caressing the left with the fingers of the right. Finally, Dad put the menu down and smiled at Mom. Well, congratulations. I had no idea there was someone new in your life.

I've only known him for a couple of months, Mom gushed. I know it's a bombshell for the both of you, but I just didn't want to mention anything until we'd finalized our plans. You know, these things don't happen very often for people my age. But Douglas and I have been very direct and open with each other, about our future together, and &

How old is he? Dad interrupted, then caught himself. I mean, if it's not too personal. I'm just curious. I carefully slid the menu out of his hands in case he decided to throw it across the room or something.

Mom seemed surprised by the question, and tilted her head as if trying to remember.

Fifty-eight, I think, she replied. No, fifty-seven. He'll be fifty-eight in September.

How about that? I said and put the menu immediately back in the center of the table.

I think I'll have the carbonara and some of those fried mushrooms. And some garlic bread. With extra garlic. You guys?

Fifty-seven, Dad mused. He must be quite a guy, this Douglas & what's his last name?

Douglas Fielding, Mom said. And I think I'll go with the shrimp scampi. I'm feeling kind of adventurous tonight.

Dad would not be swayed. Douglas Fielding, he continued. Sounds like an old-time swashbuckler. Or maybe a bank official. He grinned slyly at me, but I wasn't going to take sides in this one. Dad should have seen it coming anyway.

He's not a swashbuckler or a bank official, Mom said, signaling for the waiter with a curled finger. As she gave our order, I decided to just float along on the river of aromas coming from the kitchen—roasted garlic, mounds of fresh basil, baking bread, cut with the zesty smell of freshly squeezed lemon. I still couldn't tell if Mom was offended or was just willfully ignoring Dad's barbs just to keep the peace. He's an investment broker from Vancouver. He came to the Valley for his youngest son's wedding. His son just happened to be my coworker at the bank. He asked me out, and one thing led to another & Dad sputtered into his wine glass.

You'd love him, I know you would. You'd both love him. He's a sweet, romantic man. He loves his family. He's always buying them gifts. He drives down here once a month to see me. And you're invited to the wedding, of course. You will come, won't you?

Really? Dad said. Do you think Douglas would appreciate having your ex-husband come to your wedding?

Oh, come on now, Mom admonished, lowering her voice as the waiter came by with our appetizers. It was his idea. We're all adults. We both have a past. His ex-wife is coming.

On hearing that, Dad shook his head. Was that his idea too? Or did you invite her?

His idea, Mom admitted, but she was smiling at him, her eyes clear and direct. But I didn't oppose it.

I don't get it, Dad said with a shrug. But it's your wedding. I guess we should see if this food is really worth half a month's salary.

Mom hadn't taken her eyes off Dad. You haven't answered my question. At that moment, I felt like a spectator at a wicked chess grudge match. I wasn't even sure if I was included in the invitation. I mean, deep down, I knew I was, but right now there were only two people in the room and I wouldn't have been surprised if Mom turned to me suddenly and asked me if I'd been sitting at her elbow the whole time.

Dad hastily swallowed his mouthful of bread and wiped his lips. What question was that?

Are you going to come to the wedding?

Dad looked at me, then back at Mom. I could almost hear the gears grinding. Well, if it's my blessing you want, you've got it. But & I think I'd feel a bit strange being there, watching you exchange lifelong vows with some other man &

I understand, Mom said and turned her attention to her steaming minestrone.

Wait a moment. I didn't say no, did I? You'll just have to let me think about it, all right? I mean, I need some time.

I burned to lighten the mood and get Mom and Dad to talk about something else, anything else. I've got an announcement of my own, I said. They turned to look at me. I've decided to apply to the Royal Conservatory of Music.

Both Mom and Dad turned to me startled, as if I'd just stepped out of a spaceship. Oh? Mom said, raising a carefully plucked eyebrow. Neither of them seemed to want to follow up on my outburst, so I picked up my fork again and went back to my salad. Well, Mom said. That sounds kind of sudden, don't you think?

Yeah, well, if you were around more, you'd know I've been thinking about it for a while now.

Mom was unmoved. And how do you expect to pay for it? Not with lawn-mowing money, I'm sure.

I don't know yet. I said, straining to keep my voice casual. I thought maybe I'd sell off some clothes and jewelry. Or start dating some rich old man. Maybe I'll just rob a convenience store. There's lots of ways to earn money for an enterprising girl like me. Or & maybe you could help me out a bit.

Mom sighed. I don't think we have to discuss that now, do we dear? You've got another year to think about it. She beamed a smile up at the waiter who was bringing our entrees. Thank you.

I understood her comment. She wanted to talk about her wedding plans and her fiancé, and nothing else interested her. Suddenly I wasn't very hungry anymore. I just wanted to go back home, crawl into bed, file this weekend under Ancient History, and forget about it. Mom apparently took my moroseness to mean she was free to prattle on about her own life, and she regaled Dad with stories of how Douglas waltzed her around a restaurant on their first date, how Douglas closed an investment deal while weaving in and out of Trans-Canada traffic, how Douglas flew her to Vancouver to propose to her in front of his bedridden mother. And all the while I was hearing about Douglas, the cream sauce was curdling in my stomach and I was starting to gag on the smell of garlic.

By nine, I'd never wanted a meal to be more over in my life. Dad must have felt the same way because he actually got up to flag down the waiter as he was disappearing into the kitchen. Mom had shown barely a flicker of interest in how Dad was getting along, never asking how work was going or if he was seeing anyone. When we finally said our goodbyes, Dad's greeting hug had turned into a brief handshake and a pasted-on smile. None of his signals seemed to register with Mom, who kept acting like the evening had gone exactly the way she'd wanted it to, right until Dad signed his credit card receipt and handed it to the waiter.

We stepped out into the warm night air. I breathed deeply, my stomach already shifting uneasily under all that rich cream. Dad saw Mom off with a wave and climbed into the car with me, making no sound but a short grunt as he pulled the door closed. I waited for him to start the car, but he just sat there staring straight out into the backyard behind the restaurant. His fingers thrummed gently at the fake fur sausage casing that covered the steering wheel. So she's getting married, he mumbled, more to himself than me. Ain't that a bitch? It was the last thing he said all night.

On the ride home we kept our thoughts to ourselves, with nothing but the road and the radio for company. Dad never even changed the station when it switched back to new country, which surprised me a little. He never mentioned my sudden announcement either. Both of them were caught in their own rigid little dance, like the couple on the poster in my room. Whatever was going on with me just wasn't dramatic enough to capture their interest. I stared out the window at the passing marsh, one stockinged foot propped up on the dash, my brain reeling through a hundred confused emotions at once. Was I pissed off at Mom for getting married? At Dad for acting like such a sap? At both of them? Or was I happy for Mom? Sad for Dad? I couldn't figure out why Mom had invited Dad to a romantic restaurant to tell him she was marrying someone else. That seemed & cruel. And just to make sure I was as confused as possible, the headlights from an oncoming truck perfectly illuminated the little ledge where I'd cried my eyes out last night. The whole prom burned back into my mind in one agonizing flash of lightning. God, was that last night? It seemed like forever ago.

Dad didn't even bother putting any pretenses on what he planned to do. The moment he got his shoes off, he strode over to the cupboard and pulled out one of his bottomless bottles of Jack Daniels and two glasses. He yanked open the freezer door, grabbed a handful of ice cubes, tossed them into both glasses, added a throat-scraping belt of whiskey to each glass, then handed one to me. I took it without arguing. Dad clinked his glass against mine then drained it in one gulp. I followed his lead, nearly coughing up the mouthful of alcohol before I could even swallow it. The expression etched on my face must have been a hell of a grimace, because Dad burst out with a roar of laughter, then poured another healthy slug into my glass. Before I knew what I was doing, I'd downed two straight shots of bourbon, and now it was mixing around with all that cream and pasta from dinner. When Dad held out the bottle for another shot, I shook my head, unable to speak, and put my glass on the table.

For a moment, I thought he was going to start screaming at me. His face contorted, the mirror image of what my face must have looked like when I took my first swig of whiskey. But then the wrinkles settled back into their usual positions and, again without a word, he jerked his

thumb over his shoulder. I took that as my cue to leave. I did, stopping just long enough to douse my face with water and give my teeth a quick scrub.

I spent the next couple of hours reading on my bed, playing Smiths songs and listening to Dad stumble around the kitchen, dropping ice, muttering under his breath, and banging his glass against the table. My heart was a frozen ice ball lying on the bottom of my stomach, and I kept reading the same passage in my book again and again, forgetting that I d already read it. I wanted so much to go out there and put my arms around him, tell him to go to bed, tell him to call Diane, tell him anything to get his mind out of that goddamn whiskey bottle, but every time I turned the book over and threw off my covers, I stopped. *He doesn t want your help*, I told myself. Just let him work it out on his own. Let him drown himself in booze and wake up under a truck somewhere, or with his head hanging in the toilet, anything to slap him back to some kind of sense and let him know how he was fucking his life up. But that should be your job, shouldn t it? Aren t you a part of his fucked-up life? A rather huge part of it? Then don t you think you should be out there slapping some sense into him yourself instead of hiding in bed?

My emotions were coiling around like writhing snakes tangled in knots, that when Dave called at around one I could barely close my eyes, let alone sleep. My eyes snapped open on the first ring, and I grabbed the receiver. Hello!

Hey & There was a note of sleep in his voice, as if I d woken *him* up. You still up?

Well, obviously, Sherlock. What do you want?

I tried to call you last night, but you didn t answer. Hey man, I m sorry about what happened, things got pretty screwed up.

I held the phone receiver away from my ear and stared at it like an exotic fossil, then brought it back. Do you even know what you re sorry for?

He paused for a beat. Yeah, about getting you suspended. I m just saying it was a shitty thing to happen. Why, what are you talking about? Is there something else I should be apologizing for? Because if there is, I have no fucking idea what it could be & Oh, I get it. You re talking about Mandy. Look, I don t know what you think is going on, but you re totally wrong &

He went on talking, but I stopped listening. I tried to picture his lips near the receiver, the waves of his voice transformed into electrical impulses, a computer-generated semblance of a human voice, reduced to a hellish croaking rasp, until the sounds that finally came out of the phone and into my ear had been stripped of all life, leaving only a string of bleats in the shape of words, without meaning or sense, the mechanical emptiness of an alien monologue. Fully creeped out, goose bumps racing up and down my arms, I gently replaced the receiver and hugged myself. The moment I took my hand off it, the phone rang again. I stared at it, willing it to spontaneously combust. It kept on ten, eleven, twelve shrill rings until I reached down and yanked the cord out of the wall.

I wanted a bath. No, I wanted a cigarette. No, I wanted a coffee. Maybe I could just get up, grab the keys and drive down to Tim Horton s, chain smoke and drink huge cups of black coffee until I my pee turned to mud and the counter guy keeled over from lung poisoning. The idea gripped my mind with such force that I was driving past the marsh with no conscious memory of getting dressed or grabbing the notebook that was now sitting on the passenger seat.

Tim Horton's was nearly deserted. As I pulled into the parking lot, I could only see a solitary denim-clad kid framed in the window. He had a scraggly moustache and he was sitting hunched over a bowl of clam chowder. When I pushed the door open, I had to adjust my eyes to cope with the brightly lit, whitewashed interior. The radio dial was perma-glued to Truro's everlasting country station, CKCL, and the guy behind the counter was actually a girl I recognized from school, a tenth grader. She was stacking the dishwasher with cups and coffeepots, accompanying Travis Tritt with a cheerier whistle than was appropriate at one-thirty in the morning.

I ordered a chocolate chip muffin and the biggest black lagoon of a coffee on the menu and settled in behind a red plastic bench with notebook, pen and cigarettes for inspiration. I took a sip of coffee, nearly burning my lips off, lit a cigarette, exhaled with a mighty breath, and jotted down the first lines that popped into my head:

Your words were teardrops.
 Who let you in like that?
 The children on the doorstep were watching us.
 As they laughed we made water necklaces with the rain.

I laid my pen down and glanced up at the counter girl and the guy eating his soup. I watched them for a few moments as they moved rhythmically to their own inner waltz—the girl's movements from counter to dish rack, the guy's spoon to soup to mouth to soup routine. The soundtrack changed to a George Strait lament, and I pictured the two, guy and girl, dancing together across the freshly mopped floor, the guy smiling through his stringy moustache, the girl taking off her paper cap and letting her long golden hair flow untethered over her shoulders. But, as they stayed nearly motionless except for those few simple, repeated actions, I realized that it wasn't the dance itself that interested me, but the longing for it. Both of them stealing quick snapshots of each other when they thought the other wasn't looking, both of them wanting more than anything for the other to put down his spoon and her cup and dance arm-in-arm across the floor in an invented moment of sudden contact.

I picked up my pen again and wrote:

We're dancing, me in your eyes and you in mine.
 Yet nothing moves but my fingers, conjuring
 An invented moment of sudden contact.

Suddenly I wanted a song. Just a simple one, a precise little piano piece with a few lines of poetry about a pair of miniature figurines who only wanted to touch each other, a tiny moment of contact cruelly denied them by a thoughtless owner. I could imagine a whole set of songs like that, beautiful tiny little pieces, about the hopes and desires of a bunch of figurines on a mantel, all of them horribly aware that a single touch could bring them to life. I would call it *Miniatures*.
 By Sonya Castle.

Another coffee and another muffin later, and my pen was sizzling, trailing squiggles and ink blots across page after page of my notebook, a steady stream of lyrics, little snippets of

stories, some lines in the margin, some upside-down, others written in spiral swirls, like water going down a drain, all of them about dead statues and disconnections, despair and longing, a feverish tribute to teenage heartbreak and caffeine jitters, and by the time I'd drunk the last drop of my coffee and eaten the last crumb of my muffin, I had nearly seven pages of the most intense poetry I'd ever written. I didn't know if it made a shred of sense, but it was pure power. My pen hand ached and my eyes throbbed with fatigue. I rubbed my face several times, trying to focus again, then raised my eyes.

The place was full of people—late night insomniacs, taxi drivers, kids pulling allnighters, all talking and laughing together in a gray fog of coffee and conversation. I couldn't believe I'd become so absorbed that I was able to completely block out the noise. I closed my notebook and wrote *Miniatures* in big black letters at the top. Then I gave it a coffee-ring brand as a guy who'd been scanning the little café for a chair suddenly came over to me. Is anyone sitting there? he asked.

I shrugged. No, go ahead.

Nodding his thanks, the guy sat down and started tucking into a ham and cheese sandwich. I reached for my cigarettes but the package was empty. Damn.

The guy looked up. Here, he said, reaching into his pocket and pulling out a package of Marlboros. You can have one of mine.

Thanks. I lit one and nearly gagged. Shit, these are strong. I looked at the guy more closely as he dug into his sandwich with both hands. He was a skinny kid, about twenty, with a severe brush cut and scraped knuckles. He was eating like he'd been lost in the woods for a week. He didn't seem to notice me looking at him, so I just contented myself with watching him eat, observing the way he finished what he was chewing and swallowed before wiping the mustard from his chin, totally unconcerned with who saw him or what they thought.

What are you writin'? he asked suddenly, looking at me. His eyes were a hard gray. He must have been watching me as closely as I'd been watching him, just more subtly.

I pushed the notebook around with my finger. What? You mean this?

Yeah. I saw you writin' in your notebook there. Figured you must be a cop or somethin'.

I'm no cop. Just writing. You know.

He swallowed the last bite of his sandwich. What? Poetry? You're a university student?

Actually, I'm a composer. I just finished my first year at the Royal Conservatory of Music in Toronto. Full scholarship.

No shit. He looked impressed. A musician? What do you play?

Piano and drums.

Yeah? He studied the empty cups and full ashtray on my table. You been here a while.

I don't know. Long enough to smoke about five years off my life.

He studied my face for a long enough time to make me uncomfortable. You want to come over to the Pond for a drink?

Uh & I made a show of checking my watch. I'm really beat. I was just going to finish up my coffee and get home.

His face broke into a broad grin and he held out his hand. I'm George, by the way. George MacNeil. I'm over at the agricultural college.

What are you studying?

Dirt. He said this without a trace of irony. I'm studying soil science, soil quality, that kind of thing.

Dirt.

He nodded. Dirt. So what about that drink?

I leaned in. I don't know, Mr. Dirt Man. It's getting pretty late, don't you think?

He snorted. I'm not even warmed up yet. How about a walk then?

So we scrambled up the embankment of the train line, George holding out his hand to pull me up the last couple of feet. We crossed the tracks and bounced down a narrow path in the reeds that led to the gate of Holy Well Park, a tiny little oasis on the bank of the Salmon River that separated Truro from Bible Hill. We walked over to a bench and I collapsed with a sigh, breathing the cool night air. The stars were out in battalions tonight, arranged around the glowing full moon like the morning dewdrops on a spider's web. The park was empty except for the two of us, but when George sat down beside me I was struck by how calm I felt despite the dozen or so cups of coffee and the stranger's arm casually draped around my shoulder. George dug a silver hip flask out of his pocket and unscrewed the lid. As he tipped the flask to his lips, the moonlight slid along the polished surface with fluid grace and leaped right into his eyes. He passed the flask to me and I took a sip, expecting a nasty brace of whiskey, but got a mouthful of vodka instead. It went down easily and I handed back the flask. I was still riding the high from tonight's furious creativity, so when George turned to kiss me I felt vindicated, instantly aware that the whole miserable weekend had been leading up to this moment. And everything had started with one innocent little lie about studying at a conservatory.

We shared one of his foul cigarettes, and before I knew what was happening, he had a hand under my shirt, groping for my breast. His mouth pressed against mine again, forceful and ungainly, and suddenly I wanted him inside me more than anything, more than anything I could express in words. I writhed against his body, my hands working under his shirt, feeling hisropy farmyard muscles, and then in a move that shocked him, I unzipped his fly and tried to pull out his penis. Jesus, he muttered to himself, amazed, but he helped me take it out, then yanked down my pants and underwear. For several seconds the only sounds were our frantic breathing, the rustle of denim, and the creaking planks of the park bench as we lost ourselves in an outburst of pure, spontaneous pleasure, perfectly visible to anyone who happened to walk or drive by.

George took longer to come than Dave, but when he did with a muffled grunt and lay against me on the bench, the strange, sudden moment winked out almost immediately, and I was tired again. Neither of us spoke for several minutes, the shock of the whole thing still pulsing

through our minds. Then George cleared his throat. I gotta get going, babe. His voice sounded hoarse. That was... He shook his head.

I didn't respond, just did up my shirt again and pulled my jacket back on. He was staring at me with an expression halfway between awe and contempt, one I didn't particularly like. I stood up, flexing my back and humming the little saxophone ditty I heard in my head. I could feel George's eyes sliding up and down my body, so I lowered my arms and turned to face him.

You gonna at least walk me back to my car?

Of course, he said, standing up. A truck rounded the corner, its headlights giving George's face an angelic glow for a moment. Then the truck was gone, and his face receded into the shadows again. Let's go.

When we got back to the Tim Horton's parking lot, the place was deserted again, except for my Toyota and George's dirty red Chevy. George waited for me to collect my things from inside, then opened my door for me and helped me in. Feeling gawky and stupid, I gave him a quick goodbye kiss and closed the door on him. I watched him as he walked slowly over to his car and got in. Both of us sat behind our wheels without moving, then started our cars. I waited for George to pull out of the parking lot first, then slowly toiled over to the Quik-Mart at the Irving station across the street. Still in an exhilarated fog, I bought a package of cigarettes as casually as I could, feeling everything with a heightened sensitivity—the white glare of the fluorescent lights, the colorful display of candy bars, the racks of soft drinks. The pimply counter guy handed over my change with a mechanical dullness, totally oblivious to what I'd just been doing in the park. I didn't mind that. The weekend had been such a strange whirlwind that I was happy to just, for a few minutes, pretend that nothing extraordinary had happened and I could focus on the simple everyday act of buying a package of cigarettes. But as my coins tinkled together, five piano notes dropped into my mind like frozen tears, and in a heartbeat I knew how *Miniatures* was going to begin.

CHAPTER 7

Once the new school year started and my part in *The Laughing Corpses* ended, I found my cool factor drop almost back to zero again. Even though Dave was expelled, he still hung around the hallways and cafeteria, making sure everyone knew that I was out and Mandy was in. He barely gave me a second glance if I happened to be passing within ten feet of him, and even then it was just a casual once-over, eyes sliding up to meet mine, notice my presence, and then slide away again, usually back to Mandy's adoring face. Well, he'd got what he wanted, but it was a bitter pill to see the two of them fondling each other, pretending I didn't exist.

The summer was a lonely one, long days working the cash register at Smart Set down at the mall, tidying up after customers had pulled down dresses and flung them carelessly back over the rack. Since business was quiet, the store only needed one person to take care of things, and by the end of the day I was so starved for conversation that I found myself sharing my thoughts with the janitors and security guards, who no doubt wished they could tell me to shut up whenever I started complaining about my customers.

And that was the summer: one day leading into another, finishing when the last rays of the setting sun had left the sky and the sounds of night baseball being played filled the warm air. Dad had either forgotten his promise to teach me how to drive the truck, or he'd just been too busy to bother with it, making trips all over the Eastern Seaboard and out to Vancouver and back. On the rare occasions that we did cross paths, we didn't say much to each other. I figured he was still pining over Mom's sudden announcement, and the week before the wedding we had a huge screaming match about it, both of us saying whatever nasty things we could think of to each other. I told him he was acting like he was Mom's empty shoe closet, he told me to mind my own goddamn business and things went downhill from there.

The only thing that happened that whole summer worth remembering was going to the Valley for Mom's wedding. It was the first time Dad and I had seen her beau, Douglas Fielding, and I remember the look on Dad's face when the two men shook hands. Douglas Fielding was a silver-haired, blue-eyed gentleman with a smile that outdazzled the chandelier and looked so natural in his tuxedo that I could have imagined him wearing it to afternoon tea. Dad, on the other hand, haunted his tux like a demon being squeezed out of a possession victim. He towered over Douglas Fielding, but instead of intimidating the shorter man, he almost seemed to be embarrassed by his size, constantly slumping his shoulders to seem smaller or running a distracted hand through his graying hair.

The wedding itself went perfectly, as if it had been choreographed. Mom looked absolutely stunning, like a woman half her age as she recited her vows, gazing into Douglas Fielding's crystal blue eyes with a beatific smile. I knew it was breaking Dad's heart to see the kind of wedding Douglas could provide—a small Lawrence Welk-style orchestra playing

standards and a beautiful promenade leading up to the altar draped in pink chrysanthemums, Mom's favorite flower. The pews were filled to bursting with family and friends, mostly from Douglas's side, although I saw a lot of my own relatives, uncles and cousins who I hadn't spoken to in years. Grandma was there, Travis at her side, talking with my uncle Simon. My cousins were down from Ontario, along with their husbands and wives and children, most of whom I'd never even seen before. After the thousandth stock greeting and cheek kiss, I was ready to crawl back into the Toyota and hide, listening to the radio until the reception was over. Still, I felt proud of Mom for being able to get a second life off the ground. I could tell she was in love with Douglas—her brimming eyes gave away that secret—and she seemed to get along famously with her new in-laws, pretty much as well as she got along with her natural relatives. She gave Douglas's two young grandsons the same amount of attention she gave me, fussing over their clothes and hair with a flourish of theatrical concern.

As for scrapbook moments, Mom's wedding was it for the summer and after that there was really nothing for me to look forward to except plowing ahead into my last year and trying to get back into the school band. I had already made up my mind to apply to the Royal Conservatory in January, and I needed to get started on the right track. The thought of looking Ms. Campbell and the rest of the band set in the face again didn't thrill me, but Dr. McCaskill had told me that a good recommendation from Ms. Campbell would improve my chances of acceptance.

And at least I looked semi-presentable, now that I'd let my hair grow out again. Earlier in the summer, I'd opted for blonde highlights to give my hair a sunnier look, and after a year of growth, it was now longer than it had been when I chopped it all off. Now I thought I looked more band princess than punk rock goddess, but I couldn't bear to take out the nose stud. It was just too damn sexy.

I'd also been working steadily on my miniature doll idea, trying to stay as simple as possible—little tiny piano pieces with almost no accompaniment—but the more I worked on it, the further away it seemed. My months as drummer and songwriter for the Laughing Corpses had given me some experience in songcraft, but this was a much more ambitious project, and I really had no idea how to go about it. I wanted someone to help me with it, but I was nervous about showing Dr. McCaskill the only piece of music writing I'd ever attempted now that I'd gotten so deep into the work that I felt lost in a forest.

I had to screw up a lot of courage to knock on Ms. Campbell's door late in September. I had no idea who was drumming at the moment, or if there was even a place for me in the orchestra, so when I poked my head around the door of the practice room, I half-expected to be laughed off the campus. At the very least, I'd get a flat rejection. But I was completely thrown by her first words to me when she lowered her bifocals and saw who I was. Sonya! she exclaimed, breaking into a wide, sparkling grin. My God, girl, it's been ages! Have you finally come back to us? Come here, let me get a look at you.

I stepped into the room, waiting for the other shoe to drop, but to my delighted surprise, Ms. Campbell stood up and clasped both my hands as if I were an old friend she hadn't seen in years. I guess I was wondering if there was room for me in the band.

Room for you? Ms. Campbell echoed, widening her eyes. The chair is there, if you want it. I'd just like to know ASAP, you know. So we can get practicing.

I wasn't prepared for this sudden change of heart. The last time I'd seen Ms. Campbell, she was leading me out of the gymnasium after I'd abetted Dave in trashing the school prom. We hadn't spoken since, and I just naturally assumed she wanted nothing to do with me. But here she was, offering me a chair, even pouring me a cup of jasmine tea. Thanks, I mumbled. As I sipped from the cup, Ms. Campbell sat back behind her desk and watched me, her hands clasped under her chin.

You know, she said, speaking in a conspirator's whisper. I've been waiting for you to come to your senses for months now.

Come to my senses? The fragrant aroma of the tea soothed my unease, and I felt more confident that this interview wasn't a joke and I wasn't going to be shown the door. What do you mean?

I was disappointed in how you quit the band last year, but afterwards I realized that I didn't handle the situation very well myself. I overreacted. And when you started playing in that & rock band, I thought I'd lost you for good. She brought the cup to her lips again, the tea seeming to fuel her thoughts. But the more I thought about it, the more I felt that playing in that band would be a great experience for you. It's not exactly my type of music, you understand, but so many of the same principles apply: discipline, practice, craft. And I thought you played quite well on prom night. It's a pity of course, the way things turned out, but I know you weren't really to blame for that. You were just in the wrong place at the wrong time. And now & She finished her tea with relish. You're in exactly the right place at the right time.

In what way?

Well, she continued, pushing her glasses up into her wiry hair, the school is offering a scholarship of up to \$2000 to a certain lucky few of our band members who want to pursue their musical studies after graduation. Now, you will have to bring your overall GPA up this year, but if you like, I can put your name on the eligibility list. There's some stiff competition, but & She paused here, looking into the depths of her teacup. & there's no one I'd rather endorse than you.

I was speechless. How long had she been considering this? I kept wanting to ask Why me?, and kept not asking, holding my breath, afraid that she might reconsider. Finally, I murmured a brief thanks and tried to disguise my puzzlement by taking a long drink of tea.

Of course, Ms. Campbell carried on, that means longer practice sessions, not just with your tutor & Dr. McCaskill, isn't it? But also with me, after school. How does that sound?

That sounds just fine, Ms. Campbell. I can't thank you enough for this & I'm kind of shocked, actually.

She smiled again. Forget it. Just be here this afternoon at three. We're putting a concert together for Thanksgiving, so we don't have a lot of time to get up to speed.

I'll be here. I stood up on rubbery legs, and turned to leave.

One other thing, Sonya, Ms. Campbell interrupted. I turned back to face her. I never told you this, but & I love the nose ring. My cheeks turned bright crimson, and I thanked her once again, totally bewildered, before stumbling out the door in a daze.

From that point my life gradually began to take shape. Ms. Campbell's scholarship offer gave me the energy I needed to throw myself back into Dr. McCaskill's lessons, and we began going through possible audition pieces together, he constantly trying to raise the bar for me with more difficult pieces, and me pushing for lighter, shorter etudes. Finally, we settled on my repertoire: Handel's Suite No. 3 in D Minor, two movements from Brahms Piano Concerto in D Minor, Schumann's *Dreaming*, John Cage's *A Room, for Piano*, and Chopin's Etude No. 3 in E Major. It was a huge amount of work to have ready for my February audition, but Dr. McCaskill was optimistic about my chances, saying that if my work habits stayed consistent, I'd be ready in time. I wasn't as sure, but I put my trust in the Doctor, and let him guide me toward the doors of the Royal Conservatory.

The letter came in February, at the peak of the worst blizzard in years, when the limbs of the kitchen window willow couldn't hold another ounce of snow. School had been closed for several days and Dad was stranded at a motel somewhere west of the Rockies, waiting for the highway pass to reopen. But the mail got through all right. I saw the truck plowing up the road as I stood in front of the picture window, sipping a cup of coffee and watching stray snowflakes chase each other around the front yard, and at quarter after ten I was staring down at the letter—a package, really—with the Royal Conservatory logo, two interlocking swans. I tore it open and scanned the first sentence, addressed to me by name: It was with great pleasure that we announce your acceptance into the Piano Performance program at the Royal Conservatory of Music. We hereby cordially invite you to & The letter went on, but I couldn't make out another word through my tears.

I looked up to see the mail truck picking its way down Mountain Lee Road, then reread and reread the opening sentence of the letter, not quite believing what I saw written there. Something struck me suddenly, something I hadn't realized until this moment, disproved by the letter I held—at no point over the last few months, no matter how hard I worked on my audition tape, no matter how exasperated Dr. McCaskill got and no matter how often he threatened to kick me out of the house if I didn't start concentrating, did I ever expect to be accepted. It had all been a lark, really. Oh sure, I took the practice sessions seriously, or at least as seriously as I could, but when I finally dropped the tape off at the post office, it had been with a sigh of relief, as if the hard work were now over. The idea that I would actually be accepted had never occurred to me. I don't think I even expected a rejection letter. Once the tape was in the hands of the Canadian Postal Service, my part in its journey was finished, and it would go bouncing onto a tarmac somewhere, maybe in Nepal, to have a series of zany adventures that I would never know anything about.

Okay, I'm lying. After all, I would never have bothered to record my audition in the first place if I didn't take my work seriously. Maybe what I really meant was that a real conservatory—two or three hundred musicians hunched over contrabasses and pianos, dressed in absolute finery, mad composers sweating over their modern piano concertos, stern, bearded professors from Eastern European countries like Austria and Hungary, barking out orders in clipped accents, maybe even some seven- and eight-year-old prodigies who played quarter-sized violins with the ease of tying their shoelaces, ivied walls, hallowed halls, and a huge brick building that

had been standing since World War 1 a *real* conservatory was such an abstract concept for me, a poor truck driver's daughter from Anywheresville, Nova Scotia that I just couldn't grasp the situation. Maybe it wasn't that I had no hope of getting accepted it was that the acceptance letter came from a big black void with the word Conservatory stamped across it. The letter might as well have come from the Twilight Zone. I glanced down at the letter again, eyes clear now, mind focused and ready to process.

They wanted to know if I accepted my acceptance. They wanted me to respond to the letter as soon as possible. They wanted to know if my finances were in place. They wanted me to read the accompanying documents carefully, to make sure I understood their contents fully, and to contact the conservatory if I had any questions or problems. They wanted me to attend a concert from the impressive array of events lined up for the summer. They wished me all the best for the 1992 academic year. They saw me as a bright hope for the future of the Canadian music scene. I looked back out the picture window. A car had skidded off the road and face-first into a snowbank. The driver was spinning his wheels, throwing mud-colored snow all over the road, buzzing like a fly trapped in a jar. The sign for the abandoned Rainbow Motel across the street swung back and forth. Looking at it, I was reminded of the sign outside the Paesanello, out of business for three months now. Both signs still stood, their letters scraped off by hateful weather, hopelessly advertising dead businesses to nonexistent customers and, as I stood at the window drinking my coffee, I knew it was time to leave.

Dad got home three days later. He burst through the door just as I put my breakfast on the table, and threw himself into a chair. He was a scruffy wreck, eyes wild and bloodshot, hair sticking up like a duck's ass, glasses askew. His clothes looked like he'd been sleeping in them for days. They gave off a sour stink of sweat, grease, road grime, and motel bedsheets. Without a word, I pushed my plate under his nose and poured him some coffee. He attacked his poached eggs on toast immediately, holding his knife and fork in his fists, like a kid just learning how to use them. He didn't seem to notice the dirty ashtray by my elbow, or if he did, he didn't show it, and I couldn't be bothered trying to hide it. If he didn't know I smoked by now, he was too far gone to be reclaimed. When he'd slurped back the rest of his coffee, he groaned, took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes, which I could now see were baggy and bruised from what must have been a week without sleep. That's it, he said in a thick voice. No more driving for me. Christ! He uttered a short, harsh bark of laughter. And you want to learn to drive. Jesus, girl, you have no idea. I've been holed up in a motel outside of Revelstoke for five days, living on 7-11 microwave hamburgers. This is the first decent food I've had in a week. All I want to do is get one more coffee into me and then crawl into bed and sleep for a week.

I found my opportunity. Dad, I said gently. He looked up at me. I got accepted. He blinked. You what?

I found out a few days ago. The letter came.

Sonya! My God, that's amazing news! Come over here! He put me in a bearhug and squeezed me until I couldn't breathe. Congratulations, congratulations, he said into my ear, then pulled back to look at my face. I stared at him, remembering that the last time he'd hugged me like that was when I was ten years old, and he went down on his knees to tell me about his

divorce. The moment must have triggered the same memory in his mind, because he wiped a tear from his eye and said, That s been a long time coming, Sonya. A long time coming.

Up close, I didn t mind Dad s smell at all. It was an honest smell, nothing less, and suddenly I didn t care about how many miles he logged on the road away from home, or how many fights he had with his girlfriend. He was here now, and both of us knew that soon it would be my turn to leave, but this time for good. I think that s why I stood on my tiptoes like a little girl, leaned forward and planted a kiss on his nose. He looked surprised for a moment, then sat back down in his chair and shook his head, smiling. My girl s going to be a concert pianist. A concert pianist. He savored the words, running his hands through his hair all the while.

You re gonna make your old man proud.

So, Dad & When are you gonna show me how to drive the truck?

He grinned. The minute we don t need a snow shovel to get out the goddamn door. We laughed together at that, the first genuine laugh we d had together in months, just the two of us against the world, as always. It was enough for me.

The snow didn t clear for another five weeks. By then, it seemed like everyone in town had heard about my acceptance, no doubt because Dad had done everything he could short of broadcasting on Channel 4. Men Dad worked with, men I hadn t talked to since I d been on the road, were calling the house to congratulate me. Ms. Campbell asked me if I would perform my audition pieces at the school talent show in June, and teachers I d never met were wishing me luck. At first I couldn t figure out why everyone was making such a fuss. I wasn t the only member of the school band to be going on to study performance. I knew Sherry Irving, Dennis Smyth and at least three others had been accepted to the British Columbia Open University in Vancouver. Maybe I was just everyone s favorite rehabilitation project.

When I told Dr. M the news at my next practice session, he immediately pumped my hand, then grabbed the phone and called Charles Kennedy, the man with the daughter who was studying the clarinet. Although I could only hear one end of the conversation, I could tell by the way Dr. M kept nodding and glancing back at me over his shoulder that they were discussing my living arrangements with the clarinetist. When he hung up, Dr. M sat me down at the kitchen table. Well, it s all set. Rachel said she d love to have you. She s been looking for a roommate for a while now. The apartment is small, and one of you will have to bunk down on the couch, but it s off Bloor St., just a couple of blocks from the conservatory. There s lots to do in the neighborhood, and you won t have any problems getting tutoring work, if you need some extra money. Not that I d recommend doing that your first year, of course, but you re going to need something to keep you going. Toronto isn t the cheapest city in the country, not by a long stretch. Rachel s always complaining about how cold it gets there in the winter, but if you ve got some heavy winter clothes, you should be fine &

As I listened to Dr. M go on about living in Toronto and how wonderful everything was going to be, I sat perfectly still, hands folded delicately in my lap, and channeled every last ounce of energy into keeping the entire house from spinning right off the planet and into space. The whole thing was only now starting to sink in. I d have to move, pack all my stuff, learn to live with someone I d never met, and attend a school where I didn t know a single soul. And

money & How the hell was I going to pay for it? The scholarship was no guarantee, and even if I did get it, I'd still have to come up with money to live on. My fingers flew up to my temples and started massaging vigorously. Dr. M stopped talking in mid-sentence and asked me if I was okay. I nodded and smiled wanly. Just feeling the pressure.

He shrugged. That's only natural. Don't worry, you'll be fine. Everybody has to go through this at some point.

That's not very comforting.

Dr. M clearly was not in a sympathetic mood. Look at it this way. You're getting a head start. You don't have to worry about looking for a place to stay, for starters. You've got a support system right there in the city. That's more than a lot of people.

I guess so. I'm just whining a bit, that's all.

Dr. M handed over a tin of chocolate cookies. And you're entitled. It's no small thing getting into the RCM. You should be proud of yourself.

That's what everyone tells me.

Anyway, Dr. M continued, picking up his original thought, Let me know when you expect to move up there to Toronto, that is, and I'll pass the word along to Rachel. You two are going to hit it off, I can see that.

I nodded, not feeling very convinced, but Dr. M seemed satisfied with my answer and rubbed his hands together as if everything was settled. As for me, I could hardly wait until I got home for my first driving lesson. At least that was something tangible I could look forward to just me and Dad sharing some quality time together and going over engine parts. Everything else—the summer, moving in with Rachel, the Royal Conservatory—could just wait for one day until I was ready to deal with them. I wanted the snow to melt, the spring to start, the leaves to bud, and Dr. M to call it a lesson and let me go. Finally, he checked his watch. I guess that does it for today, Sonya. We didn't get much work in, did we?

I sighed, doodling invisible sprites and fairies on the bone-white placemat with my finger. Sorry, I'm just kind of spun out, you know? I can't concentrate.

Dr. M gave me an indulgent smile. I understand. He peered at me closely, then steepled his fingers under his chin. You've blossomed into a beautiful young lady, Sonya. Did I ever tell you that? When you were seven, you were all arms and legs, energy all over the place. And now look at you. Graceful, poised. I can definitely see you in front of an audience when you get older, playing Rachmaninov or Schumann. You always responded best to D minor. Did you know that?

No, I had no idea. What was he talking about?

That's your key. When you were younger, D major was your key. As Christian Schubart said, the key of triumph, of Hallelujahs, of war cries, of victory-rejoicing. But ever since you started working on your audition tape, you became attracted to the D minor key: melancholy womanliness, the spleen and humors brood.

Melancholy womanliness? Ha!

Schubart said that each musical key had a set emotional character, and he made a list of all the keys and their emotional characteristics. Fascinating stuff. I've got a monograph of his 1806 study, if you're interested.

I'd never heard Dr. M wax rhapsodic like this. I don't think so, Dr. M. Maybe I'll take it with me when I move. I made a show of checking my watch again. Listen, I really gotta &

Dr. M snapped out of his odd trance and chomped on a cookie. All right, get going then. I'll see you next week?

I slung my bag over my shoulder. Sure, sure. I'll be here. Oh, I'll be playing at the school talent show next month, if you want to come. I'm playing my audition pieces.

Oh, well & I look forward to that.

I got up and went over to the front foyer to put my shoes on. As I leaned over, I glanced back into the kitchen and saw Dr. M framed by the kitchen door. He was eating his cookie meditatively, smiling to himself, eyes fixed on something just out of sight. He looked like a waxwork of himself, just sitting there waiting for instructions from somewhere. I wanted to hold that image of him in my head as long as I could, so I left without saying goodbye.

CHAPTER 8

We started under the hood of the Freightliner, with Dad showing how the basic components worked, forgetting that he'd already shown me this stuff ten years ago, telling me how a diesel engine converted fuel to energy, while I kept thinking about an idea I'd first had when I left Dr. M's this afternoon. Over tomato soup and pastrami sandwiches, I kept turning it over and over: how strange was it for a girl my age to have two much older men for mentors, even if one of those men happened to be her own father? I pictured Dr. M, framed in the kitchen doorway, then Dad, happily puttering around under the hood of the Freightliner, a dimple of grease dotting his forehead like an Indian mystic. I laughed out loud at that image, and Dad gave me a quizzical look.

I was almost eighteen, and the two most influential people in my life had been Dad and Dr. McCaskill. Most of the kids at school idolized movie and pop stars, if they idolized anyone at all. They probably looked at me as a bit of a weirdo, a girl living alone with her father, a truck driver, no less. It was a strange picture, but what was stranger was that this was really the first time the strangeness had ever occurred to me. My life had always felt pretty normal, no weirder than anyone else's. I had friends who'd had really hellish childhoods, full of violence and abuse, really sick situations. Compared to them, my life had been ridiculously easy—my parents loved me (even if they didn't always know how to show it), I was a pretty good musician who had been accepted into the most prestigious conservatory in the country, I'd had an amazing time being popular, being in a rock band, sleeping with an older guy that most of my friends envied, my grads were good. Yeah, I was usually strapped for cash, but that didn't bother me. There was no need for me to feel weird about my life. So what was the problem? Post-high school blahs? Pre-college jitters? Both? Neither?

Sleep was impossible that night, so I kept the light on and tried writing some more of *Miniatures*, before throwing my pencil across the bedroom in a fit of frustration. I stared at the music I'd written, seven pages worth. A month's work. I remembered the night I started scribbling notes in a creative frenzy, the night I met George and had sex with him in the Holy Well Park. I was deeply dissatisfied with my writing, a jumble of piano notes spread across a bunch of pages, all tangled like a basement cobweb, without shape or direction.

This wasn't what I wanted anyway. I wanted something more than just notes on a page. When I first started writing, I knew what the notes meant, I knew what the rests meant, the stops and starts. The first page of the composition was as easy as drawing a picture. Everything made sense. What had happened with the next six pages? I turned off my light and stared at the ceiling for a while, trying to sort out the problem.

I must have dozed off, because I snored myself awake. My bedside clock said 3:30, and I was shivering because I'd kicked my bedclothes onto the floor. More importantly, I knew in a

flash what had been bothering me about my composition – the notes weren't my own. I'd heard them somewhere before. Not that particular series of notes, but other notes, written in the same emotionally evocative way. What had Dr. M said this afternoon? Someone had done a study on the emotional character of different musical keys. I was D minor. Suddenly I understood what he meant. I was writing what I was thinking, not what I was hearing. And I was hearing something completely different now, something sadder. No, not sadder. Older. Ancient. A moment had passed, and the miniatures were crying out against it. No, not crying out. Screaming out, with every fiber of energy, screaming silently at a moment that was past. And no one could hear them except me. I slapped my hand onto the lamp switch, knocking it over in the process, grabbed some new sheets from the drawer, and started writing again, with so much force that my fingers throbbed from where I was gripping the pencil.

This time I tried harder to translate the intensity of the music I was hearing in my head to notes on the page. I struggled to make the notes come clearer, trying to drive every thought out of my head so I wouldn't be distracted and interrupt my flow. I concentrated so hard for over an hour that I thought my brain would crack and leak gray matter out of my ears, but when I finally exhausted myself I stared at what I had on the page. I hummed it a few times, quietly, trying different inflections. Each different inflection gave the piece a new tonal quality, or brought out some facet that I hadn't heard before. But, most importantly, the piece felt *right*, consistent. Every note had a purpose.

Searching my feelings, I noticed something different from my night at Tim Horton's. Then, I'd been intoxicated with the sound of my pencil scratching the paper, the process was what had kept me motivated, just my knowledge that I was *doing* something, writing music that hadn't been written before. But my feeling now was bigger somehow, more substantial. I hadn't just written, but I'd written something *good*. I was sure of it. I had no idea how much good music was written at 4:30 in the morning, but I was so sure that my little composition was good that I was tempted, at that moment, to switch my major from Performance to Composition. Well, I thought about it, at least.

For the rest of the week, I didn't want to touch my composition, afraid that if I looked at it again, it would spontaneously combust or something, and disappear. Or even worse, turn into a piece of crap written by some moony teenager high on her own pretensions. Instead, I threw myself into my lessons with Dad, which delighted him to no end. Dad really must have thought that I was kidding when I told him I wanted to learn to drive the Freightliner, but after seeing that he couldn't bore me no matter how many times he drilled the functions of the dashboard equipment or the basics of how the engine worked, he told me I was for real and he might as well get to the point and teach me how to drive the damn thing. He'd been acting like Mr. Miyagi for weeks now, getting me to wash the truck whenever he came back from a trip, quizzing me on what to do if I broke down on a nowhere prairie highway in the middle of the winter (I'd freeze to death, was my answer.), and basically acting like the stern taskmaster he probably thought Dr. M was. Of course, all I wanted to do was drive the rig.

So I finally got my chance on a glorious June morning, two weeks before final exams and one week before I was supposed to give my performance at the talent show. After a winter of hiding, the leaves were again decorating the trees and the sun was just starting its downward

slide into the lower half of the deep blue sky. Dad maneuvered the rig onto Highway 311 and motored along until we came to MacCallum Road, an old dirt highway that wound all the way to Tatamagouche, about fifty miles up the Sunrise Trail. Once Dad had pulled onto this wide gravel track, he sighed deeply, puffing out his cheeks, then turned to where I was sitting in the passenger seat. All right, missy, he said. Are you ready?

I rolled my eyes. What the hell, Dad, I've been ready for weeks! You're so melodramatic!

Okay, then, he said with a sly smile. Scoot on over. He opened the cab door and climbed out, letting me slide across to the driver's seat. I had to squirm a bit to get around the giant gearshift that towered up from the floor like a disjointed metal tree, but once I got settled behind the bike tire-sized steering wheel I was so stoked that I was bouncing on the cushioned seat, feeling like a queen on her throne. Dad climbed up into the passenger seat, slammed the door behind him, and looked at me. Well? Start'er up.

I turned the ignition and pushed the starter. The engine began to rumble. I stepped on the gas a little, just to feel the power under my foot. It revved calmly. For a second, I was seven years old again, back at the Toronto zoo and watching a lioness through the bars of her cage. Our eyes met and we stared at each other for several long seconds, and then she stood up, flexed her shoulders and let out a low warning grumble. I felt such strength in that sound that I instinctively stepped back from the cage and started backing away. I couldn't stop staring into those two empty black pools, dead but somehow terrifyingly alive. It was like looking down a double-barreled shotgun. My heart racing, I slowly began walking up the path toward the monkey house. The lioness watched me go, her growl steady, until I got behind some trees and remembered to breathe again.

The same power oiled out from the engine of this giant rig, but this time the lioness was on a leash, under my hand, and now I was the one who felt terrifyingly alive. I cranked in the clutch and tugged the gearshift with all my strength. The truck began to roll. Hit the gas, hit the gas, Dad said. Let's get'er movin'! I hit the gas, yanking on the steering wheel to keep the truck from drifting to the shoulder, shifted again, putting the truck into a nice crawling cruise speed, then relaxed a bit.

It was an incredible experience up there in the cab but I was so busy checking the mirrors, peering at blind spots and remembering when and how to shift that I couldn't really enjoy it. Dad kept barking instructions: Check the rearview, keep your eyes on the road, shift *now!* No, no, you're double clutching! By the time I got halfway to Tatamagouche, I was so nervous that I had to peel my fingers from the wheel. Muscles I didn't know I had were sore. My calf ached from jamming down the clutch, my shoulder throbbed from my awkward gear handling. Beads of sweat slid down my armpits and I was getting a headache from concentrating so hard.

Dad was grinning at me from the navigator's seat. Well, we still have a transmission, so that's not too bad. He gave me a truckerly punch in my aching shoulder. Good work, girl.

Ow! Quit it! Rubbing my shoulder, I stared at the bank of brightly colored knobs, gauges and buttons on the dashboard and trying out the little chant I used to remember them all

Voltmeter, ammeter, temp gauges, oil pressure & tach, differential, speedometer, and air brake.

All right, Dad said, You did good your first day out. But now we gotta keep getting out here, as often as we can, so you can get used to shifting. Now I m gonna let you turn this rig around and take us home.

I did, and got us home without littering the road with transmission parts. When Dad took back over, where MacCallum Road turned onto Mountain Lee, he took off the grease-encrusted Kenworth cap he always wore in the cab and stuffed it on my head. I turned it backwards and posed like a rapper, which got us laughing and gave us a nice stress-relieving note to end the day on.

When we got into the kitchen, Dad handed me a bottle of Oland s beer from the fridge. I popped it open and sipped, again aware of how cool it was to have a beer with the old man instead of sneaking around behind his back. Dad seemed to be reading my thoughts. I know this probably violates some law in the Good Parenting book, he said, holding up his beer bottle, but I figure you re gonna be doing it anyway, you being in a rock band and all. I played it cool, just sipping nonchalantly. But if I catch you getting plastered at some pit party, I ll come over there myself and drag you home by the scruff of the neck.

Jesus Christ, Dad. I shook my head and took another sip.

But I won t have to worry about that, will I? Not from my little concert pianist.

Ay ay, Dad, I said, and let out an air-rippling burp.

Smartass.

So & You wanna go out again to morrow?

I actually found driving the rig a soothing experience. Of course, I wasn t allowed anywhere near the Trans-Canada, not until I got my commercial driving license, so Dad and I kept taking our driving trips up MacCallum Road, exploring the massive network of old back roads towards Debert, Parrsboro, Five Islands and God-knows-what other backwoods trails and disused highways. I spent more nights that summer washing road dust out of my hair than I did manning my post at Smart Set. And as for the pit parties that Dad warned me about, I got invited to a grand total of one a step down from last year, when a party wasn t a *par-tay* until I showed up with the guys and I left with a friend after two beers and half a joint. The whole thing just seemed so stupid to me, hanging out with a bunch of kids who still got a howl out of lighting their farts. Who needed it?

My final concert was what won me the scholarship, I think. Dr. M and I had been working on my audition pieces since last November, constantly smoothing and refining them until I could play them backwards, forwards and standing on my head. Both Mom and Dad came to the show, the first time I d seen them sitting side by side since I was a little kid, and when I took my bow to thunderous applause, they both stood up and outclapped everyone around them. Even from where I stood on the stage, I could see the tears in Mom s eyes. Good for her. She d waited ten years to hear me play onstage. I hoped it was worth the wait.

Then came the third week of July, three weeks after I'd walked across the stage waving my diploma, three weeks before I was supposed to load up the truck for my trip to Toronto. I was down at the mall trying on spangly tops for the fall, when I saw Dave out of the corner of my eye. He was alone, although I had no idea what he was doing in a woman's clothing store. His hair had grown almost down to the middle of the back, and it was a tangled mess, but other than that he looked pretty damn good in his leather jacket. He had on a pair of small round sunglasses, his lips forming the semi-permanent sneer he always wore. I turned back to the mirror, pretending not to notice him. He did the same thing. Gradually we both worked our way closer until we brushed elbows and turned to look into each other's eyes. My breath caught.

Dave pushed his sunglasses up into his hair and gave me a look of faux-surprise. "Wow. Hey. How're you doing?" I gazed at him, confused by the stirrings of emotion I suddenly felt. Instead of answering, I handed the top I was looking at back to the saleswoman and gathered up my bags. Dave uttered an impatient little snort. "Are you still pissed at me?" he asked, lowering his voice so the saleswoman couldn't overhear him.

I shouldered my purse and transferred the shopping bags to my other hand. "No, I'm not pissed. But you know, we haven't talked in a long time, so &

Dave reached down and took my bags. "Here, let me carry these. Where are you going?"

Actually, I could use a cup of coffee.

"Mind if I come along?" He gave me a comic leer and waggled his eyebrows. "My treat."

I shrugged. "Suit yourself, rock star. A cappuccino, lotsa cinnamon."

We wandered in a roundabout way over to the Second Cup, Dave waiting for me as I poked in and out of different shops. I plunked down \$25 on an anthology of modern American poems and a snazzy leather organizer while Dave flipped through guitar magazines. When we finally did get to the food court, I grabbed a seat and started leafing through my book of poetry, wanting to find something to recite before Dave came back with our coffees. I settled on a short poem by Langston Hughes. Dave placed the tray in front of me just in time to hear the lines:

That justice is a blind goddess
Is a thing to which we black are wise.
Her bandage hides two festering sores
That once perhaps were eyes.

Poetry. Christ, Dave said. "You haven't changed a bit, you know that?"

I took my cup, hot and rich between my hands, closed my eyes and smiled. "I'm always changing. I opened my eyes again to find Dave staring at me, shaking his head and looking a bit uncomfortable. "How do I look?"

You look different. More & I don't know. Mature?

I sipped my coffee. "Are you still playing?"

He shook his head. "Nah. Band broke up a couple months ago."

I did some quick math. "So & right around when I quit."

Not right around . Exactly then. Steve took off that night, and then with you gone, it just left the two of us. I've been doing a little playing on my own, just by myself, writing some stuff. But nothing major.

How does it feel to be expelled?

Fucking-A! No more bullshit classes, no more bullshit homework! It's awesome. My parents are pissed as hell, but what am I gonna do, you know? I'm out.

I fiddled with the book in my hands. Did he still expect me to be impressed with his casual attitude? Our days together seemed far, far away right now, some part of me I left on the road. But I couldn't deny I still found him damn attractive. I heard about you going to that conservatory. Looks like you were a preppie after all. He held up his hands before I could get pissed off. Kidding, kidding. It's amazing, actually. You're going to Toronto.

Are you still going out with Mandy? I asked.

He took a long time to answer. Nah, we broke up last month. I'm seeing this other girl now. I don't think you'd know her. She's a freshman.

How old are you, Dave?

He looked surprised. I'm twenty. Why?

I leaned in until we were almost bumping noses. Don't you think you should be dating girls more your age?

For a moment he looked at me blankly, his forehead slightly wrinkled, as if he didn't know why I would say such a thing. Then I thought he was going to get upset, but he kept himself under control. I like younger girls, what can I say? he said with a shark-like grin.

Yeah. I went back to my book. Whatever.

He reached out and touched my shoulder. You're looking pretty sexy, you know that? It's cool to catch up with you again.

I looked up from my book. Dave was smiling at me, an invitation in his eyes, and I just stared into his face for a long moment, trying to memorize every detail. Was I imagining the little lines I saw creeping around the corners of his smile? And was his hairline just a fraction of a millimeter further back than it used to be? There was no genuine happiness in his smile, nothing but an empty come-on, the only smile he really knew how to make. How long did he expect to get away with it? I pictured him at thirty, sidling up to some woman in a bar, the Pond, probably, his hair cropped short now because insurance salesmen needed to look presentable. He'd look the woman in the eye, give her that sly smile, maybe even wink at her, and she'd & she'd laugh in his face. Or throw her drink in it.

But that was only part of what I saw. I saw him sitting in front of the television after a long day on the telephone with customers, harassed, a glass of bourbon in one hand, the channel changer in the other, staring emptily at golf games on TSN or dreary Three's Company reruns, laughing mechanically just to remind himself that he was still alive. And one glass of bourbon followed another, until he woke up the next morning, late for work, unshaven, hair disheveled, fingers still gripping his glass, mouth pasted shut with the residue of alcohol. Maybe every once in a while he'd remember that he used to be Dave Rasmussen, leader of the Laughing Corpses, the ass-kickingest punk band in the history of Truro. He might even call in sick and pour another glass of bourbon to quiet his pounding head, and think about how the crowds used to

chant the lyrics of his songs along with him. I could see him sitting in his abused armchair until the sun went down and twilight spread throughout his dingy bachelor apartment, just reminiscing with a mind too fogged up to remember the names of his former bandmates. I could barely keep from crying. I just have one question, I said, fighting to keep the tears out of my voice.

Name it, he said eagerly, totally misreading my train of thought.

Will you remember me when you're thirty?

The question threw him. Of course. What do you think?

I finished my coffee and gathered up my parcels. I gotta get going, Dave. It was nice seeing you again.

He watched me do up my jacket. Are you leaving already? Don't you wanna get some pizza or something? I shook my head, absorbed in stacking our paper cups neatly on the garbage bin. Hey. I looked up. Good luck in Toronto. You'll do fine.

Thanks, I said, waving. Take care. I left, stealing one quick glance over my shoulder at Dave as I did. He stayed sitting at our table, his back to me, aimlessly tapping his foot. If he turned around to watch me leave, I didn't see him.

That was the last time I would ever speak to Dave. When I came back home the following summer, I bumped into Mandy at the video store, and she told me that he'd gone out west to try his luck. By then, my interest was only polite curiosity, but Mandy seemed eager to tell me all about Dave's ups and (mostly) downs during the year I'd been away. He didn't get into the insurance game, but he did help out on his dad's car lot, until his dad fired him for turning off too many customers. He tried his luck in Halifax, playing acoustic guitar in front of the Dalhousie University library, pumped gas at Casey's Irving out at the end of Robie St., hung out a lot at the Engine Room, drinking beer and eating 25-cent chicken wings. I still missed him a bit, though, whenever I passed by his parents' house on College Rd., and wondered if he was doing all right wherever he was.

CHAPTER 9

Dad and I switched seats in the parking lot of a truck stop outside Campbellton, just above the border of New Brunswick. Here, the Trans-Canada narrowed into a two-lane road, not much wider than the Sunrise Trail and hemmed in on both sides by the thick Gaspé forest. Now that night had fallen, traffic had quieted so much that I could drive for several minutes without seeing the headlights of an oncoming car. The lack of headlights, along with the lack of houses or stores, gave the road a creepy edge that made me want to push through it as quickly as possible. Dad had crashed out almost the moment he lowered his bulk into the passenger seat, and now he lay with his head tilted back against the leather, mouth hanging open, sawing away in dreamland.

I was a little uncomfortable driving in the dark like this, so I kept going over Dad's lessons on night driving—adjust speed to keep from falling into a rhythm, keep the radio playing softly, not loudly, crack the window to let in some air, and don't stare at oncoming headlights. That last rule was pretty easy to follow. I could count the number of cars I'd seen since Pointe-a-la-Croix on two hands. The radio breathed old static-fogged bluegrass songs, but they weren't helping to break the slightly sinister spell of the woods, so I twisted the dial to see if I could find some rock and roll. Every once in a while, the CB crackled to life with shadowy voices, adding to my unease. I decided not to answer them.

The truck rolled on through the night, and my imagination rolled with it, picturing the highway from a vantage point above the trees, a black ribbon cutting a careless, winding path through a blacker forest, the white glow of the moon bathing the trees in a sickly pale light. The further into the woods I got, the closer the trees came to the road, almost close enough to brush the roof of the trailer as it sped past. I tried my best not to think of trees coming to shambling life, reaching out with their twisted branches under a hideously smiling moon. Instead, I focused on the photograph of the Royal Conservatory from my acceptance package—venerable, unshakeable old bricks, windows framed by thick sills, big double doors that had been opening and closing since 1886. I'd be on the edge of Toronto by morning, unloading my stuff by lunchtime, and, hopefully, getting along with Rachel by the middle of the afternoon. The reality of all this was still nebulous, but it was slowly taking shape.

The sounds of the truck were starting to lull me. Maybe my percussion-trained ear was shaping the sounds, but all the click-clacks, mutterings and rumbles of the engine were beginning to make the truck sound like a giant instrument, with me pulling levers and pushing pedals from its bowels. There was a beat happening at the heart of the engine, somewhere underneath the roar of the radiator fan, and if I listened just a little more closely I could find it and control it.

Hour followed hour and town followed town, towns with names like Sainte-Florence, Sainte-Cleophas, and Sainte-Flavie. The sky began to gradually lighten and the woods gave way to the grand vista of the St. Lawrence River, which put me in good spirits. The clock on the dashboard read 5:00, then 5:30, 5:45, and finally, at about 6:00, I pulled into a truck stop, ready to eat the place into bankruptcy. Dad woke up as I brought the rig in for a graceful landing beside an oil tanker. He climbed out of the cab, apparently unconcerned about putting his life in the hands of a novice driver, and stood and stretched, locking his arms behind his back, the morning sun glancing smartly off his glasses. Well, kid, we lived. Let's get some breakfast.

In the diner, another Irving, I ordered some pancakes with real maple syrup, a huge grapefruit, and an inky cup of coffee. Dad kept scanning the French newspaper, looking for something he could read, finally throwing it down in frustration. I practiced my French with the waitress, who answered gaily as she refilled my cup, and when the bill came, I insisted on paying and opened my purse with panache. You're in a cheery mood, Dad said dryly. Maybe I should get the tip.

Yeah, maybe you should, I replied, peering into my wallet. After all the lessons, tuition payments and such, I expected to see flies flying out of my change purse. I pulled out a \$10 bill, my last one, and handed it over. Dad gave it to the cashier, got the change, then started counting the wad of bills he had in his own wallet. The cashier and I both watched him with interest. After going through the bills a couple of times, lips moving silently to add the numbers up, losing count a couple of times and having to start again, Dad just reached in, pulled out the entire stack of bills and handed them to me. Dad!

Well, you did most of the driving, he said. And it's kind of a graduation present. Go ahead.

I took the money, saw that Dad had nothing in his wallet but a few stray fives, and handed back half the bills. He hesitated for a moment, but took the money without a word, then helped me pull my coat over my shoulders before excusing himself to go to the bathroom. As I waited for him, I kept noticing the cashier, who was grinning to herself as she poked meal tabs on a spike beside the till. I was trying to sift through my limited French to ask her what she was smiling about, when Dad came back with a handful of junk food—peanuts, potato chips, cans of pop, and a big bag of M&Ms, his road snack of choice. The girl behind the counter totted up his purchases and then looked at me, as if she were waiting for me to pay. That's all right, Dad said, digging out two fives. You got breakfast, I'll get lunch.

The girl shook her head, smiling, as she bagged the stuff. I took the bag, mystified, and followed Dad out the door. He had the engine started before I even got to the truck, and before I could even settle into the passenger seat, we were pulling back out onto the highway.

Dad was fully awake now, tossing back M&Ms, chugging coffee from a Thermos under the seat, and neatly slipping the rig into and out of the morning highway traffic. He was in his element now, eyes clear, a smile on his face as the huge rig responded to his gentle commands like a stallion under an experienced horseman. I hadn't seen Dad take a drink since we'd been on the road, which was a good sign, and now as I watched the wheel slide through his big hands, I was reminded of how steady he could be, how in control. I felt I could breathe easily for a while, so I rolled down the window and let a cool stream of air blow across my face.

Beside me, the St. Lawrence slowly opened into a wide stretch of water. As the sun climbed to its high point, we passed through the outskirts of Montreal, then moved on past dozens of towns with long hyphenated names, crossing over into Ontario just as the clock on the dash blinked noon. I let myself doze off into a maple syrupy dream, soothed to sleep by the sound of Dad singing along with Willie Nelson on the radio. Maybe I didn't treat you &

When I woke up, Dad was maneuvering skillfully around the tight corners of a tree-lined city street. The setting sun skipped off the leaves of the trees and pried open my eyes, so I could see we'd gotten ourselves into a dead end somewhere. Where are we?

Dad pulled the rig to a stop in front of a rundown-looking apartment building and shut off the engine. We're here.

Here?

Well, this is the address. He handed me the scrap of paper where Dr. M had written down Rachel's address and contact information. 145 Brunswick Avenue.

I looked out at the apartment building, a gray five-storied box complete with a dilapidated garbage bin beside a front porch that looked one rain shower away from collapsing onto the shaggy lawn. Wow. I'm here.

We climbed out of the cab. Dad walked to the back of the trailer to start unloading my things while I walked up onto the porch and tried the door. Locked. I turned to have a look around the neighborhood. For the moment, the truck took up most of it, its trailer blocking the neighbor's driveway along with our own. But from what I could tell, ours was the only apartment on the street. The rest of the houses were better kept, spruce-looking bungalows and split levels, with flower boxes hanging from the windowsills and Subarus parked in the driveways. The street was quiet now. A few birds singing in the trees were the loudest sounds in earshot. Looking at the off-kilter porch, I guessed that our building was the only one on the street available for students. The landlord must have decided that regular maintenance would be wasted on students, so he just let the place go to ruin, not bothering with touch-up paint jobs or fixing the broken gutter hanging from the eaves.

Dad was lugging a pair of my suitcases over to the lawn. I've gotta get going. If the cops catch me parked here like this, they'll probably fine me. Let's get your stuff.

I helped him haul the rest of my things over to the lawn and carefully rearranged them into a neat pile, then sat down on my trunk to light a cigarette. The grass under my sneakers seemed to be growing in little tufts, as if whoever planted it had just tossed the seeds over their shoulder. I could see little patches of dirt in among the tufts of grass and ants moving in a steady stream from one tuft to the next. As the ants moved around and between the blades of grass, dime-sized wet splotches suddenly pattered down on the dirt from above. A giant hand rested on my shoulder and I looked up at Dad, tears pouring down my face. He raised my chin with his fingers and looked searchingly into my eyes for a long time. When he found whatever he was looking for, he knelt down and gave me a hug, holding me tightly and planting a kiss on my forehead.

I've gotta go, Sonya, he said. His voice was thick but steady. I've gotta go. You take care now and call me. Anytime. Then he was back in the cab, invisible except for a beefy arm cocked in a wave. In that claustrophobic cul-de-sac, dragging a fifty-foot trailer, Dad was able

to get the rig turned around in five minutes. And then, with a blast of the horn, he was moving back out to the main road. Watching the trailer doors round the corner and pull out of sight, I fumbled in my coat pocket for a piece of tissue and felt a strange bulge. Puzzled, I pulled out a fat envelope. Inside was the stack of money Dad had tried to give me at the truck stop, and I suddenly realized why the cashier had been laughing. She'd seen the whole thing.

With no way into the house, I had to sit on my trunk for another hour until Rachel decided to come home. By then the sun had sunk behind the houses and the first evening stars began to appear. Most of the residents were home from work now, kitchen and living room windows flooding the sidewalk with yellow light. A few children came outside after they ate and ran to the fence where the Dead End sign was posted, yelling and laughing. In the gloom of the twilight, I could just make out a little path running through a tangle of brambles and behind the fence. The children scrunched between two thorn bushes and disappeared in a chorus of shouts and yells. I turned back to see a couple coming toward the apartment arm in arm. It was too dark to make out their faces, but the guy was quite tall, thin and angular, shoulders and head slouched over the woman like a streetlight. She only came up to his shoulder.

Hey! she shouted, seeing me orphaned among all my worldly possessions. You're Sonya Castle, right? She untied her arm from her boyfriend's and stepped into the light of the neighbor's doorstep.

I stood up and brushed off my hands, dirty from pulling out tufts of grass. Yeah, that's me.

She brushed her frizzy hair out of her eyes to get a better look at me. Wow, you're beautiful! she gushed. Isn't she gorgeous, Vince? I'm Rachel. This is my boyfriend Vince. He's a separatist. Don't let him get talking about the Bloc Quebecois, or you'll never shut him up. Vince gave me a pained look, and shook my hand. His fingers were alarmingly strong, like tree roots. When he moved his face into the light, I was struck by how birdlike it was—a large, hooked nose framed by piercing, deep-set eyes and hooded by thick brows. When he twined his fingers around mine, his thin lips curved into a tiny smile, not exactly friendly.

Rachel was almost the exact opposite, quite short and a bit plump, but her round, open face was more inviting. She was wearing a long earth-mother kind of dress, dark brown with a gold leaf pattern emblazoned on it, and about a dozen gold and silver bracelets on each arm. She immediately took charge, telling Vince what to pick up first, and unlocking the door to the apartment. Why is the front door locked? I asked.

Rachel jimmied around a bit with the key before answering. That's the way Kevin likes it. He's the landlord. All the tenants have keys to the front door, so we all keep it locked when we're away. I've been living here for a year and I still can't figure him out. Is he a paranoid creep or is he just trying to cover his ass? Love the nose stud, by the way. Vince passed me trailing a wake of heavy cologne.

Rachel's apartment was the first on the right. Sorry, the place is a pigsty. I wasn't expecting you until tomorrow. She unlocked the door and pushed it open. I peered around the corner.

My first instinct on seeing the state of the apartment was to run directly to the phone and call a taxi. The place was a code-red disaster area. The sour smell of week-old alcohol hung in the air. A clock reading nine-thirty sat beside a calendar stuck on April. Books and papers were strewn all over the living room floor, weird wood and wire collages hung from the walls, there were pizza boxes and empty beer bottles everywhere, and the couch was decorated with a faded blue blanket covered in stains. The stereo was currently being used as a shelf for a stack of CDs and clarinet parts propped against some kind of papier-mâché sculpture. I couldn't tell which was supporting the other. In fact, everything seemed to be holding something else up—the milk crate of textbooks against the sagging coffee table, the anemic-looking houseplant against a stray pane of glass in the bay window, the brick holding up the three-legged television stand. Even the telephone hung on the wall by force of will only. One slam of the door and the place would fall like a chain of dominoes.

Rachel laughed suddenly. Yeah, she's a wreck, she said with pride. Takes a lot of partying to get a place in this condition.

Vince went in and out, silently hauling my things in from the lawn. When he finally set my trunk down on the living room floor, he collapsed on the couch with a huge sigh, eyes closed. Wiped, he said to no one in particular. It was the first word I heard him speak. He had a mild Acadian accent. How 'bout a beer?

Rachel came back from the kitchen with three bottles of beer and handed them around. Figured you might want to get fueled up a bit before you see your room.

I took the bottle. Do you think so?

She shrugged. Well, it ain't the Ritz. Vince gazed at her through sleepy eyes. I mean, it's okay and everything. You'll want to fix it up your own way. I nodded slowly, taking out my cigarettes. Rachel held up a warning hand. Uh-uh, no way. No smoking. Rule numero uno. She jerked a thumb at Vince, who was now lying on the sofa with his boots dangling over the arm. I make him go outside.

I looked around at the disarray in the living room and put away my cigarettes. Okay, let's see my room.

As I followed at the hem of Rachel's long dress, I passed the bathroom and glanced in. Socks and stockings hung all over the place, from the shower curtain rod and the rickety bath stand. The sink was littered with cosmetics, perfumes and all kinds of other junk. The door to Rachel's room was closed, but there was a poster of a little blonde girl holding a giant teddy bear. The poster seemed normal enough, except for the Ace Frehley paint on the girl's face.

My room was a tiny cubbyhole at the end of the hall, empty except for a squat dresser and a single bed with a bare mattress. Even with the bed pushed hard up against the wall, there was hardly enough room to squeeze past it and the dresser. If I stood in the middle of the room and stretched out both arms, I could have almost brushed both walls with the tips of my fingernails. The carpet was an institutional green, poorly laid, and banged up so close against the wall that I could see the black rubber underneath. Needs dressing, Rachel said from beside my elbow.

There's no closet, I said.

Nope. What you see is what you get.

How much is the rent on this place?

\$600 a month, plus utilities.

Jesus. I slumped down on the bed.

Rachel sat down beside me and put her arm around my shoulder. Hey, that's not bad for a two-bedroom place just a couple blocks away from the conservatory. We don't have to waste money on the tram or take a taxi. There's a cheap little grocery store around the corner. It's not a bad place. Can you cook?

A little bit. Not much.

Shit, sorry. You must be starving. How long were you sitting out there?

I don't know. Quite a while. I was starving, come to think of it. The last food I'd eaten were those pancakes this morning. That was years ago.

Do you like Chinese? There's a place near here that does amazing egg foo yung.

That sounds fine.

Cool. I'll make the phone call, and then we can get your stuff unpacked.

The three of us sat around the kitchen table munching on Chinese food out of the box. Vince and Rachel snickered at my clumsy chopstick technique, then laughed out loud when I threw them in the sink and started eating the noodles with my fingers. Vince swigged from an ever-present beer bottle, saying only what was absolutely necessary. I wondered if he said so little because he didn't speak English very well. Rachel and I chatted, mostly about life at the conservatory. I let Rachel do most of the talking, dropping in a word here and there to keep the conversation flowing. According to Rachel, the conservatory was a hotbed of snobbery, debutantism and inter-academic love affairs. I didn't know how much to believe, so I chose not to believe any of it, and just concentrated on nodding and chewing.

Vince dug around in the takeout box for the last noodle shreds and polished off his beer.

Practice time, ladies. Brian and I got that show coming up.

I perked up. Are you in a band?

Just a couple guys, you know.

What do you play?

Bass. Okay, babe. He leaned in for a sloppy kiss and made a face. Ew. Chow mein breath. He stood up and pulled on his jacket. So Gator, are you gonna show her the rats' nest in the armoire?

Shut up, dork. See ya later. Vince grinned and closed the door. Rachel's eyes lingered on the door, a dreamy smile playing around her lips.

Why did he call you Gator? I asked, piling up the empty takeout boxes.

Just his pet name for me. He just started calling me that one night. I don't know why. She paused for a moment, as if trying to remember where the name had come from, then just shook her head and threw the forks and knives into the overflowing sink. We were probably fried out of our trees. It gets like that around here.

So how long have you two been going out?

Rachel pulled her hair back into a twisty ponytail. Six months even on August 31st.

I smiled. Still in the honeymoon stage?

Rachel peered at me through narrowed eyes for a moment, then softened. I guess we are. He's a sweet guy. Different & Amazing bass player. You've gotta hear him play. I heard you played drums. Without commenting, I setting the dirty dishes aside so I could fill up the sink. Did you ever play in a band?

Yeah, I was in a punk band for about a year. But, I'm proud to say, it broke up when I stopped sleeping with the lead singer.

Ooooh, Rachel squealed. She'd taken my cue and was rooting around for a usable dishcloth. That's the kind of gossip I can get into.

Hey, I said, squeezing the last dregs of soap into the sink. What kind of dishwashing music have you got?

How would you describe dishwashing music ?

You know, something light and fun. Mellow. Maybe some country?

Rachel thought for a moment and then disappeared into the living room. I filled the sink with soapy water and turned the tap off just in time to hear the lilting voice of Sarah McLachan whisper out from the stereo. I got tons of bluegrass stuff, if you're into that! Rachel shouted.

Buddy MacMaster and a bunch of other old guys. Does that count as dishwashing music ?

Well, I shouted back, I wouldn't say that to Buddy MacMaster, but yeah!

Rachel came back to the kitchen and picked up the drying towel. You know, I think we're gonna get along just fine. We finished washing the dishes to the accompaniment of Buddy MacMaster's manic fiddling, and played a couple games of crib. By ten o'clock I was yawning so much my jaws were cracking. That's it, I mumbled, I'm done.

Go to bed, then, Rachel crowed, laying down her winning hand. You're done! Go on and get some sleep. I'll show you around the neighborhood tomorrow.

Over a bowl of Froot Loops the next morning, Rachel told me more about life at the conservatory. I didn't want to give you the wrong impression last night. It really is an amazing place. So many of the professors are these famous musicians, you know, from Germany or China. Yo Yo Ma graduated from here, did you know that?

Yeah, it was in the brochure, I said, dipping a strawberry in some whipped cream and munching on it.

Rachel was wearing another low-cut dress, this one a nice summery yellow that laced up under her chin. She waited for me to finish up and throw on my Blue Jays ball cap. Then we set out to have a look around. Outside, the air was crisp and cool with just a touch of a stiff breeze blowing in from the lake. The street was so quiet I could hardly believe we were in the middle of the biggest city in the country. Rachel seemed to read my mind. Yeah, we got really lucky with location here. This neighborhood is more for kids than students. She pointed. There's a playground just on the other side of the fence back there. Come on, I'll show you the grocery store.

The grocery store she was talking about was just around the corner onto Brunswick Avenue. The owner, an old Vietnamese man with a friendly, gap-toothed smile, called Rachel by name and bowed when she introduced me as her new roommate. Exotic spices filled the air with pungent aromas and lined up at the back, past the ordinary rows of junk food, cereal boxes

and cleaning supplies, were large plastic bins filled with dried curries. Rachel bought us each an apple and we walked up to where Brunswick Avenue turned onto Bloor St. West. We've got a good twenty minute walk to campus, Rachel said, but it's an entertaining twenty minutes.

She was right about that. We've got everything you could ever want just a few blocks from our doorstep. There're lots of funky cafes, underground record stores, used clothing shops, if you're into that, head shops & Some cool bars. We're right next door to the U of T, so we get all the cool runoff, bookstores, pubs and all that. Restaurants with every kind of food you can imagine: Thai, African, Greek, Japanese. There's this amazing Japanese place Vince and I go to once a month, not that I can really afford it. You like sushi?

I've never had it, I said. We walked on, passing open-air cafes and street performers jugglers, sidewalk portrait artists, scruffy guys playing beat-up Gibsons and a beggar with a creative approach to panhandling a stuffed dog sticking out from under the back wheel of a parked car. On his sign were the words Save my dog!

This is what I imagine Greenwich Village must be like, I told Rachel.

Life in the big city, she agreed. Is this your first time in Toronto?

Passed through it a few times with Dad.

We came to a vendor selling cotton candy. Even though it wasn't even noon, Rachel stopped to buy a bag. What does your dad do?

He's a trucker.

For a moment, Rachel was silent, a ball of pink sugar halfway to her lips. Then she dusted off her hands with an abrupt gesture and turned to me with a curious look in her eyes.

Do you ever stop to think about that? Most of the students are pretty rich, you know. They come from good families, parents went to university. A lot of guys here are following in their parents' footsteps. Like Vince's bandmate. His father studied classical guitar right here at the RCM. And now he's teaching at U of T. Do you ever think how strange it is to come from, excuse me, your background and wind up here?

A flash of anger shot through my mind, but I decided against letting it out. After all, Rachel was a complete stranger to me. What was the point of rehashing all of my doubts and fears to someone I didn't even know? Let her learn about me the long way. If she didn't want to do that, than fuck her. I deserved to be here, I knew I did. I didn't have to prove that to Rachel or anyone else.

I'm sorry, Rachel said after several uncomfortable seconds. That kind of came out the wrong way.

I shrugged and pulled a hunk of cotton candy off Rachel's stick. Actually, I got my commercial license this summer. I drove Dad's rig up from New Brunswick.

She looked at me in wide-eyed disbelief. Are you kidding? You're a trucker too? She laughed, delighted. That's about the weirdest combination I've ever heard. I gotta tell Vince, it'll kill him. You don't mind, do you?

Mind? It's not like it's a secret or anything. God.

I know, I know. But it's just & kinda weird. You gotta admit it, right?

I smiled. Yeah, it's kinda weird.

The conservatory was a three-and-a-half storied old-world-style manor, with lots of chimneys and bay windows overlooking Bloor St., draped in leaves from the trees lining the parking lot. I could just imagine an elderly English duke and duchess moving into it and turning it into a cavernous museum filled with dusty antiques, like Dr. McCaskill's house. Although the University of Toronto next door looked much more modern, with abstract sculptures beside the main doors, it didn't have the same majestic charm. Rachel and I climbed the stone steps and pushed the front door. It swung open into the main foyer.

Sunlight poured in through the windows and onto the polished floor, but the rich mahogany paneling dimmed the light and gave the foyer a warm glow. Two hallways stretched off on either side of the front desk. Rachel pointed down one of them. This actually used to be called McMaster Hall, after some senator you probably never heard of. All of our classes are in this building, so you don't have to worry about running around. The practice studios are nice too. They all have couches in them, in case you want to crash out. Do you want to look at the classrooms?

What a gorgeous old building, I said in a hushed voice and took a deep breath, my eyes shut tight. I can almost smell the history. In the floors, the halls, everywhere. I opened my eyes again. I bet there's a row of portraits along the hall, right? The Ghost of Prodigies Past?

Rachel laughed. No portraits, but there are a few prodigies around.

Just a few?

Believe me, a few are enough. There's this one girl, Crystal Cross, she's a violin prodigy. She's supposed to be coming here in September. She's been studying in Germany or something. All my profs couldn't stop talking about her last semester.

Jealous?

Rachel blew her bangs out of her eyes with an exasperated breath. No fucking way! It's just that sometimes it's a little too obvious where the conservatory's priorities are.

I watched an old relic of a security guard wander past and give us a cursory wave. What do you mean?

Well, I don't want to get all down on the place again, but the school's just looking for students to become famous and spread the gospel, you know?

Anyone ever tell you you're a real cynic?

Oh, yeah, Rachel said with a snort. Happens all the time. C'mon, let's go check out the Philosopher's Walk.

What's that?

It's a little park out behind the campus. Vince and I like to go for a walk there sometimes and make out like a couple of high school kids. Sometimes they have concerts there.

Rachel bought us both some cappuccino from a sidewalk vendor and we sat on a bench on the Philosopher's Walk, saying little, sipping from our cups from time to time and just enjoying the warm summer air. Couples passed us, arms and lips linked together, hands sliding into the other person's back pocket, doing nothing more strenuous than enjoying the company of

the birds in the trees above. If this is summer in Toronto, I said to Rachel, I think I could get real used to it.

Enjoy it while you can, she replied, tilting her head back to catch as much sun as possible on her pale cheeks. So what kind of music are you into?

Damn, that's a tough question. I'm into everything, really. If it's good.

Rachel shook her head, her eyes still closed. That's not what I mean. What music really turns you on? What pieces, what artists. That sort of thing. At three in the morning, you got about five shots of tequila in you, you just ditched your shithead boyfriend, you're staring at the ceiling, what do you want to hear? Not classical stuff. Modern stuff.

I thought hard, going through songs I'd heard a million times over until they'd become part of the backing track of my life: I Go to Pieces, Angel of Death, China Girl, Another Brick in the Wall, Perfect Day, Sweet Dreams, songs blended together, popping into my head in no real order, just a random collection of noises, harmonies, melodies, bridges, choruses, lyrics of loss and sadness, joy and hope, pleasure and pain, bands that Dave made me listen to Black Flag, Black Sabbath, the Clash, and the thousands of anonymous songs that I'd heard on the radio or were playing at some party that I listened to while I pretended to be interested in the guy who was hitting on me, songs that caught my ear and then disappeared like smoke or a whiff of strange cologne that evaporated the moment I turned around to find it. You know, I really can't answer that question.

You don't have a favorite? She sounded shocked.

Not a favorite, really. I listened to a lot of K-Tel compilation albums. I struggled to put my feelings into words. I guess I've never really latched onto one specific singer. There's just too much out there.

But that seems strange to me. When I was growing up, all my parents listened to was classical music. That's all my father played in the house when he was trying to inject some culture into me. But when I hung out with my friends, we listened to a lot of great music, stuff that would have freaked my parents out—the Cure, Depeche Mode, Siouxsie and the Banshees. I went through a heavy goth phase when I was in high school. Me and my friends used to have these dance parties, you know, we'd all come dressed up like Halloween monsters and play the Bauhaus and bands like that, and do all these weird dances. But I really connected with those bands. I mean, I listened to them in my room with all the lights off and just cried sometimes. You didn't go through anything like that?

I was silent for a long time, listening the thin wisp of a breeze comb through the leaves of the overhanging birch tree. Even on a beautiful day like this, I could hear a note of vulnerable ache in that sound. The wind would go on blowing through dead leaves and bones, stirring dust into lonely swirls across an endless desert. A sudden chill raced down my neck and I shivered. Rachel didn't notice as she tipped her cup to scoop out the last spoonful of whipped milk. I started to say that the music I connected with hadn't been written yet, but Rachel interrupted me with a shout to a good-looking young guy in fighter pilot shades who was coming down the cobblestoned walkway. Hey, baby! Thought you were in L.A.!

The guy strolled past, yanking his bomber jacket open to show his L.A. Lakers T-shirt. I saw ten ball games in two weeks! What the fuck am I doing back in this town? He turned and waved to someone farther up the path, then turned back to Rachel. When re you having another little get-together?

Weekend before classes start.

Give me a call! he shouted, miming a telephone, before jogging away to meet his friend.

Oh, sorry, Rachel said, remembering that she had a new roommate. I hope you don't mind. It's kind of a tradition.

I shrugged. It'll be cool to meet some people.

Rachel gave me a squeeze. You're gonna meet some people, all right. Count on that. You wanna see the practice studios?

The tour continues, I said, standing up and stretching.

Hey, Rachel said, arms spread across the back of the bench, not if you don't want to. I wouldn't mind hearing you play something, though. If you don't mind.

All right, lead the way.

I sat down at the Yamaha baby grand and pushed back the cover. Rachel stretched out along the sofa and waited for me to start. I flexed my fingers, wanting to play something short I could get through without screwing up too badly, and picked John Cage's *A Room for Piano*, the shortest piece in my repertoire, and the one that got the puzzled silence at the talent show. The jaunty, delicate trickle of notes danced at my fingertips like little pellets of rain against the tin roof of an old shack in the woods, some old shack abandoned years ago, holding itself up against the trunks of a few stray birches and waiting for the day when the rain rot caught up with the wooden walls and everything slowly collapsed to the earth in an exhausted, but strangely satisfied heave. When I finished, Rachel applauded solemnly, the dry claps dying in the still air almost as soon as she made them. That was amazing. Who was it?

I got up from the stool to look out the window at the traffic below. John Cage. My piano teacher introduced me to him last year.

Really? I thought he was dead.

I turned to look at her, mouth open. We stared at each other for a second and then started laughing like lunatics. Okay, okay, I said, between gasps for air. That's all you're getting today, girl. Let's go get some lunch. Then I want to get back home and unpack.

All right. Rachel walked over the piano and ran her hand along its ebony surface.

Maybe Cage is your guy. Ever think of that?

I pulled my cap on. No, I've never thought of that. All I want right now is food. And lots of it. Let's go.

CHAPTER 10

I spent the next week shopping for room decorations—posters, plants, art prints, photographs—anything to brighten the drab, slightly lizardy atmosphere that even the heat of a Toronto summer couldn't overcome. I hung up the canary-yellow curtains from my bedroom back home, put a row of herb plants in the window, and stuck a small chalkboard beside the door, just above the light switch. I figured I could use it as a kind of day planner, but more severe than a leather-bound pocketbook. Maybe it would help keep me sharpened up. As a final touch, I taped a powder-blue silk scarf over the light bulb to give the room a fresh glow, and sat down on my bed to look around. Van Gogh's sunflowers lit up one side of the room, balanced by my small photograph collection, mostly landscape shots taken on driving trips around the Glooscap Trail. I put my only framed picture, a shot of Dad sitting in the cab of the Kenworth and smiling down at me from above, on the dresser beside a vase of white lilies. Now the room felt just the right combination of princess and outdoors to be livable. I still didn't have a decent place to hang up my clothes, and had to make do for the time being with a makeshift rope clothesline stretched across the room. But at least I felt a little more at home.

I hadn't been sleeping well the past few days, tossing and turning and waking up in the middle of the night to the sounds of Rachel and Vince having sex in Rachel's bedroom. She liked to make a lot of noise during sex, moans and deep sighs, words and shouts. Even when I pulled my blankets up over my head, I could still hear them through the thin walls. And within minutes, the heat forced me to kick the covers back off anyway. Night after night I found myself staring out the open window at the streetlight that glared in from the end of the front walk, sweat beading on my forehead, trying to shut out the noises from the other room by working on tricky passages in *Miniatures*. I had most of the piece figured out musically, but I was still struggling with lyrics. Everything I wrote seemed contrived or forced or just plain bad, and the scraps of paper that I crumpled up after staining with my pen could have filled the bathtub.

The weekend before school started we decided to throw a little back-to-the-books dinner party, with Rachel inviting about fifteen of her friends to the apartment. I did most of the cooking, putting together a cold pasta salad, a hamburger casserole, and a cheese and tomato plate to go with the bottles of wine. In a fit of domestic ambition, I even tried my hand at a cheesecake, which didn't turn out too bad. Rachel cleaned up the apartment, throwing all the junk into a big cardboard box and loading it all onto the porch.

People started showing up around six, just as we finished laying out all the dishes on the coffee table (new legs screwed in tight), and I was nervous enough without having to worry about names and instruments. I had planned to wear something nice, but decided instead to follow Rachel's casual lead and put on a black spangly top and a pair of flared jeans with roses embroidered along the seams. It wasn't a formal party—nobody expected to stay too long, just

enough to have some dinner and a few drinks, before we all walked down to the pub to listen to Vince's band. It was their first performance this summer, and, listening to everyone talking about it, I figured Vince must have been prepping everyone for months.

The crowd was a pretty civil group, mostly preppy types in Tommy Hilfiger sweaters and gelled hairdos. They all seemed nice but distant, smiling a lot as they leaned against the doorway chatting, or squeezed beside one another on the couch. They knew their wines and their instruments and swapped stories of professors I hadn't met yet, concerts I hadn't seen and bars I'd never been to, all while picking the olives out of the pasta salad. When Rachel found me in the kitchen getting ready to dish out the cheesecake, I couldn't help a little jab. Your friends must think I'm the caterer or something.

Rachel banged through the cupboards until she found some more paper plates. We're gonna have to get going soon. Have we got any ice? I want to make some margaritas. Oh, Chuck brought his stash with him, so if you want to smoke a J before we go, we should do it soon, because Vince is gonna start in an hour. And don't tell everyone, ok? It's just between us. She put her finger to my lips. I can guess what kinds of parties you had back in Truro, Nova Scotia, punk rock girl. But wait until later, that's all I'm gonna tell you.

She left me to cut up the cake and went into the living room to find Chuck. When I came into the living room and put the cake down on the table, the guests barely broke off whatever conversations they were having and took the plates I passed around without even looking up at me. I saw Rachel leaning over a guy sprawled out on the floor, a glass of wine forgotten at his elbow. He was whispering something to her, his mouth shielded by his upraised hand, and the look on her face was a mixture of greed and gratitude. When her eyes flicked up to mine, she gave me a significant look and clearly mouthed the word *backyard*. She might as well have been wearing an I'm Getting High sign, but no one around me seemed to be paying any attention.

I got my shoes and jacket on and waited until Rachel was able to pry Chuck up from the floor. They followed me out onto the porch, and the three of us ducked around to the backyard, where the only light bled around the edges of the building and lit only the barest outlines of the tall weeds growing everywhere. Rachel grabbed both our hands and led us to an old sawhorse beside the oil tank. This is my little spot. Vince and I come here whenever he's got a new batch.

Chuck pulled a joint out of his shirt pocket and lit it. In the flash of his lighter, I could see that he was vaguely handsome, but his eyes had a slippery, insinuating gaze. When he passed the joint to me, his eyes traveled down to my breasts then slid away to see if Rachel had noticed. I half-expected the end of the joint to be covered in slime, but it only took a few puffs between the three of us and we were laughing like hooligans over the wig of Dr. Nathan Allister, a man I'd never met before and who now was the funniest human being alive. As Chuck described the way the professor's rug looked like roadkill, describing in loving detail how the wind once pushed it off into a puddle and how Chuck had expected it to grow legs and teeth and attack Dr. Allister for all of the humiliation it had suffered and how Chuck had wanted to start a fund around campus to raise enough money to give the hairpiece back its freedom, and somehow all of this was so funny I could barely breathe, choked with laughter, while the creaky voice of

Billie Holliday floated out from the apartment, the weeds rocked back and forth and in a yard nearby a starving dog was scraping his empty supper dish against the gravel and crying out against a world that had forgotten him, lonely and miserable under the endlessly whirling stars. What the hell was in that weed?

I had no idea how long we were out there but our cover was blown by a guy and a girl who poked their heads around the corner and surprised us. Hey, the girl said, aren't we supposed to be going now? It's almost eight o'clock.

Shit, said Rachel thoughtfully. That totally sucks. This observation was greeted with another snort of laughter from Chuck.

Totally, I agreed. Drugs really do make you talk like Cheech n Chong. And so we went on another bender, fueled by the looks of bewilderment on the faces of the guy and girl, who decided to leave us to catch up with the rest of the group when we were ready. We decided to split one more joint and head over to the pub, hoping Vince hadn't already started his set. I still had no idea what kind of music he played except that he played the upright bass—an appropriate instrument for him, I thought.

On the way to the pub I was swept along by the intense presence of the night around me, my senses sharpened so acutely that I was able to focus on the smallest details of sound all around me. The wind worked through the leaves on the overhead oaks and elms, and the quiet motors of the cars sliding by had a slightly ominous edge. As we neared the Annex, I couldn't separate the noises anymore, and everything began to blend into a spinning mix of ambient dissonance and atonal drone accompanied by far-off urban murmurings that I couldn't identify. Had Chuck mixed something stronger into the weed? I swallowed a brief panic attack, and shook my head several times, trying to clear it. The sight of the pub just ahead cheered me up, and I started walking faster to get inside before the sky fell on me.

The mood was warm and inviting in the pub, and most of the guests from the dinner party were there, having moved from wine to cocktails like extras in a James Bond movie. They were sitting at a table just in front of the stage where Vince was just opening up his bass. Not really feeling capable of socializing, I bought a rum and Coke, leaving Rachel to deal with her friends, and leaned against a large column just beside the bar. The column was painted with jazzy, vibrant splashes of orange and blue and there was a polished black counter circling it for me to lean my elbows on, so I propped myself up and waited for Vince and his crew to start playing. Vince, who'd started tuning his bass, noticed me and winked, as if he knew I was stoned. For some reason, that irritated me.

I lit a cigarette, reached over my shoulder for the ashtray and accidentally exhaled smoke right into the face of the short, impish-looking guy who'd sidled up into my blind spot. Immediately, I opened my mouth to apologize, but the way he screwed up his face made me think of a kid turning up his nose at a plate of broccoli, and I had to cover my mouth to stifle a blurt of laughter. I was going to offer you a drink, he said, when he'd recovered his composure.

Oh? I asked, lifting my rum and coke to take a sip. Yeah, I had the same idea a few minutes ago. As I looked at him more closely, my first image of him sharpened—a five-year-old with a gleam in his eye, as if he'd just poured sugar in someone's gas tank. His blond hair

stuck out in seventy different directions at once like a hay mow, and probably sprung straight up again, five seconds after he'd combed it.

Now, he was looking at me with a little sideways grin. Waiting for me to tell him how adorable he was, I guess. What? I asked, not very graciously.

Nothing. I just think you've got amazing eyes.

Right. And I bet you've said the same thing to every other girl in here. I turned back to the stage to watch Vince tune up. But the guy with the sugar-in-the-gas-tank smile was not going to be put off so easily. He tapped me on the shoulder. I looked back at him over the shoulder he'd tapped, but didn't turn to face him. What?

He held out his hand. My name's Brian. And you are &?

I looked down, arching an eyebrow at his extended hand, and looked back up at his face. The grin had become a smirk, a dare hidden in his dimples. There was no way I was telling this guy my name, so I took my drink and walked back to where Rachel was sitting, leaving him standing there with his hand stuck out like a robot whose batteries had suddenly died. Nice exit.

Rachel was talking to a tall guy with over-enthusiastic sideburns, but when I sat down both of them looked at me expectantly. Making new friends? Rachel asked.

God, I said, downing the last swallow of my drink. I hate guys who just think they can come onto you, like you're just going to melt in a puddle at their feet or something.

You look pretty fucked up there, Sleepy Eyes, Rachel said, patting my arm. And Brian's a sweetheart once you get to know him.

I looked up at her. You know him?

Without answering, Rachel pointed up at the stage. I turned around and groaned to see Brian strapping on a Gibson guitar. I watched as he tuned up, head cocked to one side, listening to the sweetness of the notes. Then, at a nod to Vince, he began to play and in seconds I'd lost myself in the gentle caress of his fingers on the strings. Whatever persona he'd been trying to work with me earlier, framed by that evil-cherub grin, was gone. Now, as he sat hunched over his guitar, eyes fixed on his chord hand, another nature began to take shape, every arpeggiated note accumulating, adding itself to the picture of a young man bringing his talents under his skilled hands like a master horseman guiding a willful stallion. He was playing a sonata, I didn't know which one, but the development carried almost all the weight of the piece. It was strikingly sad, but his playing was so deliberate and gentle that the sadness took on a quality of ancient power. Vince underlined the mood with mournful sighs from his bass.

Another picture filled my mind—two haunted souls embracing one another in an exhausted dance, limbs held up by force of will alone, moving mechanically across a dusty floor. The shimmering lights from the chandelier reflected the pain in their eyes, both knowing their time had come, that this dance would be their last. But on and on they whirled, as the music became madness and the thundering hooves grew louder and louder; on and on they danced, back and forth across the groaning floor, staring so deeply into each other's eyes that they were drowning, whispering strangled words of everlasting love, a love that did not have to die when their fingers slid away from each other a final time, a passion that could not be locked away in the basement, a beauty that would never decay, no matter how long it lay dormant. And when

Brian's fingers finally released the strings, the last sweet echo lingering in the silent air, I looked around at the others, my breath hardly stirring, to see if anyone else was crying.

They were looking at me with wide eyes and open mouths, Rachel, Chuck and all the rest, and I suddenly felt a flush burn my cheeks. So, I said, mustering a smile. Anyone else for another drink? Brian stepped down off the stage and dropped into the chair next to me, examining his fingertips. I turned to him and held out my hand. I'm Sonya, by the way. I didn't know you were a friend of Vince's.

Brian arched an eyebrow and, after a second's hesitation, took my hand. My drink offer still stands.

I nodded, tilting my face up to the glow of the red and blue lights on the ceiling. I'd like that.

But, he said with a raised finger. You've gotta drink my drink.

What's your drink?

A little something I came up with myself. Kind of on the pricey side, but I think you'll like it. I looked over at Rachel, who was talking with Vince about the Part 1 of the party he missed in between sloppy kisses. Brian caught the arm of a waitress and asked for two Sunspots, whatever they were. But all I could think about was the music I'd heard and how Brian had pared away all of the imperfections—the squeak of his fingers along the strings, the uneven pressure on the frets—to leave only the notes, each encased in its own shell, like a pearl, and he never missed one.

The waitress came back and placed our drinks in front of us. I picked mine up—it was a milky orange color with dark, syrupy ropes laced through it. What is this?

It's a Sunspot, Brian said, as if that explained everything.

It looks like something that comes up instead of going down.

Just taste it. Brian had already slugged back half of his. So I took a taste, expecting to wince, and instead found it delicious. The others were sipping rainbow-colored drinks through straws, talking and laughing, looking like models in a magazine ad. Brian finished off his drink in one last gulp and called for another. Rachel stopped nibbling Vince's ear long enough to ask me if I was still stoned (I was) and if I wanted to smoke another J (I didn't).

We left the pub at about midnight to stumble home, leaving most of the first batch of partyers behind. A different group was waiting for us on the porch, three guys and a girl standing guard over a stack of beer cases. When they saw us, they yelled and leaped off the porch, came over to us and started hugging Vince and Rachel. Brian, who'd tagged along with us, hoping our party would continue, whooped when he saw the gang, grabbing a tall, mustachioed guy in a rowdy bearhug and clapping him on the back. The other two guys looked as if they'd been shooting electricity directly into their eyeballs. They glanced around wildly, gazing in seven different directions at the same time, their red-rimmed eyes nearly jumping out of their sockets. They kept moving, snapping their fingers, running their hands through their bleached hair, punching each other, grabbing people's arms, and even doing a jittery jig on the front lawn.

Rachel barked out names. Darryl, Mickey, Gina, Paul. Meet my new roomie, Sonya.

She's pretty sexy," cackled Mickey, one of the spaceheads, in a horsy bray. Darryl, the tall guy, buried me in his arms for half a minute, kissing me on the forehead all the while. He smelled like he'd been on a week-long drinking binge and every time he kissed me he hit me in the face with alcohol breath strong enough to melt butter. The girl seemed to be the only half-sober one, and even she couldn't seem to get a sentence out without being interrupted by a giggle fit.

"This is my gang, Sonya," Rachel said gravely. "I met them in &..." She paused, trying to remember. "Where did I meet you guys?"

"On the courthouse steps," Gina said, and everyone roared. I looked around, figuring to see half a dozen of the neighbors standing on the sidewalk, ready to call the police.

"Yeah, you were walking up, we were walking down," Mickey added. "God, his eyes looked like they were spinning around in his head. Any minute now, I'd see a couple of no-sale signs pop up like in a Daffy Duck cartoon."

"Actually, these guys are a local band," Rachel corrected. "The Midnight Callers. They gig over at the Pilot."

"Yeah, they suck," Vince blurted. "We just hang out for the hash."

"And fine hash it is," Darryl said. "So what are we doing standing around here where all your jealous neighbors can see us? Are you gonna invite us in or not?"

Rachel fished in her pocket for her keys. "Wait'll we get inside, shitheads. I don't need the police over here."

After the guys lugged the beer into the house, we all sprawled out on the living room floor. Brian started handing out bottles while Rachel lit the candles around the room. Darryl pulled a CD out of his jacket and put it in. A poorly recorded jazz combo started playing something loose and mellow. Mickey, Rachel and Vince went into the kitchen, leaving the rest of us to pick at the last of the cheesecake left sitting on the coffee table and make small talk. Brian positioned himself strategically at my elbow and stretched his legs out so that our feet pressed together. I gave him a questioning look and he mirrored it back to me, making me smile.

"You're a very talented guitar player," I told him. He was silent for a moment. "Not a very inspiring comment, I know. Okay, wait, let me think of something better &..." He rolled over to peer into my eyes, while I dug deep into my imagination, which seemed stuck in first gear.

"You play like a wise old man living with the ghosts of doomed romances. You can't get excited anymore, but you keep your memories alive on your guitar."

Brian, who'd been on the verge of a sneer, suddenly furrowed his brow thoughtfully.

"Huh," he said, and sipped his beer. "What do you mean I can't get excited anymore?"

I used my finger to scoop up a chunk of cheesecake. "It was just an impression."

He pressed on. "I saw you crying."

I leaned back against the couch, eyes closed, released a long deep sigh, and looked at Brian intently. He stared back. Neither of us spoke. I studied his face, his deep blue eyes, his impossible hair, his mouth arranged in a confusing blend of cockiness, tenderness, and simple joy. Somewhere, underneath it all, I could sense a deep urgency, a hurt maybe, that found its expression in the quiet, jeweled power of his playing.

Brian swallowed audibly. You're breaking my heart, he said.

Rachel poked her head out from the kitchen. Knives are ready, she said. Who wants first shot?

Paul and Mickey looked up from some coin-flipping game they were playing. I think the providers should have the first shot, Paul said, flipping back his long hair.

Oh, no, Rachel said. First goes to our lovely new houseguest, and all-around sweet person, at least as far as I know.

Nah, she thinks we're a bunch of assholes! Vince yelled from the kitchen.

Well, come on, dear, Rachel said. I craned my neck back to get an upside-down perspective and saw her looming over me, hair dangling down onto my cheeks. She grabbed my hand and hauled me up. You'll love this, Punk Rock Girl.

In the kitchen, Vince was holding up the refrigerator, counting out a number of little black pebbles on the kitchen counter. One of the stove burners was glowing red, and two butter knives were stuck in the coils with their handles pointing out. Ever done hot knives before? Rachel asked. I shook my head. Easiest thing in the world. Just don't put your lips too close to the knives or they'll get burned right off. Ready?

What do I do? I asked, remembering vaguely the Laughing Corpses talking about the finer points of using empty toilet paper rolls to suck up hash oil fumes, but I never saw them do it.

All you have to do is breathe, Vince said. He pulled out the knives, which gave a scrapey hiss, and carefully laid the blade of one on top of a hash pebble. This is how it goes straight into your bloodstream. No wasted time. He pushed the other knife on top of the pebble, making a fast trickle of smoke. Suck it up, Vince said, and I did, getting a blast that made my eyeballs throb. When my lungs couldn't hold anymore, I choked down a cough, knowing how that would make me look, and leaned back against the wall. Rachel was watching me with bright interest. I held my breath as long as I could, then exhaled. Instantly, my high returned, making the kitchen slither and swirl. I plopped heavily down into a kitchen chair, rocking slightly back and forth.

Everything seemed to turn to glass, Vince and Rachel in sharp focus and moving back and forth like animated cels. Vince was setting the knives up again and Rachel was putting her head around the corner to see who was next. Paul came in, sliding his hips against Rachel to the sound of techno music from the stereo. Soon there was a parade of people coming into the kitchen to get smoked up, hobbling back into the living room once they'd gotten their fill. I watched all of this like it was happening on television, a completely unstructured scary-wonderful play that I couldn't turn off and when Rachel asked me if I was ready for another hit, the possibility of actually standing up was laughable. I shook my head slowly, causing earthquakes in my mind, able to hear the creak and snap of tendons and bone with every twitch of my muscles. Bring it on, I heard someone say, a girl's voice coming from somewhere over my left shoulder. Vince put the knives under my nose and released more smoke. I caught about half the dose, and choked most of that out in a coughing spasm.

Through a red film I could see Rachel and Vince conferring about something, and then Rachel took me by the hand and stood me up. She put her mouth close to my ear and whispered, Go chill out somewhere.

I hobbled into the living room, which now seemed at the end of a long, dark tunnel. When I got there, I collapsed on the couch. My fingers fell on Brian's head, and I scratched him like a dog, making him laugh. My eyes must have looked like two snooker balls, but Brian didn't seem to mind as he smiled up at me and rubbed his hair against my palm. The other people in the room had become shadows on the wall, distant spots of color and sound. Whatever music they were playing had become creepily pensive, a female voice stretched like taffy over the lampshades, sculptures, and dirty dishes. So, Brian, I said in a slushy voice. Tell me all about yourself.

Wahl, he said, putting on a hillbilly accent, I was born on a plantation in Jawjaw, the eldest of sixteen chillins. My maw and paw were killed in a tragic butter churnin' accident, leavin' me to raise my ten brothers an' fahv sisters. I used to sing them all lullabies on mah gee-tar. Then one day I met this Johnny Reb cowboy fella, and he said, Son, you can play that thar gee-tar just like ringin' a bell. An' the rest, as they say on the TV, is history. And you are one gorgeous little filly, you know that?

I tried to say, Shut up and kiss me, but saying anything understandable without consonants was hopeless. Brian must have read the invitation on my lips because he leaned down and kissed me gently, moving up to my nose, my eyelids, my earlobes, and back to my lips, his fingers caressing my cheek and pushing my hair back from my forehead. I liked his caresses, those fingertips worn to snake skin from years of pressing down on guitar strings, but right now I wanted to struggle up against my hash-induced stupor that had me locked down against the couch cushions. I sat up and cleared my head long enough to light a cigarette from a pack lying on the coffee table, forgetting Rule No. 1. I smoked it halfway, re-sparking the drug rush and bringing with it a rising tide of nausea, and buried the butt in the nearest ashtray, which turned out to be the half-full bowl of pasta salad.

Wanna go for a walk? Brian asked from the depths of the living room carpet. Clear your head?

A walk? I repeated, wondering when I'd suddenly turned into a Rodin sculpture. The front door seemed roughly three miles away. Brian got me on my feet and moving, though, and once I put my shoes on and got out into the night air, I felt okay enough to walk to the end of the street.

By now it was almost two thirty in the morning, and the streetlights had been turned off. The only light now came from the flickering candles in our living room window. Does the street have a curfew? I asked Brian.

He laughed and squeezed my arm. You're a card, you know that?

Where are we going?

Down to the playground. Now that the kiddies are safely in bed, we can have it all to ourselves. We reached the bushes beside the Dead End sign. Brian pushed them back to give me enough room to duck through, and then he followed me out the other side.

I brushed the dirt off my knees and stood up to look around. So, is this where you bring all your girls?

There wasn't enough light to make anything out except the dim outlines of the usual suspects—a swing set, roundabout, seesaws, and a twelve-foot humpbacked dinosaur of a slide that looked designed to buck kids to their deaths. I walked over to the swings and sat down in the leather loop, idly kicking at the dusty groove under my feet. Brian joined me in the next swing. Nervous?

About what?

Orientation on Monday?

I kicked the dirt some more, trying to balance a small mound on my toes. I don't want to think about that right now.

Brian turned around in his seat, twining the chains of his swing, and let himself go, spinning lazily until the chains straightened out again and jerked him the opposite way. Rachel tells me you play drums. Have you had a chance to look around town much?

Word gets around, I guess.

We're looking for a drummer.

I've only been over on Spadina a bit, you know, looked around the Annex, found a couple of cool record stores.

Orientation's kind of a joke. There's a backyard barbecue, a meet-and-greet kind of thing. You get your package and take a campus tour. Pretty basic. So your dad's a truck driver, huh?

I tossed my hair. If you need a drummer, I'm your girl. Got any cookies or anything? He dug around in his pocket. Oh yeah, you're packin'. He came up with some gum and gave me a piece. Thanks. The memory of George and the bench at the Holy Well Park slammed into my mind like a thunderclap.

Brian stood up and beckoned. Let's go play on the teeter-totters.

I stayed where I was, chewing my gum. Who said my dad was a truck driver? He's a dispatcher. There's a big difference. I glanced up at him. You didn't smoke any hash, did you?

He stopped, his expression unreadable in the blackness. I thought & Rachel said & He held out his hand again. I wanna dance.

Yeah, well, I said, chewing furiously, Don't believe everything she tells you, sweetheart.

But I got up and went to him. He put his arms around me and hummed a little melody, turning me in a slow waltz for a few bars, then dipped me so far my hair brushed the dirt. Both of us realized how insane we must have looked to anyone who happened by, and started howling. Brian even dropped me on the ground because he was laughing so hard. We laughed like fools for what felt like ten minutes, Brian slumping down onto the ground beside me. When the dust settled, I stood up again, a bit wobbly but clearer-headed, although my mouth was as dry as chalk. I wanna go home, I announced.

Brian was still leaning back on his hands in the dirt, his legs splayed out wide in front of him. I'm asking if you want to be our drummer. Vince and I are putting a jazz combo together, and we need a drummer.

I don't know anything about jazz.

He snorted. Who gives a shit? Are you any good? Tell me the truth.

No, I'm no good. C'mon, let's get out of here.

He finally stood up, wiping his dirty palms on his pants. Fine. But you gotta promise me something.

What?

You'll let me show you around town next weekend.

I shrugged. Okay, it's a date.

Brian walked me back over to the thorny bush. Watch yourself, he said, holding up a nasty-looking branch so I could crawl under it.

When we were both on the other side of the Dead End sign, I stopped and stared at it. The announcement written in bold black letters suddenly felt arrogant to me. Hardly knowing what I was doing, I walked over to the sign and started pulling on it. Brian stared at me, then back up the street to see if anyone was watching. Help me with this, will you? I asked him, grunting.

He came over and grabbed a corner. Why?

Because it's depressing, that's why. With his help, I managed to peel the sign off the fence. It came off easily, attached only by two rusty spikes at the top and bottom corners. I looked at it for a moment, forgetting why I'd pulled it off in the first place, and threw it over the bushes into the playground.

Brian was watching me, shaking his head, a little sideways grin on his face. When I came to him, bewildered, he just laughed, reached up and brushed a stray strand of hair off my forehead. Okay, I think that's enough fun for one night. Let's see if anyone's still up.

We walked together down the sidewalk. The air had grown slightly chilly, but not uncomfortable. Walking side by side with Brian, I felt no nervousness about the coming Monday, no worries about fitting in at school, not even the slightest twinge of fear about life in the big city. With a few offhand gestures, he made me feel accepted. It was exactly the feeling I needed right now, and it made me feel confident enough to push him a bit. I have to tell you, I've never heard anyone play guitar like that.

It's in the blood. My dad studied guitar here and now he's teaching at U of T. My mom's an economics professor there.

So you live at home?

For the time being. He yawned and stretched. We were almost home now. I don't see any reason to leave. They let me come and go. I'm comfortable.

Sounds ideal. What's your girlfriend think about it?

Brian snorted. That was subtle. He stepped up onto the porch and peered through the little window in the door. Long story. Tell you next weekend.

Whatever, I said, pushing past him into the hall. From behind our door, I could snatches of muffled conversation. I won't lose any sleep waiting to hear it.

I opened up the door and slowly peeped around it. Everyone was sprawled out on the living room floor listening to Jefferson Airplane, or at least watching the trails of light that Jefferson Airplane's music made as it flitted around the room. Rachel and Vince were curled up together on the couch, Vince's hand nestled comfortably between Rachel's thighs, his face buried into the back of her neck. Darryl and Gina were on their stomachs, playing some kind of card game that was either insanely complex or totally nonsensical. The two spaceheads were going through Rachel's record collection and sharing the bowl of pasta salad. Adam and Eve came back & to a garden full of snakes, I told Rachel, who made a contented purring sound.

We can find our way, don't get up. Rachel made a few lazy hand gestures like she was conducting an underwater orchestra, and elbowed Vince in the ribs.

I found Brian some blankets to sleep on. He watched me as I laid them carefully on my bedroom floor, a look of amusement twinkling in his eyes. Looks comfy, he said when the makeshift bed was ready.

By now, exhaustion had set in. Keeping my eyes open was taking so much energy I couldn't operate my arms and legs. Enjoy. I don't know what the others are going to do, and & I interrupted myself with a jaw-cracking yawn. I don't give a shit. I sat on the edge of my bed and pulled off my blouse and threw it on the floor, dimly conscious that I was now wearing only my bra and there was a strange guy in my room. I decided to leave my dirty jeans and my stud in, and just roll under the covers until Monday morning. Sayonara, Brian, I started to mutter, but by the second syllable I was asleep.

CHAPTER 11

Orientation Week started under a blanket of black gloom. The sky had knit its clouds together in a tapestry of thunder, lightning and rain that seemed to be focused directly on my bright yellow umbrella. Rachel, Vince and I were all crammed underneath it and ran practically the whole way to McMaster Hall, splashing each other with the mud from a million puddles. I kept waiting to get a zap of lightning on the butt, like in a Bugs Bunny cartoon. Yesterday, Rachel showed me where she got her hair done at a funky little hair salon in the Annex, with caffeinated abstract art all over the walls and hairdressers who called themselves personal stylists. I spent sixty dollars I couldn't afford getting blonde highlights and curls, and now I was sure my hair would be a swampy mess by the time I got to school. I pulled my plastic hood up and prayed for the best, while Vince put one arm around Rachel and me and held the umbrella as low as he could.

Most of the orientation party plans had been canceled because of the rain, so there wasn't going to be a barbecue on the front lawn or a meet-and-greet in the Philosopher's Walk. Instead, we assembled in the majestic Ettore Mazzoleni Concert Hall, to listen to the conservatory president give his annual speech. The ceiling rose away to a peak that must have been fifty feet from the aisles. Hanging from the cavernous ceiling were beautifully molded rings of wood, like wagon wheels, each one holding over two dozen smaller lights. From where we were sitting, the Steinway grand looked like a toy. While I marveled at the architecture, Vince kept pretending to raise his hand as if he had a question about something then forgot what it was and nearly made me laugh out loud by mouthing the whispering some parts of the speech under his breath just before the president said them.

The barbecue had moved to the cafeteria and morphed into a catered brunch, so the three of us joined the long line of students and faculty, while Rachel pointed out different faculty members. She pointed to an older man with a shock of white hair and a bushy beard. That's Prof. Blakey. He'll probably be your main instructor. And the woman next to him is Dr. Lalande. You'll be working with her too.

I looked through my orientation package to find the faculty bios. Prof. Blakey had received his MSc. in Interlochen. Where's Interlochen? I asked.

Rachel looked at me in surprise. In D.C. Didn't you know?

Obviously not, I replied, annoyed. I smoothed down the wrinkles in my skirt, suddenly feeling overdressed and uncomfortable. Most of the faculty was wearing shirts and blazers, but the students were in preppy-casual, with only a very few bothering to with anything as formal as a dress or a necktie.

Brian sat with us for lunch. I can only stay for a few minutes, he said, wolfing down a slice of cold ham. Simon wants us to stick together for the first day, just to keep the babies from wetting their pants.

Thanks, I said, with a sour frown.

He shrugged. Sorry. Gotta go. He picked up his tray again to dash back to his table, and was nearly sent sprawling over Vince's outstretched foot. Fucker.

A few people from Rachel's party came to sit down with us, and they immediately started up their conversation right from where they left off on Saturday night, detailing this professor's recommendation for positions in the orchestra and that professor's recent solo performance at the Four Seasons last month. One guy pointed to a table on the other side of the dining hall, at a girl who was sitting with her back to us. That's Crystal Cross. She's a violin prodigy. Played a lot of solo concerts when she was a kid, but I heard she had a collapse, a complete mental breakdown. Spent the last three years in Germany studying composition. She's going to give a recital in November. She'll get the solo next spring, for sure. I strained to get a look at her, but there were so many people surrounding her I could only catch a glimpse of black hair whenever someone moved their arm away.

So who you got this semester?

I jerked my head around. A girl with a pageboy cut was looking at me expectantly.

Oh & ah, Prof. Blakey.

The girl shook her head. Watch out for that guy.

I finished my bowl of strawberry yogurt and threw my spoon down on the tray. Why? What's the matter with him?

Nothing that a little hormone therapy couldn't fix.

Everyone had a laugh at that. I laughed along with them, a little uneasily, sneaking a quick peek over my shoulder at Prof. Blakey, who was sitting with some of his colleagues at another table.

C'mon, Donna, Rachel said with a sneer, don't terrify the poor girl on her first day.

Oh, yes, I forgot, Donna said, flashing me an evil grin. You're new here.

After lunch, our afternoon classes started and I had to say goodbye to Rachel for the rest of the day. Without Rachel or Vince around to show me where to go, I kept having to study my schedule to find my classes, glancing down at the paper then up at the doors, turning corners to hallways lined with books and instruments, bumping into professors and other students, and feeling like a little girl in church. Just wandering the halls, I could almost breathe in an austere, chalky residue—a mixture of leather binding, lacquer and violin rosin—the smell of notes being composed, played, studied, analyzed, labored over, polished, made to dance at fingertips and along strands of horsehair. I backed myself up against the wall to let a group of chattering students pass. They obviously weren't freshmen.

I found Prof. Blakey's class and chose a desk close to the front, staring up at the portraits of famous composers above the chalkboard. My feeling of being in church intensified. Other students were filing in now, scraping chair legs against the wood floor, clearing their throats, talking softly. I turned around to see Prof. Blakey come marching in briskly, carrying a stack of

binders and folders with papers half falling out of them, plopped everything down on the podium and looked out at us. We looked back at him. Well, he said, forcing a cheery smile through his thick beard. Let's get started. You'll need three textbooks for our theory course—he wrote the titles on the blackboard—*Rudiments of Music in the Spheres, Harmony of the Spheres Vol. 1, and Counterpoint of the Spheres*. And, of course, plenty of notepaper. At the end of the hour, I want you all to sign up for your master class schedule. I'll have the form to hand around to you in a few minutes. Don't worry if you can't get the time you want today—we switch every month. Now, I want to give you a brief introduction to the materials course &

Prof. Blakey droned on like that for the next two hours, talking as if he were reciting a legal passage he'd memorized, and never once asking the students anything about themselves or even if they wanted him to slow down. By the end of the hour, my head was spinning, and, when a bunch of us gathered for some vending machine coffee, Prof. Blakey walked by without so much as a nod in our direction. I asked one of the other students if he was always so remote, and she told me he hated freshman. Her sister had studied with him and found that his respect for his students grew year by year, depending on how much effort the student put in.

Yeah, kind of like a mutual fund, I said.

The girl stared at me as if I'd just spoken in Hebrew. I guess, she mumbled.

I met Vince and Rachel after school and we had dinner together at Future Café, a popular hangout for students and the cappuccino-cheesecake crowd. Rachel and Vince talked excitedly about getting back into things, seeing people and professors they hadn't seen for months, and debating about who was going to get into the orchestra this year. Neither seemed very interested to hear how my day went. Rachel asked me a few questions, more out of politeness than interest, but then could barely be bothered staying out of Vince's hair long enough to listen to my answers. So I mostly sat, picking morosely at an anemic Greek salad, not hungry, more worried suddenly than I had been all summer.

That night, I just lay in my bed and stared up at the ceiling, unable to get to sleep, my nerves jangling like Rachel's bracelets. Why was I suddenly so unsure? I wondered if the upperclassmen deliberately turned off when they got back to school, as if summer was the time to throw off their class constraints and romp with the rookies, but once school started again, everyone slipped into their proper places and went back to the status quo. I listened to Rachel and Vince, who were laughing loudly at a sitcom in the living room. Or maybe they were laughing at me. I couldn't tell. Turning over on my side to get a new view, I was faced with a Polaroid I took in Annapolis Valley when I was twelve. I couldn't see the details, but I knew it by heart. It was Mom, sitting alone on a swing, her back to the camera, her face turned just enough to catch a glimpse of her profile. Her head was tilted slightly, as if she were listening to something in the wind that was making her hair blow back. She wasn't holding the ropes, just letting her hands dangle at her sides. There was no one else around her.

She never knew about the picture—I took it while peeking out from around a tree in Grandmother's backyard, running away before Mom could turn far enough around to see me. I couldn't remember why I never told Mom about the picture, but I knew I'd promised myself she'd never know I took it. It was my secret.

I closed my eyes, picturing sparkling glass windows, tall skyscrapers and tram lines, zoos and museums, street signs, five-star hotels, homeless people, street performers, sidewalk cafes, and the CN Tower, trying to fit these images together in a jigsaw puzzle small enough to wrap my mind around. I wanted to manage Toronto, squeeze it into a postcard or a snow globe, something I could understand. I wanted it to be home.

I didn't meet up with Brian again until the end of the month. He happened to walk by me sitting under a tree in the quad, gathering up the nerve to go to my master class with Dr. Lalande. When my hand rose to answer his wave, moving back and forth like it was hypnotized, he said something to his buddies and jogged over to me. Hey, haven't seen you for a while.

I agreed.

He stretched himself out on the grass beside me without bothering to ask if I was interested in his company. He seemed to be taking for granted that I'd been waiting for him to reappear in front of me ever since Rachel's party. After a few minutes of silence, he said, How are you getting along with classes?

I glared at him. I'm not, you know, but thanks for asking. I picked up a dried leaf and crumbled it into dust, letting the wind blow the scraps into the air.

Do you want to talk about it?

Talk about it? God, what is there to say? I go from one class to another, not knowing what's going on, listening to teachers talking about stuff that I've never heard before, being ignored by everyone around me. Rachel and Vince have been acting like I'm not there. I'm afraid to walk in front of a mirror in case I don't see my reflection.

Brian looked out across the quad. Little clusters of students lounged on the grass, on benches, on the steps of McMaster Hall. Everyone looked like they were exactly where they were supposed to be, comfortable in their brand-name sweaters and Birkenstocks. Knots of wood ground into my back from the tree I was leaning against. Ants tickled my fingers. How are your classes? Brian asked.

I checked my watch instead of answering. Five minutes to go. I actually dreaded going into the practice room with Dr. Lalande. Every time I did, I felt like the fly who stepped into the spider's parlor. Dr. Lalande's sugary-sweet smile masked the heart of a sadist who would've made Dr. M cringe. She had a way of pacing around the room as she listened to me play, her face set in a deep frown that made me so nervous I kept getting crossed up. Whenever we stopped for a break, she gave me her big smile as she told me all the mistakes I made. We need a lot of ear training, she would say, shrugging in the hopeless way an exhausted mother shrugs when she hears about her teenage daughter getting caught shoplifting.

Brian touched my elbow. Hey, you still interested in taking a trip with me around town? If you're not busy Saturday, we can hook up around ten or so.

All right, you're on. I gotta get back to the snake pit. I stood up and looked down at Brian, still sprawled out under the tree. How did you survive your first month?

Slept through it, mostly. Sorry.

Brian came calling at nine o'clock on Saturday with two tickets to the Toronto Symphony Orchestra at the Roy Thomson Hall, but, in his words, That's only the end. He'd lined a full day of places to visit, starting at the CN Tower and touring the Casa Loma, lunch in Chinatown, an afternoon at the Ontario Museum, the concert, and topping the day off, a mystery spot. But I got a pretty good idea where he wanted to finish off by the way he asked me if I was nineteen. Just making sure, he said with a nudge-nudge leer.

I wimped out at the CN Tower, much to Brian's amused delight. As we waited for the bus that went over to the Casa Loma, he kept needling me with little jabs, like Are you sure you wouldn't rather take a taxi? The bus is pretty high. And when the bus pulled up, he took my arm to make sure I didn't get dizzy as I climbed the steps. Finally, I whirled around and, in front of all the other passengers, barked, I hope you don't treat your wife the way you treat me! The split-second look of utter shock on his face was worth every single taunt he'd made, and when I sat down beside the window, I smiled up at him and patted the seat next to me.

It's okay, I said, I'm not mad. You Toronto boys have no manners, poor things.

Brian grinned. Touché. He sat beside me and pointed out the sights as we rolled past them, giving me a primer on the History of Brian Stuart 101. That's the theater where me and my ex-girlfriend met John Candy. That house on the corner there, I used to go to a lot of beer parties there. I swear, someone got arrested at every one of his parties. There's where Vince and I did some guerilla gigs last year.

Guerilla gigs? I looked out the window at the street scene. A busker in dirty jeans and a red neckerchief was playing an Asian-looking violin.

Yeah, that's where you just grab your instruments, find a place, and bang for an hour or two. Kind of like & Well & He uncased his guitar, tuned it quickly and started strumming. All the bus passengers, aroused from their daydreams, looked around to see who was playing. The same sweet notes that had moved me so strongly at the pub whispered from his fingers, drawing everyone on the bus into a five-block music appreciation club. Punks nodded heads with harried mothers and one corporate-dressed figure even deliberately missed his stop to listen. The moment was so fragile I didn't dare breathe, and when Brian's fingers stopped moving and he put his guitar back in the case, a number of people applauded. This is our stop, he said, slinging his guitar over his shoulder and standing up. We got off the bus to another round of applause. The smile on Brian's face as he stepped onto the sidewalk was bright enough to burn through the gray autumn clouds.

Wanting to say something but not sure what, I decided to keep quiet and just grabbed his arm as we hiked up to Casa Loma. He seemed surprised, but mostly kept quiet too, saying only that this was his first visit to the castle since he was eight years old. We followed the circular path around the stone fountain in front of the entranceway, stopping just long enough for me to take a picture of him sitting on the edge of the bowl-shaped pool.

After we paid our admission, we picked up a couple of pamphlets to find out a little about Sir Henry Pellatt, the financier who built the castle in 1911. Turned out he only lived in it for about ten years before going bankrupt and having to give the place up. I wasn't surprised. The

ceilings in the front entrance were higher than the Ettore Concert Hall. How much do you think it would cost to heat a place this huge? I asked Brian, as we walked under an arched doorway into the Oak Room.

They probably burned peasants, Brian replied. The carpet in the Oak Room was a rich magenta color, and in the middle stood a gorgeous oak table with a floral centerpiece and book-ended by fake candles. I walked around the edge of the table, running my hand along its surface. Methinks, Sir Henry, that I made a grave error at our masked ball last night.

Oh? Brian replied in a plummy voice, echoing my posh, landed-gentry accent. And what grave mistake might that have been, Lady Mary?

I believe I let the Duke of Kingstonshire steal into my boudoir and ravish me, all the while neglecting our guests downstairs. It was frightfully inconsiderate of me.

Good lady wife, you have been most forthcoming. But it couldn't have been the Duke of Kingstonshire.

Why is that, m'lord?

Because he was buggering me in the wine cellar.

A giggle burst out of me, making the security guard glance over at us in surprise. I covered my mouth, feeling like I'd just farted in church, and that made me giggle even louder. Brian led me upstairs to look at more antique furniture and aristocratic architecture. By the end of the tour I'd seen so many burls and bevels, claw feet and cabrioles that a tinkling sugar-cookie spinet melody started whirling around in my head. I told Brian we had to get out before I got a headache from all the ornate finery.

All right. Do you like gelato?

Gelato? That's ice cream, right?

He gave a snide humph. Ice cream is to gelato like an outhouse is to Buckingham Palace. No, that's not it. Ice cream is to gelato as a chunk of marble is to the statue of David. No, wait &

I held up my hand. Stop. Please.

Right.

The rest of the day passed in a blur of cityscapes and strange Chinese vegetables, capped off with the concert at Roy Thomson Hall. By then, I was so tired that I caught myself nodding off deep into the second movement of Prokofiev's Second Piano Concerto and had to excuse myself to go to the bathroom and splash some water on my face. When I came out, it was time for the intermission, and instead of going back to find my seat, I ducked out onto the steps to smoke a cigarette and let the chilly air wash over me.

Brian guessed where I'd gone and found me sitting on the stone railing, one leg dangling over the side. He draped my coat over my shoulders. I figured you'd be cold, he said, sitting down on the steps.

Thanks. We watched the people on the sidewalk hurry along, turning down alleys and crossing streets, all following disconnected invisible lines. What was that piece you played on the bus? I asked.

That was *Água e Vinho* by Egberto Gismonti. A Brazilian guitarist. But I kinda fucked it up.

I could watch the stars all night, I said. Just sit here and get lost for hours. It's such a nice way to spend a night.

Then you may not be that into the rest of the evening's entertainment, said Brian.

Yeah, I got the idea you wanted to go to a club or something. I think I'm too tired to much else tonight.

Hey, that's cool. If you don't want to, we can get coffee or something after the concert and just call it an early night. However you feel.

For me, coffee meant a takeout cup of cappuccino and a cinnamon roll from the Starbucks just up the street. We caught the bus back to Bloor, and walked the last block home, Brian humming *Heartbreak Hotel* with his arm slung around my shoulder. I've noticed you have a very wide range of musical tastes.

Yeah, I do. I like a little of just about everything. Life just seems easier when you like everything.

An interesting philosophy, I mused. But doesn't that make it hard to tell the difference between good music and shit?

Brian wrinkled his forehead. I don't know. I never really thought about it that way.

Neither did I, I said. I'm just saying whatever pops into my mind.

We got to my front door. Brian waited for me to fumble for my keys. When I found them, I turned back to him and smiled. I had a great time today. Thank you for showing me around your town. It was nice of you to take the time for me.

He didn't answer that. Instead, he leaned in and kissed me, putting his hands into my hair. I kissed back, then broke it off with a smile as I gave his cheek an offhand caress. It's important to recognize good people, he said, flashing his sideways grin. I wasn't sure which one of us he meant. Got plans tomorrow?

I shrugged. Call me.

I will. He reached out for my hand, taking my fingers in his and looking deeply into my eyes. He let my hand go. I'll call you.

I nodded, not wanting to speak. He waved and started walking out to the street, slowly, as if waiting for me to stop him. I didn't, watching him as he turned onto Bloor. Only when he was out of sight did I turn the key in the lock and go in. I couldn't be absolutely certain, but as I walked down the hall to the bathroom, I couldn't remember my feet touching the floor at all.

CHAPTER 12

I was convinced our first practice session would be a disaster. What the hell did I know about jazz? I hadn't even looked at a drum kit since the spring. I'd been working on keyboards for so long, I'd lost all my rhythm. Halloween was three weeks away, and I had to learn the entire line-up by heart. How could I afford to rent a kit anyway? Besides, I was having enough trouble just staying on top of my schoolwork. I had to accompany a vocal major in November, I had three Handel pieces to learn, and the vocalist was a real bitch because her usual accompanist had to deal with a family emergency. Dr. Lalande was finally starting to smile for real during my classes, so I'd been taking extra hours in the practice studio and drinking coffee so strong it tasted like wet ashes. As a last roadblock, I mentioned that since Vince hadn't said a word about me joining the band, I wasn't sure how much he supported this crackpot idea. Brian listened to everything I said as he sipped his tea. When I finished my complaints, he let me catch my breath, put his cup and saucer in the sink and looked at me. So, he said, smiling brightly, we're getting together at Vince's place tonight around six, order some pizza and drink a few beers. I want to break it to him with you there. I opened my mouth to start complaining again. I'm not taking no for an answer, so forget it. Just be there at six.

After Brian left, I spent the rest of the afternoon tidying up the apartment. Rachel had tried to make omelettes for breakfast, but in a Rachel-esque display of domestic ineptitude, she took a call in the middle of cooking and burned a mess of eggs into the frying pan just before we had to leave for school. Now, the dishes were piled halfway to the ceiling again, and the counter was a gooey swamp of egg yolk and butter. To get myself in the mood, I lit an incense stick and put on one of Vince's Dave Brubeck records. While I washed the dishes, I listened hard to the record, trying to isolate the drum patterns. By the time the record was over, the dish soap had died and my hands were withered to a wrinkled old crone's claws.

There was no way I could do that. The complex, syncopated rhythms and virtuoso solos kept rolling out of the speakers, forcing me to put down my washcloth and just listen in awed silence. If this was what Brian wanted me to do, I'd have to laugh in his face. To keep from crying, maybe. And now I had to go expose myself to two guys I hardly knew. Whatever, I'd have to burst Brian's bubble and tell him to find a new drummer and let me get back to getting on Dr. Lalande's good side.

When I got to Vince's place, my mood was so sour I was actually tempted to turn right around at the edge of the parking lot and go straight back home to bed. But I gritted my teeth and climbed the stairs to his second floor. Vince opened up and saw the look on my face. Man, who pissed in your cornflakes this morning? Not even a hi-how-are-ya.

Brian was hardly nicer. You missed the pizza, he said, showing me the empty box and belching, just to illustrate the point. Sorry about that.

Fine, I said, slinging my purse onto the couch and flopping down in a huff. I only came over to let you know I can't be your drummer.

Vince and Brian looked at each other. Shitty, said Vince. He laid himself out on the big double bed that took up most of the living room floor and started rolling a cigarette. Brian leaned back on the couch and thumbed through a book of Robert Mapplethorpe photographs. Neither seemed interested in doing anything strenuous like talking or offering me a beer. I decided to get one out of the fridge myself. Vince had obviously been taking housekeeping lessons from Rachel. Just looking at the stack of dirty dishes on the counter made my hands shrivel up again and in the three seconds it took for me to open the fridge, grab a beer and shut the door again, I could have recited every item of food in it.

Brian threw his book down. Are we gonna jam tonight, or what?

I nearly spit into my bottle. Tonight?

Sure, tonight. Have you got anything else planned?

Vince pulled himself up from the bed and unfurled to his full height, standing on tiptoes, stretching and yawning. Paul will let us use his drum kit. He went to Detroit for a week, so we can jam over at his place.

I held up my bottle. I just opened this.

Brian stood up. So bring it with you.

I crammed my eyes shut and rubbed them furiously. Guys, I really don't know about this. I don't know what you want from me.

Vince looked down at me, arms crossed on his chest. Sonya, we're not going to beg you to play with us. But you don't have to treat us like lepers, either. Fuck, just give it a shot. We both know you've never played jazz before, and we still want you to practice with us. What does that tell you?

You know, I said. I think that's the most you've ever said to me.

Vince packed up his base and pulled on his leather jacket. Yeah, well, I'm a quiet guy. People don't like people who are quiet. Brian, can you bring the music?

Brian nodded and picked up a stack of sheet music off the floor. I had to gulp down my beer and give a long, fizzy burp, making Brian laugh in surprise. The beer went straight to my head but I got a rush of newfound confidence, and grabbed both guys' arms as they were getting ready to leave. Okay, I don't want to fuck up this little band of yours, but if you want me to play, I'll do what I can.

Brian ruffled my hair. That's all we ask.

The Midnight Callers practiced in a windowless little concrete box in the back of a music shop on Brunswick Ave. The room looked more like a storage container than a workable space. It stank of stale beer and sweaty T-shirts, moldy fruit skins and takeout boxes that had been left long enough to grow legs. Vince moved a stack of milk crates out of the way to make enough room for his bass. Brian set a mike stand up and started tuning his guitar. The drum kit sat at the back of the box, blocked by crates and amps, a stray saxophone case and a tambourine on the floor that looked like a bear trap. Getting to it was like going through an obstacle course.

But when I sat down and picked up the sticks, most of my doubts vanished. I tapped out some simple rhythms and riffs, feeling like I'd stumbled across an old friend I hadn't seen in years, and slipped comfortably into an easy four-beat rhythm, underscoring the dark creak of Vince's bass as he tuned the strings. When the instruments were tuned and tweaked, Vince let me look over the music he'd written. "Don't worry if you want to stretch your solos a bit," he said. "We'll just come back in when you go back to the rhythm."

For now, let us set the tone," Brian added. "Vince'll signal the changes. Okay & one, two, three, four &

We ran through the first three numbers, which were simple enough on the page, but when Brian and Vince started jousting with each other, adding solos and dialogues, the songs took on a strange life, building up layers of improvisational countermelodies, which I found impossible to keep up with. I had to fight with myself to stay focused, and every time I missed a cue, I could see Vince glance at me out of the corner of his eye. This unnerved me so much that when we took a break, my hands and feet were shaking and I sat down on one of the milk crates and just stared at the floor until my heart slowed back to normal. The boys retuned their instruments, saying nothing except an offhand comment or two about the acoustic quality of concrete. They didn't ask for my input or compliment me on my playing, so I sat there between them, watching them fix strings in meticulous absorption.

As if he'd just remembered who'd been playing behind him, Vince turned to me, began to say something, gave Brian a signal with a flick of the eyes, then looked back at me, drawing his brows down into a V. This production was making me angrier by the second, and when he finally started to speak, I leaned forward, ready to rip into him if he made the most innocent negative comment. "Sonya," he said. "I tensed up. His next words were chosen with great care.

When you listen to us, what do you hear?"

His words sucked the anger out of me. I had to stop and think hard for a moment. What did I hear? I didn't know if he wanted a technical answer or something more & poetic. I looked over at Brian, but he was no help, scribbling away in a notepad and pretending not to be listening. "What do I hear?" I repeated, trying to buy time. "I'm listening to you guys. I'm trying to get on top where you're going, what directions you're taking, so I can stay with you. And it's fucking hard."

Vince was shaking his head. "That's not what I meant. I'm not talking about just the way we're playing."

I hear an argument. Two of you locked in a tiny room with no air. Sometimes you both have the energy for a real fight, sometimes only one of you does. You argue back and forth. Sometimes one of you gets the upper hand, sometimes the other. When things get too intense, one of you has to step back and take a breath. Usually, it's Brian. And then you change roles, like dancers stepping on each other's toes, getting legs and arms tangled up, disentangling, fighting again. All elegantly ripped to pieces.

Vince was listening, head cocked on one side. He seemed to be trying to resolve a conflict with his facial muscles. "Then that's what you should be playing. I don't want you to worry about hitting the correct notes, or keeping up with us exactly. What I want is for you to

listen to your instincts. Not what you've been taught, but what you can feel. I want to try it again. And this time, I want you to take your spots from us. Do you know what I mean?

I don't know. Maybe. I stepped back behind the kit. Vince, can I ask you the worst question in the world?

He laughed. Sure.

I held up the sheets of music. What does this mean?

He pulled his brows to the bridge of his nose, then shot them so far up they almost disappeared into his hair. It's about Quebec. It's about how Quebec's cultural identity has been disfigured by the rest of the country. Isn't it obvious?

Huh, I muttered, picking up my sticks. And you want to express this through a musical form invented by black American musicians from Harlem?

He let out a deep sigh and looked over at Brian with a hopeless shrug. Okay, from the top. One, two, three, four &

I led us into the piece with a slow swell from my cymbals, just to get warmed up. When I gave them a simple beat, the boys opened their dialogue again, this time letting their voices resound more loudly against the concrete. I started with a simple pattern, repeated a few times, and began moving down a dark forest path, edging around the shadings and rock outcroppings into a smooth, but gradually more complex, rhythm. I was gliding past trees and bushes, dancing in the little droplets of light that fell through cracks between the limbs and peppered the forest floor. Beside me, a brook trickled its way through the green shade, curling around small boulders and cobblestones, and a sudden, sharp ache for home made me take a leap into the cool water. I splashed in it and out of it, jumping from the path to the brook and back to dry land and watching rainbows tethered between blades of grass shimmer in gossamer beauty. But my attention kept coming back to the forest, and as I peered into the darkness I thought I saw a shape sliding in the depths, stealthily avoiding the pools of light. When I turned back to the brook, it had swerved out of sight under the dense foliage.

The shape in the woods held my attention now, and I stopped to listen to it, entranced by the musky melancholy in its voice. I stepped off the path and into the woods, picking my way carefully as I tried to pinpoint where the sound was coming from. In the distance, I could see light pouring out from a clearing, and I made my way toward it, while on all sides the mournful cry grew in power and urgency, until I broke through the clearing and into the light again. The brook had reappeared, tumbling over a small waterfall and completely overwhelming the voice in the woods. I wanted to stay and listen to the cascade of clear water, let the golden afternoon sun warm my tired feet.

But the woods folded around me again, and the last rays of a beautiful afternoon were suddenly drowned in a torrent of eerie sounds, black leaves closing in over the sky overhead, the waterfall snuffed out by a deepening howl, a clawing at the back of a wounded throat, scraped raw by agonies I could never know. The sound stayed buried, more suggestive than scary, but insistent and propulsive, as I pushed my way through brambles and nettles, whipped and scarred by snaky twigs and thorns, searching for the path that would lead me out of these woods.

I couldn't find it. My mind swam and swirled, coiling under the deep, haunting lament that seeped up like smoke between the cracks in the forest floor. My arms were exhausted from pushing aside clutching branches, my legs ached from pounding against unyielding stones, but I kept running in a mad flail, eyes hopelessly darting in all directions, trying to pierce the gloom, make out anything that made sense, running faster and faster, deeper and deeper, lost in patterns that circled endlessly, accompanied only by my own breathing now, ragged and gulping for stagnant air, taking one last mad gamble, one last thrust into the blackness before I collapsed to my death.

That's when I felt the path under my feet. A one-two stutter-step and I was out, my sticks flying out of my hands, over the cymbals and across the room, where they hit the door with a clatter. The boys watched me, mouths hanging open, as I slumped down over the snare, feeling little rivulets of sweat run down my arms. When I regained enough strength, I came out from behind the kit again, carrying the stool. The boys cleared some junk out of my way, and I sat down to light a cigarette. No one spoke, so I decided to break the silence. So why don't you boys tell me more about this gig?

Vince started putting his bass away. I could see a tremor in his hands as he snapped the latches closed, but he was able to keep his voice under control. It's pretty straightforward, kind of a mini-talent show.

Brian broke in. They've got a good line-up, but it's kind of a smorgasbord of styles. There's a guy from my class, Teddy Macumber. He does singer-songwriter stuff, acoustic and harmonica. There's a female vocal group that'll do a few madrigals, a more basic rock band. And then us.

I'm trying to get us on at the end, Vince added. The guy who set it up is a friend of mine from Montreal, so obviously he's cool.

Ha-ha, Lower Canadian, said Brian.

How long will our set be? I asked.

Well, Vince said, scratching his head. That's the problem. We're playing down at the Montreal Bistro, so it's pretty pricey. We've got about an hour, hour-and-a-half, max. So I figure our set'll be about fifteen or twenty minutes.

That's not much, I said.

Vince sighed. True, but it's a prime gig. I heard there might be some MCA people there. You never know.

Brian shouldered his guitar. Okay, people, I've gotta meet Prof. Carlson at eight, so I better get moving. Sonya & did you say the last time you played drums was in the spring?

Yeah.

He looked at me for a long minute. That's a little scary. Anyway, I'll call you tonight. All right?

If you like.

Brian collected the sheet music and handed the stack of papers to Vince. See if you can work out a schedule with Darryl. We should try to get this space every day, if we can. He left with a quick wave, letting the door close in a rush of cold air.

Vince studied his bass for a moment. I think I'll just leave this here. It's like being chained to the Titanic sometimes. You wanna go for a drink at the pub?

I thought about Rachel for a second, trying to remember what time she said she'd be home. Okay, one quick one.

The pub was nearly empty when we got there. I found a seat next to the pool tables and waited for Vince to bring over the bottles. He sat down, sliding a Schooner across the table to me, and picked his bottle up. I touched mine to the lip of his. How did you and Brian first start playing together?

One of those things, really. We knew each other a little bit, from parties and stuff. Rachel knew his girlfriend, and she introduced us.

I took a long sip of beer. But what made you want to play together?

I don't remember exactly. Brian brought his guitar over to the house one time and just played. He likes doing that. I had Gina's bass, I was kind of messing around with it, and Brian just started jamming with me. I don't think there's anything more to tell.

So Brian's got a girlfriend?

Vince looked at me as if considering something. Do you want to get serious about this?

What, the band? I don't know.

At that moment, Vince seemed much taller than usual. He stared at me through his curling cigarette smoke for a moment. I don't know what you think about me and Brian. But we really want to make this work. Don't get me wrong, I love being here, I like studying & But we've talked a lot about it, and we really want to make this band work. This is what we have to concentrate on.

I leaned in closer. Can I ask you a question?

Shoot.

Why was Brian so interested in getting me to play drums with you guys?

Vince smiled slyly. It's no mystery.

What do you mean by that?

Never mind that. What's really important is how you feel.

You want to know whether I'm in or out. Is that it? I glanced around the bar. The only other students in the place were a couple of girls playing pool. I have to be honest though. I had fun today and everything, but &

But what?

I just don't think jazz is my thing. I feel really uncomfortable playing this kind of music.

You don't like jazz?

It's not that I don't like it. It's just not my thing. It's so all over the place, so many starts and stops and changes. I just don't have any connection to it.

I looked up at him. He was regarding the bottom of his bottle, turning it in his fingers as if reading patterns in the foamy residue. It's still early. My dad always tells me that there's no such thing as too late.

But I don't want to switch to jazz. That's what I'm saying. I like it, but & He signaled the bartender and ordered two more bottles. That's not what I mean. We've only been playing together for two weeks. We've got one gig coming up, and I don't want you to take it too seriously. What I'm saying is, the band is ours. We can do what we want with it. Brian's not as big a jazz guy as I am. He'd probably agree with you.

Yeah, but he's a pretty amazing player.

Vince glanced up as two older men came in, talking loudly together. He watched them take seats at the bar, calling the bartender by name, and pointing to a bottle on the top shelf. We're all good players. Maybe even better than that. There's nothing more I hate than false modesty. How old are you again?

Nineteen.

I'm twenty-one. Brian's twenty. Do you know how many people would kill for our talent?

I didn't answer. It was a question that I'd never thought much about. Was I really talented, or was it just years of practice? I couldn't tell the difference. I'd been playing forever, training my fingers, my ears, my eyes to work together, straining to make what I saw on a page or in my head evolve, become music. Wasn't talent supposed to come easy? It had never been easy for me. I'd fought with myself from the beginning, fought my hands, my ears, my doubt.

Think about our first practice session, Vince said. He didn't even look up as the bartender placed our glasses on the table. He continued to stare straight at my face, not showing even the slightest sign of being drunk. Think carefully about it. Didn't you get how tuned in we were? It was like we were all on the same track, totally together, totally focused.

I smiled. I don't know how much I'd read into one &

He interrupted me. When you're playing alone in some practice room, or you got a professor breathing down your neck, you're nervous. You fight with yourself, nothing seems to work right. You got all these notes sitting in front of you and you wonder what the fuck they all mean. They're not just going to walk off the page and into the air. You gotta play them, make them come alive. And that's really hard when you're by yourself.

You think so?

His voice got louder with each sip of beer. Absolutely. There are three of us. We help each other, we fight with each other, we have our own ideas about how everything should sound. We pick each other up. We can tune in to each other's vibes, there's this electricity when we're playing together. I love it. Brian loves it too. He reached over and put his hand on top of mine. I want this thing to work. I know it can work.

How's that?

He lowered his face enough so that his eyes almost disappeared into the shadows of his brow. The effect was a little creepy, but I kept listening. Because we're fucking good. That's how I know. He took a long drink of beer. Have you ever played in a band before?

I played in a punk band for about a year. It was just a shitty little group, but it was fun. For a while.

But I mean, you play drums and piano. What else?

That's all. He nodded to himself.

This was definitely a different side of Vince than I was used to. Not that I knew him very well, but it was a change from the taciturn slob I first thought he was. I realized I knew almost nothing about his family, his background, what he did before he came to the conservatory, or even how he met Rachel. Even these two beers were the first ones we'd drunk alone together. I saw him as a guy who draped himself over couches and paid more attention to getting under Rachel's shirt, not an artist. If he wasn't ugly, he wasn't far from it either. He'd struck me as just another guy who thought more of himself than he had a right to, cultivating scraggly sideburns that stretched into bad-taste territory. His mother had probably told him he'd grow into his face.

But now, under this light, his features gathered together in a kind of dark intensity, and he spoke clearly and precisely, sure of himself. Not arrogant, just sure. I guess what I'm asking is—are you serious about this?

Vince, you have to give me time to think about it. I can't answer that question right now. You know, school's going to get harder, I'm going to get swamped with shit to do in the next couple of weeks. Andrea's recital is coming up. I want to play with you guys. It's fun, but being in a band again. I don't know & I trailed off, suddenly struck by an image of the three of us onstage somewhere, sweat and flashing lights, trading instruments, lost in a world of our own sound, but at the same time, drawing thousands of people, riveted to their seats, into an ocean of music, in waves and waves, in storms, thousands of statues, wonderfully, hideously alive but motionless except for their eyes, their minds writhing and coiling, until some kernel deep inside crumbles, freeing them to move. And one by one they rise and start jumping, gyrating, whirling, letting loose in some mad voodoo dance until the night itself backs away from them, all shadows banished to the underworld, so that everything is visible, on all sides and in all directions. Everything.

I shook the image out of my head. Let's just see how the gig, okay? One step at a time.

Vince smiled. It's a deal.

CHAPTER 13

Rachel and I spent the next day poking around the Cumberland Mall, looking for cheap buys. Over lunch at the Bagel Stop, we compared our purchases while we drank strawberry milkshakes. I bought a cute pair of out-of-season sandals, but that was about all I could afford. Rachel was quieter than usual, hiding behind her frizzy hair and grunting when I tried to make conversation. I wondered if she was upset because Vince didn't come over last night. We left the pub around 1:30, and he decided to go back to his place, saying it would look strange if the two of us came home together.

Now she was inspecting something in her salad with a disgusted look on her face.

There's a hair in here, she said, pulling out a long black strand.

Man, don't make me sick.

Well, what kind of crap is this? She picked up her salad dish and walked over to where the counter girl was stacking plates.

I couldn't hear her, but I could see her give the girl, who looked barely out of junior high school, a good reaming. The poor girl just stood there, distractedly twisting the limp dishrag she held in her hand. When she finished unloading, she came back and threw herself in her chair with a huffy sigh.

So, she said, picking up her bagel and eating as if nothing had happened. You wanna go to Crystal Cross's recital?

Who's Crystal Cross?

Rachel looked exasperated. I told you about her. She's the violinist that everyone's so freaked out about. She's giving a recital next Wednesday. I think most students are going.

Oh, right. Sounds good, I said. Are you gonna ask me about our first rehearsal?

She kept her eyes on the cream cheese she was spreading across another bagel. Yeah, how'd that go?

It looks like they really want me to be their drummer.

Good for you, Rachel murmured around a mouthful of bagel. I'm glad you guys are working things out. She picked up her purse. I want to check out Estée Lauder for a while. She stood up and slung her purse over her shoulder. How about we meet back here in an hour?

Fine with me, I said. She left without another word, her bag following her around the corner and out of sight in a flash of rainbow tassels.

An after browsing bookshops and trying on earrings at accessory counters, I was back at the Bagel Shop to wait for Rachel. I waited for twenty minutes, and when she didn't show up, I dumped my tray and left without scanning the crowds for her telltale hairdo.

Instead of going home, I took a detour over to the Wax Museum, thinking I might buy a jazz record or two to inspire us during our practice sessions. The Wax Museum was a musty old used record store with bins full of plastic-wrapped album jackets from just about every era and genre that existed, and I usually came here a few times a week to browse and pore over records I couldn't afford. But what I wanted most right now was some time alone.

The store was packed with heads in kangols, neo-beats and retro-disco junkies, and the air was filled with the scent of pot smoke and patchouli oil. All of it put me in a nice reverent state, and I found myself bobbing along to the reggae grooves the clerk was playing. I went straight to the jazz section and started leafing through album jackets, looking for something that struck my eye. Seeing as how I really didn't know the first thing about jazz, I thought I would just grab the first couple of records that looked interesting, buy them and go home.

At seven o'clock I was still there, lingering between a double Billie Holliday collection and a couple of Duke Ellington records that were in the cheap bin. Somehow I couldn't seem to make a decision. I looked from one record to another, flipping through entire collections by Oscar Peterson, Sarah Vaughan, Nat King Cole, a blur of smiling men and women in tuxedos and evening gowns, but my attention kept wandering away. It wasn't that I didn't want to make the choice, but for some reason I felt like I'd lost interest. Finally, I figured out why. Ever since I'd stepped into the shop, I'd been aware of a strange, atonal music in the background. Whatever the clerk was playing was distracting me. I couldn't concentrate on the records I held in my hands, but could only listen to the ghostly sounds of winds, woodblocks, and what might have been a glockenspiel recorded from inside a glass tube. The rhythm lurched in shifting, unfollowable patterns, and everything floated atop and was propelled forward by a nagging bassline. I chose the Billie Holliday record just to ask the clerk what he was playing.

It's a local four-piece called Corona, he said. Really freaky stuff. It's kind of meditation music, but not relaxing, if you know what I mean.

Do you have another copy?

Not of this record. This is my own personal copy. They broke up about five years ago. But they made a couple albums in the late 70s that are really good. Just a sec. He slid off his stool, where he'd been listlessly filling out invoices, and disappeared into the avant-garde section of the store. When he came back, he had a record in his hands. The jacket was totally white with some primitive sketches in black: an old guy that looked like an Indian holy man in a yoga position, and a cat beside him, also in the same yoga position. Around the cat, several mice were rolling around, laughing at the cat. The title of the record was *Heaven Stretch*. If you're interested, I can let you have this one for \$6.

Deal. After thinking it over, I decided to put back one of the Art Blakey albums I was going to buy, paid the bill, and pocketed the change.

As I was leaving, the clerk shouted, Come back and let me know what you think of that, and I'll show you some other cool stuff we got back here!

No one was home when I got back, so I unwrapped myself and threw my coat and scarf on the couch. The record player was standing invitingly open, the hash pipe sat pertly on the coffee table, waiting for me to fill it. I slid the vinyl out of its sleeve and spiked it, then settled

down into the spot in the couch with the fewest broken springs, fired up the pipe, and closed my eyes.

The music began in small, steady strokes of what may have been five electric guitars all playing together, stretching out in shimmering sheets and waves and rolls of sound. For about five minutes, there were only the guitars, gradually getting louder and weirder, smeared by gobs of muddy feedback and jangled strings. But, apart from the guitars, I don't think I recognized a single other instrument on the record. Strange pulses seemed to be calling across galactic distances, echoing winds seemed to blow across barren deserts. What little percussion there was sounded as if it had been recorded in a basement with bare concrete walls and a labyrinth of rusty lead piping. At times, I heard a jangle of string noise that could have been knives scraping across a harp or someone taking a hammer to the guts of a piano. The piece dwindled over the course of its thirty minutes, dying like an ember on an endless winter night, into a black decay of sound, jagged, filled with gaps in the recording, weird meddling in the studio, until the broken gasp of a lone flute whispering a threnody brought the piece shuddering to a conclusion. When it was over, I lay still on the couch, one arm draped over my eyes, seeing nothing but the thousands of exploding novae from deep within the starfields beneath my eyelids.

This was what I wanted to play, this was the kind of music I needed to make, not warmed-over jazz or phony punk rock. Here was music that bubbled up from underground rivers, screamed around alley corners, seeped out through cracks in coffin lids, urgent and necessary, music that drew from poisoned wells not for audiences in Armani suits and strapless Dior creations, but for living ghosts, people forgotten, left to rot in abandoned tenement houses, huddled around burning pools of gasoline, war survivors, people who'd seen and done and heard and knew, every note a cry from the cinders of some destroyed soul, one who'd known such love and torment that death couldn't silence it, all fingers, hands, mouths, minds working together to build a map of the human soul from discarded notes and toxic teardrops.

Did you forget about Rule No. 1?

My eyes snapped open. Rachel was standing in the doorway, her arms crossed. Three large bags filled with clothes were on the floor beside her.

Man, how long have you been standing there?

Long enough, she replied. Don't you have to practice for Gladys's recital? Without waiting for me to answer, she picked her bags up and went into her bedroom, slamming the door behind her. Feeling guilty but not sure why, I hauled myself out of my comfortable dent and started tidying up around the living room.

Have you eaten yet? I called. No answer. The room was silent except for the sound of blood rushing in my ears and the faraway roar of the refrigerator. I was suddenly struck with the idea of writing a score for the human body, the blood flow and bone creak of the terminally alive. I strained to listen more closely, but the maddening hum of the fridge kept getting in the way. And, from somewhere under that sound, I could hear Rachel's muffled sobs. For a while I just stood there, wondering whether to go knock on her door or leave her to her tears. In the end, I decided to eat a dish of yogurt, tiptoe past Rachel's rainbow-tagged door, and hide out in my room for the rest of the night reading poetry and maybe even trying to finish up *Miniatures*.

Instead, the only disconnected fragment I could lock onto was Brian's phone number. He answered sleepily, but perked up when he heard my voice. You're fried, he said, practically crowing.

Mmm. You know the best thing about being stoned?

What?

Being stoned. I said with a cackle. I wanted to tell him about Rachel, but decided not to, in case she could hear me from the Bat Cave. I bought this incredible record today. Ever hear of Corona?

No. Some kind of space rock band?

I twined the phone cord around my finger. Yeah, I guess. Just weird noises that go on for about thirty minutes.

Sounds cool.

Well it sounds a lot cooler than it sounds.

He laughed. His voice was surprisingly warm, even over the telephone. Practice tomorrow. Same time, same place.

You have an amazing frequency, you know.

Thanks, I guess. Sonya & His voice trailed off for a moment. I wish you were here with me. Or I was there &

Or I was there and you were here. I chuckled. I never thanked you for the Buckingham Palace gelato.

Watching you lick the cone was thanks enough, he said. Sorry, sorry. That was &

Why don't you come over? I asked suddenly, then remembered Rachel. Well, maybe you better not.

Could you come over here? I could send a car. Was he kidding?

Rich guy, I mumbled. Holding my eyes open was becoming a chore, and I gave in to a dreamy smile, letting the receiver slide down my cheek onto the pillow. Talk later, baby.

He said something but I was too far gone to understand it. I let myself drift off, hands clasped under my cheek, the receiver lying under my chin.

The two weeks leading up to our performance at the Top of the Senator went by so fast I barely had time to breathe, let alone try to figure out where I was supposed to be and who I was supposed to be practicing with. When I showed up late to work with Gladys, she would give me a stare that could crack a wall and ask the ceiling how in the hell she wound up relying on a freshman to accompany her. If I stumbled on a note, she would throw her music on the floor in a prima donna fit and storm out of the studio, while I sat, head bowed at the piano, trying to remember one of the complex drum rolls I had to play for the boys.

At the Midnight Callers' concrete box, I let my rehearsals with Gladys bleed into my practice sessions with the boys, as I studied the notes Gladys gave me during our breaks. With my mind going in two directions at once, not to mention classes, which were getting more

stressful every day, I found I had just enough energy when I got home at night to drop my stuff on the floor and make sure my face was aimed towards my pillow when I passed out. My fingers hurt from banging them against piano keys, my ankles and shoulders hurt from pounding the drums, and my brain felt like a parched dust-bowl garden full of brown weeds.

And it seemed I was getting a colder and colder shoulder from Rachel every day. I had no idea what I'd done to piss her off, but she was obviously upset about something. I began to dread coming home, in case Rachel was there, and often grabbed a sandwich at Future's and went straight to the studio instead of coming home and making dinner. I wanted to talk to her, to just come out and ask why the hell she was treating me like dirt, but I thought I should wait until after the two performances, when I had a cleaner slate.

Our last practice session before our Top of the Senator performance was on a Friday night. When I got to the practice box steaming from the one-two punch of having Gladys yell at me for being late and then having Rachel rag on me because I left the front door unlocked, Vince and Brian were in the middle of a heated chess match, arguing over a take-back. You took your hand off the queen, Vince said, his shoulders hunched like vulture's wings over the glass chessboard.

Just to get a better look at the playing field, Brian shot back, and only for half a second. C'mon, man, give me a break!

I stormed over to the drum kit, kicking stuff out of the way and making more noise than necessary. You guys seen my sticks? I asked.

We're playing first! Vince answered. Of all the shitty things to do to us. The show's gonna run an hour, and then they've gotta get everything cleared off the stage for some bullshit awards ceremony. We've got fifteen minutes to get set up, play our set, while people are still going to be looking for a place to sit, and be offstage before the next act. The place'll probably be half empty, too!

Your sticks are on the radio, Brian said without looking up. He was still trying to figure out how to save his queen.

I sat down behind the kit, still fuming, stood up again and marched over to Vince.

What's up with Rachel? I asked.

Vince hesitated before reaching to grab Brian's queen. What do you mean?

She hasn't spoken to me in, like, two weeks. She's pissed off at me about something, but she won't say what. It's driving me crazy.

Vince shrugged. I don't know what's going on in that girl's head sometimes. We had a fight about & He stopped and looked at Brian, who gave a tiny headshake.

That floored me. You had a fight about me? Well, what about?

Vince looked up at me. I think that's going to take some time to explain. Let's practice and get the show over with tomorrow and we'll talk about it later, okay? Okay?

Fine, I said, and took my place again behind the kit. Then let's get going.

Brian wanted to take me to the Top of the Senator by himself, without Vince, and I agreed, happy not to have to deal with Rachel for an evening. Vince planned to meet us there an hour before the show started, to give us enough time backstage to get our instruments tuned.

During the cab ride, Brian kept up a steady stream of chatter about his classes, his teachers, the bands of teenagers hanging around in the streets. The wind had turned nasty late in the morning, and the forecast on the radio said there might even be a chance for a light snowfall. It wasn't even November yet!

I hadn't liked the looks of the sky all day, so when the night came I felt a little better. Brian pointed to a couple kissing in the doorway of an apartment building and asked me if I thought the woman was the man's wife, girlfriend or mistress. I told him I didn't care who she was as long as the fur coat she was wearing wasn't real. Must be his mistress, Brian mused.

Who'd spend that much on his wife? He winced, expecting me to smack him.

I was too obsessed with the Rachel issue to pay much attention, but I was grateful for his company just the same. For the occasion, he'd chosen a smart powder-blue shirt and red tie, and smoothed his hair down with what looked like a whole tube of gel. It wasn't a bad look, but I didn't want to touch his head without a wet wipe handy. Just looking at him with that little corkscrew smile was enough to make me wish we were taking a road trip together. I pictured his elbow crooked out the Kenworth's passenger window as we sailed across the Prairies, the stereo blasting and nothing but the sky above to see us.

Vince was talking with a couple of the vocalists backstage. A near-empty bottle of wine on a stool explained the flush in his cheeks, and he was already upset by the looks of the crowd.

There's no one here, man, he said, running his hands through his hair. His navy jacket was too small and tight for him, coming up above his wrists and pulling in tightly around his chest. He took the last mouthful of wine right from the bottle.

What are you doing? Brian hissed. You shouldn't be drinking now.

Fuck it, Vince said with the wave of a hand. We've got to get set up so the other guys can use this space.

We don't have to worry about that, one of the vocalists said. She looked half-drunk already. All we gotta do is step on stage and bam!

The backstage area was so cramped that Vince had to scrunch down so he wouldn't hit his head on the lampshade hanging from the ceiling. I think we should just go out there and improv the whole thing, he said, his face getting redder the more he thought about the idea.

Yeah, we should. Fuck the list, just go out there and jam!

Christ, no! I said, horrified.

We don't even have a name, Vince continued, waving the program under my nose.

We're listed as Opening Jazz Act.

We don't have a name, do we? Brian asked.

Sure we do, I said. Opening Jazz Act. What's wrong with that? C'mon, let's get set up.

The backstage curtain was thrown back and one of the guys from the acid-jazz group stuck his head in. Man, we gotta get our stuff moved in here. Are you guys ready, or what?

We're ready, Brian said, before Vince had a chance to interrupt. Vince, he added, a note of firmness in his voice. Let's stop fucking around and get to work. At first I thought Vince would react angrily, but I was surprised to see his shoulders slump the tiniest bit. He

nodded and started hauling his bass out to the stage. Brian looked at me and made a sweeping gesture with his arm. After you.

I went onstage, ignoring the audience, and started checking the drum skins and clamps. Brian followed me out and laid out our music. The emcee, Vince's friend from Montreal, stood at the lip of the stage with a microphone in his hand. I noticed Vince never made eye contact with him as he carefully rosined his bow.

When we were ready, the emcee stepped onto the stage and introduced us as old friends from the back alleys and bars of Montreal before giving way to some half-hearted applause from the parties at the nearest tables. Wanting to get the show going, I looked to the boys, mouthed the words "On four", then tapped out a brief 4/4 rhythm. Vince followed my lead smoothly into our first piece.

Even after three weeks of daily practice, I still found myself missing cues and getting off-rhythm at times, but I was able to right myself before I led the boys off the trail, and once I got settled into a groove, I really started having fun. From my spot behind the kit I couldn't tell if the audience was getting into it, but I could see Vince and Brian trade grins and knowing nods as they sparred back and forth with their instruments. Vince even loosened up enough to introduce the band to the crowd, even asking for suggestions for a name ("The Chocolate Fantastics" was the best one I heard). When I ended our mini-set with a three-minute drum solo, the applause from the crowd spread a smile like peanut butter across my face, and I waved from behind the high hat, hoping for a personal cheer.

Still, we had to rush to pack our instruments and get offstage before the next group came on, and by the time we were pushing our way through the back door, I could hear the crowd giving twice our ovation to the madrigal singers, who they seemed to know by name. I loitered by the door just long enough to be forgotten, then joined the guys in Vince's van. They had already loaded the instruments and were sitting in the front seat passing a can of beer back and forth. I climbed into the van and hung over the back seat between them, happy but unsatisfied. I'd barely worked up a sweat onstage.

You're not actually thinking of driving home? I asked Vince.

He shook his head with a disgusted grimace. So now you wanna know what's up with Rachel?

Brian sighed. You're gonna get into that now? I might as well just say sayonara and go home.

I neatly swiped the beer can as Vince passed it to Brian. Look, I don't know Rachel that well. I don't know you guys that well. But I have no idea why Rachel would be mad at me.

You have no idea? Vince echoed. Yeah, maybe you wouldn't.

Ah, these cryptic answers are driving me insane. If you want your beer back in your hand and not over your head, you've gotta be straight with me.

Vince looked at Brian in disbelief. Okay, he said. I'll be straight. Rachel's a little pissed that we invited you to join the band. Okay, little is maybe a bad choice of words.

Fucking furious would be more accurate, Brian added.

Why? Does she play the drums too?

Vince and Brian looked at each other again. Vince sighed grimly. Look, I don't want to have to sit here and make embarrassing confessions, and go through the same big load of shit I've gone through before. Maybe it's just best for you to know that Rachel's really not pissed off at you, and it's nothing you've done. Can we leave it at that?

So you're not going to tell me?

No, I'm not. I'm going home. Rachel's there. She said she'd meet me after the show.

Great, now I'm totally fucking tortured. I slumped over the back seat and pouted, chin cupped in my hands. I caught Brian staring at me in the rearview mirror. When our eyes met, he smiled casually.

Vince finished the can of beer. And yes, I'm going to drive home like this. And I'm going to get there safe, without knocking over any mailboxes or running over any cats. At least, not accidentally. But I can drop you off, if you trust me.

That's all right, I said, sliding out of the side door. We'll take a cab.

Where are we going? Brian asked.

Well, I thought we could go back to my place.

Brian said, Goodbye, great show to Vince, and shut the passenger door. Vince pulled out of the lot without returning the goodbye, and drove off into the night. Brian told me to wait on the sidewalk while he called a cab from inside, giving me a couple of minutes to watch cars tool up and down Victoria St. My breath steamed in the chilly air and I banged my hands together to drum up some heat. Every puff of wind held a taste of snow that made me wish I'd brought my gloves. I even thought I saw a couple of flakes whisking down, but it might have been my imagination.

Brian came back out just as a cab pulled up to the curb. He opened the door for me, helping me slide in, and sat down beside me. I don't know how you can afford to take cabs everywhere.

I don't pay rent, remember?

God, don't remind me. Rent was coming up, and Dad still hadn't sent my allowance. My student loan didn't cover tuition plus rent, so he agreed to pay half the money for my first year. After that, I was on my own.

You're coming to Crystal Cross's recital on Wednesday, aren't you?

Sure.

No one knows what she's going to play yet, but it should be good.

We traveled down Dundas St. and turned onto Spadina Ave., streetlights, headlights, and neon signs showing off the stylish Saturday night crowd—people lining up to get into fancy clubs and buying hot dogs from street vendors. A wedding party was standing under the awning of Leoni's Restaurant, protecting one another from the bitter wind. Students were braving the cold to join study groups in cafes, looking out from frost-fogged windows at the traffic moving slowly up and down the street, the wintry scene accompanied by the frosty, crystalline notes of Holly Cole's Christmas Blues on the cab radio. I edged closer to Brian and hummed a little

melody from *Miniatures* in his ear. He looked at me strangely, but smiled, adding a bar of his own.

He paid the cabbie while I unlocked the door of the apartment and scurried around the living room, lighting candles and sliding the Corona record on the spike. Not exactly mood music, but I wanted him to hear it. I needed him to hear it. Because in the cab tonight I'd renounced jazz, thoroughly and completely. It was a dead language to me. Maybe that was unfair, I didn't know, and I wasn't trying to be disrespectful, but if I was going to find my own voice, I had to dump all the influences that were cluttering up my creativity and try to work with no models at all. I had no idea if it was even possible, but I had to try.

I poured us both a glass of wine and curled up on the couch beside Brian, hitching up my skirt so I could stretch my legs out on the coffee table. The music started in and Brian cocked his head, a puzzled frown on his face that gradually smoothed into a contemplative stare as the piece wound around its dark corners and strange sonic booby traps. He sat perfectly still, sipping from his wine glass, until the piece ground to its unsettling freefall ending, then turned to me, gulped audibly, and started kissing me.

He fondled my legs, as I tugged at his shirt, closing my thighs tightly his hand and pushing hard against him. He leaned me back against the arm of the couch, one hand now under my arching back and the other loosening his pants enough to pull them down around his knees. He took his time with his kisses, letting each one melt on my lips like a wine-flavored sweet, holding himself back against my lurches, and gently guiding himself into me until I felt like I was going to explode. He rocked smoothly, rhythmically, as I buried my hands in his hair, leaning up to kiss his face and neck. Between moans, I listened to the water pipes gurgle and spit as they reacted to the dropping temperature.

Brian stayed in me after he finished, rubbing his face in my breasts as I twined my fingers carelessly around his hair. Thank you for that, he said softly, sitting up and leaning against the couch. I slid my legs across his lap and nestled my cheek against the couch arm, trying to find a position where I wouldn't get jabbed with broken springs.

Which part? I asked, trying to make a sexy purr. My purse was on the floor beside the stereo, and I groped for it, grunting with the effort. Finally, I was able to hook the strap loop and drag it over the couch. Digging around, I found my cigarettes and lit one, blowing a cloud of smoke into the air. The hell with Rule No. 1! I yelled, and leaned back into the cozy nest of Brian's embrace.

What's Rule No. 1? he asked.

I'm not supposed to smoke in the house. But fuck that, right? I deserve it! I blew smoke rings to prove my point. So what did you think of the music?

Brian poured us another glass of wine and handed me the glass. I don't get it, he said slowly.

You don't have to *get it*, I answered, rolling my eyes. But don't you think it's the most original music you've ever heard?

Maybe. I've heard a lot of crazy, experimental shit. I mean, it's interesting, but & I crawled onto his chest and looked him right in his deep green eyes. But what?

I think you're the sexiest girl I've ever seen, Brian said.

You're changing the subject, I replied, delighted. I leaned down and gently tugged on his bottom lip with my teeth. Just as gently, he worked his hands down my panties.

So sexy, he murmured when I let him have a breath of air. You win, the music's amazing, it's life-changing, okay &

I cut him off with another kiss. Don't go home tonight. Stay here with me. I can make pancakes for breakfast.

I'm going nowhere, Sonya. Nowhere at all.

CHAPTER 14

Crystal Cross took the stage of the Ettore Mazzoleni Concert Hall at exactly 4:30 Tuesday afternoon. She was wearing a black sleeveless dress that might have been Chinese. It crossed her front and fit close around her waist and hips. A black ribbon circled her throat. Her obsidian hair was pulled up and twisted loosely around what might have been a chopstick, although I couldn't tell from where I was sitting. Long, sooty lashes framed large eyes, which looked sea-bottom black against her porcelain skin and floated atop her perfectly sculpted cheekbones. The only flaw in her face though, was a big one—a scar, visible even from where I sat, hooked around below her left eye, giving her expressionless stare a strange, haunting menace. Two handsome blond accompanists, much taller than she was, flanked her, eyes empty and warmed only by the muted glow of the footlights. For several seconds, no one moved. Crystal simply stood at center stage, arms at her sides, clutching her violin and bow. Then, Crystal gave a short nod. Her accompanists moved to their respective instruments—the black Steinway in the left wing, and the cello positioned just to the right of mid-center stage—and tuned up. Crystal brought her violin up and tucked it under her chin. Another curt nod. And she began to play.

The pieces were striking. The piano player treated his instrument as if he were playing percussion, jabbing at notes, placing them in odd, rolling phrases, using mostly the lower-end keys to keep a lurching rhythm. The cello accompaniment was equally precise and heavy, underscoring Crystal's disturbing violin work. The opening piece slowly and intriguingly began to take shape, gaining in intensity. The cellist's slashing motions became more frenzied as the pianist pounded the keys with stark intensity, Crystal's violin providing a focal point for the seeming dissonance going on behind her. She moved in and out of the dialogue sparring back and forth between the cellist and pianist, at times instigating, at times castigating, answering first one and then the other, and at the same time soaring above both accompanists into ever more shattering bursts of fury. Stripping the notes of any sweetness that might have colored them, she tore at the strings with abandon, creating sounds of abrasive and beautiful violence.

For the next thirty minutes, the music ranged from intense to reflective while maintaining a constant haunting undertone throughout. Phrases doubled and redoubled at unpredictable intervals, echoing and glancing off each other. She held notes longer than seemed to be correct, sliding them under the tumbling piano, intertwining the instruments with a slippery quality that bothered me in a way I couldn't quite put my finger on. The pastoral sequences banged up against the more intense passages with a jarring suddenness. I couldn't follow where the piece might be headed, and I wasn't sure if I was supposed to be able to. The last five minutes built into a peak of maniacal intensity, the music twisting and writhing, making my skin crawl and pinning me to my seat with such ferocity that I had to grip the armrests.

When she finished not with a grandiose flourish, but with a mournful, lingering sigh that gradually snuffed itself out like a candle she and her accompanists met again at center stage, repeated the stiff bow they'd made earlier, and then disappeared into the wings without waiting for their applause. Everyone in the crowd sat stiff and silent for a few moments. Then the ovation started somewhere in the back, and when it spread to the first few rows, where Brian and I were sitting, everyone was pounding their hands together in a thunderous fury. The ovation lasted for a full five minutes, with no one getting up to leave. I stayed rooted to my spot, feeling like I'd just been assaulted.

I looked at Brian. His brows scrunched together and his lips were pressed tightly together, like he was trying to decipher a coded message. Thirteen? he asked.

What?

He turned to me. She wrote that when she was thirteen.

Where do you think she went after the recital?

I don't know, he shrugged. She's probably meeting with her & entourage.

People had started filing out, muttering to each other in low voices. Some seemed to be having trouble getting their feet to work properly. Listen, I said, I've gotta get back to work. I got a lot of things to do tonight. I worked my way out into the aisle and into the foyer. Professors were crowded under the richly draped lintels that rimmed the entryway. Dr. Lalande was standing with a bunch of others, heads bent together in deep discussion. I hurried past them, hoping they wouldn't recognize me, and sat down on the front steps, leaning against the stone railing.

Brian sat down beside me. So, are you in or out? Vince wants to know.

I don't know. I have a lot of things on my mind. Do you ever worry that you're really not any good?

No, he said flatly. Wait, let me think about it a bit more. Uhh & He squinted and scratched his three-day scruff. Nope, never.

Why do you always have to be such a smartass?

What, because of what you just heard in there? He shook his head in frustration.

Look, you can't keep comparing yourself to everyone else. That's a waste of time. Excuse me, but it is. Do you know anything at all about the way she was raised?

I shook my head.

Dr. Smit told me about her when the board of directors found out she was coming over here. She's led a very, very different life from us. I'm talking six hours of practice a day. Every day. Do you know what that does to a person?

No, what?

Brian spun his finger around his ear. All she knows is music. That's her entire life. Sure, she's a prodigy, and everything & He stretched the vowels out, giving them a thick ironic twist. Fuck her, man. Are you gonna do the show with us or not?

Yes, I'll do the show.

Okay, then. He leaned over and kissed me, cupping my chin in his hand. God, he was a great kisser. He broke off and stood up. All right, I want to buy you lunch tomorrow. We can go over to Future's. Is that cool?

That s cool. Run off and leave me.

Jesus. He shook his head again. Women. He stared at me through his bangs, working his smile for everything he was worth.

Get out of here before I kick your ass. I shoved my foot out at him and banged his ankle.

Tomorrow, he said, and started walking away. I watched him until he disappeared around the corner toward U of T, then stood up and went back into the auditorium to look for Crystal.

Little groups of students and faculty were scattered here and there, talking in low, earnest voices. I could see Crystal s accompanists sitting in the front row with a couple of professors, but she was gone. Had she left already? I hadn t seen her walk by, but she might have slipped out the back door. I figured I could ask the accompanists if they knew where she went, and started down the aisle toward them when I saw her come out from backstage. As usual, professors surrounded her, mostly people I didn t know, although I recognized Dr. Cannell, head of the composition department. He was almost as tall as Dad, and when he bent down to talk to Crystal, who looked a foot shorter, I thought he was going to throw his back out. He was pointing something out from a stack of papers he was holding, but she might have been listening to the sound of shoes on the stage surface for all the attention she was giving him. When this odd little procession reached the lip of the stage, she swung herself to the floor, stopping only long enough to take the papers from Dr. Cannell, and started marching up the aisle without a glance at her accompanists.

From the stage, her face had been expressionless. But as she came closer to me, I could see the tension in her features, as if she were trying to keep from crying. She passed me without looking, trailing a mixture of clean sweat and strange, musky skin cream. I watched her go, pulling on a black skullcap as she did, and turned back to look at the professors, who were still standing on the stage flipping through their notebooks. I decided to follow her.

It was a struggle keeping up with her. She moved like a shadow, threading her way through the crowds returning home from work. Sometimes I d lose sight of her and think about giving up, only to pick her out again as she broke away from a group of people. I was trying to follow at a safe distance, not even sure why I was doing it or what I hoped to find out.

We crossed the street and went into Queen s Park. The wind had died down, but a slight chill had sprung, reminding me that winter was only a couple of weeks away. Crystal disappeared into a grove of trees at the edge of the park, and I hurried to make sure she didn t get away. I could see her ahead of me, walking more slowly now, a bit hunched over. As far as I could see down the lane, we were the only two people in the park. There didn t even seem to be any dog walkers or couples holding hands. Ahead of me, Crystal suddenly sat down on a bench and stuck her legs out in front of her. I stopped where I was, behind the King Edward s Statue, and watched her.

For about five minutes, neither of us moved. I hadn t eaten anything all day except for a blueberry muffin, and my hands were starting to freeze inside my mittens. Why couldn t I just go and say hello? Just tell her I d listened to her recital, and I thought it was fantastic? It would

really be the easiest thing in the world, wouldn't it? I suddenly felt like an idiot. I was sure she knew I was following her, and would probably just laugh in my face if I approached her now. I should just turn around and go back home. She obviously wanted to be alone anyway.

I peeked around again, and frowned. Crystal was gone. Had she seen me, or had she just gotten too cold to stay outside, like I was? Damn. I turned back toward the gate and let out a yelp of surprise—she was standing right in front of me, studying me with a quizzical smile. Before I had a chance to catch my breath and think of an escape, she laughed. The laugh disappeared quickly from the corners of her eyes, and she stared at me for several seconds, saying nothing. I thought it was strange that the cold hadn't brought any color to her pale face. She was still wearing her hair up, and the stiff wind whipped wisps of hair around her eyes. Up close, the scar was more jagged than I'd first thought, a white lightning slash that traced a path from somewhere under her bangs and hooked under her left eye just on top of her cheekbone. It was the only flaw on her perfect skin.

Yes, she said. Then, after a moment's hesitation, Do I know you? Her voice was much deeper than I'd expected, raspier.

No, I replied. You don't know me. My lame words hung in the air between us.

Why are you following me? She barely moved her lips as she spoke.

A million lies whipped through my mind, but the only response I could manage was the truth. I wanted to meet you.

Because of my recital?

I just wanted to tell you how amazing it was.

You thought it was amazing? She uttered a short laugh that had no laughter in it and looked back at the bench where she had been sitting. I really screwed them up to day, didn't I?

The statue's marble base was starting to hurt. What do you mean?

She kept her gaze focused on the bench. I promised everyone I wouldn't perform that piece. They wanted something more traditional. She fixed me again with her unwavering stare.

But I reneged this morning. That's why the programs looked so crappy. Actually, I didn't change my mind. I knew all along that I'd do it. What's your name?

Sonya.

I want a hot chocolate. You want to join me for a hot chocolate? I know a great place on Spadina.

That's a wicked idea. Lead on.

Crystal led me out onto the sidewalk, where we ran into one of her hunky blond accompanists. He asked us where we were going. To Gina's, she said. Wanna come?

He gave me a long appraising look. I really wish I could but I've got my master class now. But if you're gonna be there for a while, I can catch up with you two.

Whatever, said Crystal and turned to me. C'mon. Let's go get warmed up.

Gina's was a cozier, darker version of Future's, a little more upscale. Most of the customers were in their mid-20s or older, shoppers who'd just dropped in for a quick refueling, and now they filled the place out until it was practically bursting at the seams with energetic conversation and caffeine fumes. The smoking section was full, but Crystal ignored it and

wedged herself into the last table in the non-smoking section, her back to the wall, almost elbow-to-elbow with the couple sitting at the next table. I carried our hot chocolates over and put them down on the little table. There was barely enough room for the tray.

In a sequence of compact, elegant gestures, she crossed her ankles, pulled a red box out of her purse, took out a long, brown cigarette and put it between her lips, holding it with her teeth as she slid the chopstick out of her bun and let her hair spill loosely over her shoulders. When she'd performed this little ritual, she lit her cigarette, exhaling a thick cloud of silvery smoke. For a while she was silent, savoring her cigarette as if it were a stick of silky Belgian chocolate. The stylish young couple sitting beside us were clearly not having the same rapturous experience, and they kept trying to signal their annoyance with frowns and clucking tongues.

Crystal ignored them like she ignored everything else right now except the restorative clouds of smoke she was blowing. I looked around nervously, sure that a waiter was going to come over and kick us both out. Crystal wasn't trying to be discreet, even making a show of tapping her ashes on the floor and paying no attention to whether they landed under the table or into the stylish woman's bag of expensive-looking silk blouses.

So, Crystal said finally, what did you think of my recital? I started to repeat what I said to her in the park, but she waved an imperious hand. Not that bullshit. I mean, how did you feel when you were listening to me play?

My feelings were still so immediate that I didn't have to recall them—they were right there at the end of my nerves. I felt like I was naked and being scrubbed by a steel wool pad. I took a deep breath. I was jealous. I *am* jealous.

Crystal sipped her hot cocoa. Is that why you followed me? To tell me you were jealous of me?

No, no. I looked her straight in the eye. Why did I follow you? I don't know.

Don't get me wrong, Crystal said. I think it's great that you did. You're a freshman, right? Where are you from?

Nova Scotia. But you're a freshman too, aren't you?

Crystal grinned. Sort of. But I could probably teach my classes. I'm only doing a two-year program anyway. She looked around the café suddenly and shivered. Do you find it cold in here? No, I've been studying composition for three years already. So it's not like I'm learning a lot new here.

In Germany?

She frowned. How did you know that? Before I could answer, she shook her head impatiently. Yeah, I can just imagine the crazy shit that's flying around about me. When I first arrived on campus, I thought I was going to lose it totally, just go insane. I had about a dozen profs all yakking in my ears about all the work we were going to be doing, and how excited they all were. Why? She interrupted herself to stare into my face. What have you heard about me?

Nothing, I said, bewildered. Except that you were a child prodigy and you spent three years in Germany.

No one said why?

I shook my head. No. I just got here myself a couple of weeks ago, and I've been trying to get adjusted &

What did you mean by that? she asked sharply.

By what?

Scrubbed with steel wool? That's kind of a weird comment, I just want to know what you mean by it, that's all.

My cocoa was starting to taste slightly muddy. I just meant that & there were some harsh moments.

She kept her burning eyes fixed on mine. Yeah, I wonder why. Harsh, she repeated, drawing out the word. That's close to it. I locked myself in my room for three days and wrote straight through it, sliding sheets under the door for Mom to pick up and play on the piano. It doesn't work on the piano, though. It's for violin only. For *my* violin only. I don't want to write scores for other people to play.

Even after you're dead? I ventured.

She shifted uncomfortably in her chair and puffed smoke through her teeth. It's a little late for that anyway. I've been through all that already, and there's nothing there. And what do you know about it, after all? Death. Her voice came to rest gently on that word, like a cat sitting on a pillow. She studied her cigarette. But you don't know a thing about it, do you? She stopped for a second and instantly carried on as if I'd answered her. No, you don't. I can tell. But you're right about that—it *is* harsh. It had to be. How else could I make you understand? And you do understand, don't you?

I nodded slowly. This was turning into the strangest conversation I'd ever had.

Excuse me, an indignant voice interrupted. It was the man sitting beside us. But there's a reason we chose to sit here and not in the smoking section, right?

Crystal turned to look at him, and something in her eyes jumped out at the guy something that made him recoil slightly as if he'd come face to face with a cobra. I'm sorry, she said in a quiet voice. I didn't see you there. She turned back to me. Whatever the guy had seen in her eyes was gone. But something was missing. Didn't you feel it? God, I felt it, every note.

Trying to steer the conversation back to safer ground, I commented on how beautiful her coat was. She gave me a blank look, then ran her hands over the sleeve. Yeah, it's fake lamb's wool.

Must be expensive. I've never seen a fake lamb before. She stared at me. Uh, just a joke. Are you & Chinese at all?

Crystal finished her cocoa and dropped her cigarette butt into the mug. My mother was half-Chinese. Do you get much out of your studying? You're just doing the performance degree, aren't you? I don't know how you can stand it. I don't ever want to learn someone else's work again.

You know, it's strange. I've tried composing. I'm actually working on a piece now, called & *Miniatures*.

She handed our mugs to a passing waitress without even looking at her. What's it about?

Did I dare tell her? It's a series of really short pieces about the loves and hopes and dreams and regrets of & a collection of miniature figurines. I had this idea one night, about this collection of figurines in an abandoned house, and how they had all once been alive, but were now stuck in a state of suspended animation, still with all of their feelings, but they'd be frozen like that forever unless someone touched them. So they were doomed to live completely in their own minds, unable to love or even touch the person right next to them.

Crystal's eyes were shining. That's a beautiful idea. Have you finished it?

Not yet. I'm having a lot of trouble with it, actually.

Crystal closed her eyes, smiling to herself. *Miniatures*. A beautiful title too. She opened her eyes again. Let's make it. Put some musicians together and just make it. We could do it, you know. I'd have no trouble finding the musicians. Yes, she said, smacking the table with her palms. That's what's missing.

What?

That, she repeated, touching the tips of her index fingers together. What you just said. Ah, I can't explain it, she said, giving up and looked up at the clock on the wall behind the counter. It's almost seven already.

I turned to follow her gaze. What's that mean?

She pulled on her skullcap and put her coat on. I always spend two hours a day in my garden sanctuary. Just to chill out. It was something I got into in Germany—they've got amazing spas over there. I really got into covering my body with all these weird oils and designer muck. I didn't do it a lot, but my boyfriend at the time was a painter—he took me to Bad Waldsee for a birthday weekend. He liked to paint me.

Portraits or modern painting?

She grinned. Neither. I mean I was the canvas. He used water-based paint. But that weekend I felt like a birthday cake, baking in the steam room with all this different-colored mud all over me, then a mineral shower. We had sex for hours that night.

You've got incredible skin. Like, not a blemish.

Yeah, I've got a daily routine. Which I gotta get to now.

Oh. So you have to go.

Yeah, but I'll see you around. Wait a sec. She fumbled around in her purse for a pen. If you got something to write on, I'll give you my number.

I looked around the table, found a napkin and handed it to her. She wrote down her number and slid the napkin back to me. Give me a call sometime.

She strode out of the café, head held at a regal angle, people stepping aside as she walked by, afraid that maybe she was going to plow them over. I slid around into her seat so I could get a better view of the café and took out my notepad. Talking with Crystal had left my nerves singing just as loudly as listening to her recital. I couldn't even begin to imagine what had been missing in her piece, but I had the strangest feeling that I'd just heard it for the second time today.

I stayed in the café for another hour, just drinking coffee and sketching in my notepad, as people streamed in and out all around me. The notepad, littered with coffee stains and cookie crumbs, began to fill up as I doodled aimlessly, sketching anything that popped into my head: Crystal's face, an empty room, a broken window, a pair of figurines in 19th century pioneer clothes. As I drew, I hummed a few bars of *Dance China Doll*, one of my little songs from *Miniatures*, and then laughed at myself for mixing up my cart and horse. Oh yes, I mumbled to myself, I have to write the damn thing first, don't I?

Suddenly I became aware that someone was watching me. I glanced up and my heart skipped a beat. Crystal's striking blond accompanist was standing at the edge of the table, looking down at me with an amused smile. Jesus, I said, patting my heart. You scared the shit out of me.

He held out an envelope. Actually, I'm just here to deliver a message. Crystal forgot to give you this. I took the envelope and opened it. She's having a party next weekend, if you're interested. It's invite-only, very hush-hush.

Hush-hush? Why?

She gets a lot of flak from her professors. I'm Curt, by the way. Curt Beckwith.

I shook his hand. Sonya Castle. You played really well today.

When I made no move to invite him to sit down, he jerked his thumb at the front door.

Well, I gotta go. Got some friends waiting. But if you can make it, that'd be great.

After he left, I opened the card inside the envelope. There was a strange, mesh-like design on it, like a sewer grating or some kind of trellis-work. I turned it over. Crystal's name was written in the center of it, with her address and contact information, but no mention of the conservatory or anything at all music-related. That seemed a little odd to me, but after the conversation I'd just had with her, I was prepared for anything.

The ebb and flow of our conversation kept coming back to me as I tried to focus on my drawing. Every few minutes, I found my eyes wandering away from the sketch pad and around the café, not seeing much of what was going on, but going back over things she'd said. Death had slipped through cracks in the conversation a couple of times, hints of strange childhood torments and nightmares. Then there was that scar. I'd tried to figure out a way to mention it without sounding too curious, but I wasn't able to get a word in.

Later, after I cooked up a huge pot of chili for dinner, I went back to my room to work on *Miniatures* while Rachel washed up. In two hours, one tiny piece—four bars of music—was all I could manage. I threw the pencil across the room and rubbed my face in my sheets, disgusted with myself, almost vibrating with pent-up energy that I couldn't seem to release. Classes were already starting to overwhelm me. My head felt empty, full of dust and cobwebs, but in the middle of it, a tornado was brewing, and I knew that all I needed was a lightning flash of inspiration to start that tornado whirling like a devil against the walls of my brain, banging to escape. I sat up quickly, ready to track down my pencil and jam it back into my paper, when I looked and saw the blackboard on the wall.

I used it mostly for to-do lists, and now it was filled top-to-bottom with items: practice sessions with Brian and Vince, practice sessions with Gladys Becker, writing and analysis

assignments, a small shopping list (eggs, bread, honey), fix the coffee table (one of the legs had snapped off), and general jobs with no real deadline (study, read the book of Modern American Poetry (capitals mine) I'd borrowed from the school library, take my weekly browsing trip to Wax Museum). These tasks weren't arranged in any particular order they were all *now!* *Today!* and *Why are you wasting time, dumbass?*

I stared at this blackboard, frowning, not exactly sure of what I had in mind, then picked up my eraser and wiped it clean, creating clouds of chalk dust, and turning what had been readable words into a white smear of nothing. Then I ran to the bathroom, washed the eraser in the sink, went back to my bedroom and erased every last fleck of chalk dust from the board. When it was dry, I picked up the chalk and wrote the word *Clarity* in big block capitals. I stepped back to look at the board, then wrote *Courage* underneath. Satisfied, I threw the chalk into its holder, put my boots on, and spent the rest of the evening in the practice room, working on Gladys's recital.

CHAPTER 15

Brian showed up early on the day of the party. I hadn't done anything all day except shuffle around the apartment in my pajamas, scribbling some notes here and there on my composition and drinking too much coffee, so when I peeked around the door at 4:00 to find him standing there wearing an ice-melting grin and holding a bottle of wine, I nearly panicked.

Jesus, is it time to go already?

No, he said, leaning in to kiss me. I just thought maybe we could have some dinner before we went. And then I could try to get you drunk.

Man, I haven't even had a shower yet. I opened the door a bit wider to show him I wasn't even dressed, but he just shrugged and peered over my shoulder into the apartment.

Where's Rachel?

She just went over to buy some groceries. Come on in. Just give me twenty minutes or so to get ready. I stepped aside to let him in, taking the wine from him as he bent down to take his boots off. He had on Vince's silly Easter-egg themed tuque, and his khaki winter coat hung nearly down to his knees, making him look like a little kid trying on his father's clothes. Just chill out on the couch for a while. I won't be long.

He walked past me and into the kitchen. Hey, Sonya, where's your corkscrew?

In the drawer beside the sink.

I showered quickly, pulling the brush through my hair hard enough to hurt, then rifled through my closet trying to decide what to wear. I settled on a black satin blouse with embroidered lace cuffs and my good pair of beige slacks. Curt had said it wouldn't be a formal party, but what the hell? It would be fun to dress up a bit. I put on the chain and matching earrings Mom had given me as a graduation present and looked at myself in the mirror. Not bad. I wasn't the shoe collector that Rachel was, but I was sure she wouldn't mind if I borrowed a pair of hers tonight. Normally, I didn't go in for make-up, but a little lipstick and mascara would look nice. Brian hadn't given me time to do anything with my hair, but I preferred the ready-to-go look anyway. A dab of perfume behind the ears and on the wrists, and I was set. From the record player the opening bars of Brahms *Piano Quartet No. 3* drifted down to my bedroom. I smiled at myself in the mirror, a photograph smile, prim and phony. But when I narrowed my eyes and lowered my head a little, I could see a hint of mockery in the smile, and a devilish crinkle at the corners of my eyes. I went downstairs.

Brian sat up when he saw me. You look good, he said. The opened bottle stood in the middle of the coffee table, flanked by two glasses of wine. He'd found the corkscrew easily enough, but not the wine glasses. The wine was in a couple of short plastic juice glasses. I sat down beside him on the couch, one leg curled under me so I could see him. He handed me a glass and I sipped. The way Brian had sunk into a comfortable nest in the sofa, wearing another

of his endless series of dark, woolly sweaters, both hands wrapped around his glass of wine, made me want to dig out my sketchbook and charcoals.

What was that you said about dinner? I asked, suddenly hungry.

I thought we might get something at that little Italian place up the street. He turned to me and let his eyes wander over my face. Did I tell you how good you look?

I tried out my sly mirror smile. Yes, but feel free to tell me again.

He laughed at that. Do I have to?

How about some more wine? Brian reached over and refilled my glass, dripping a little on the couch. Here, give it to me. I took the bottle from him and topped up his glass, giving my wrist a little turn to catch the drip.

So, do you want to go to that Italian place?

We've got plenty of time, right? Why don't we just stay in and cook something here? Rachel's bringing back some vegetables for a stir fry.

You really want to cook?

Why not?

Just at that moment, Rachel burst in with an armload of groceries. She stopped when she saw Brian, but recovered quickly. Oh, hey you! she said breathlessly. You wanna help put this stuff away?

Brian rocked back and forth, gathering momentum so he could lift himself out of the squashed couch. Just give me the knife and let me cut something.

He wasn't much of a hand in the kitchen, but I let him chop up the vegetables and toss the salad, while Rachel tidied up the living room. With the three of us working together, everything was ready by half past. When the timer on the oven went off I took out the bread, put it on another plate and we carried our dinner into the living room. Brian put on a Billie Holiday record, and we all sat together, eating thoughtfully, saying little, as the music created its own warm space in the apartment. Her voice found every corner, every hidden nook, twining around the coils of steam rising from our plates, skating dreamily across the surface of the wine. I put down my fork and looked out the front window while I listened. When I imagined her singing, I always pictured her breath, visible in icy Manhattan air.

So why aren't you and Vince coming to the party? Brian asked Rachel.

He's coming over here and we're going to have our own party. She chuckled.

Actually, the real reason is because Sonya invited you instead of me.

I let my fork clatter onto my plate. Okay, hand me that last slug of wine.

Kidding, Rachel said, hugging me. Crystal's not really my bag anyway.

Why's that? Brian asked, pouring out the last of the wine.

Rachel shrugged. Oh & I've just heard a lot of strange things about her.

My head snapped to attention. What do you mean strange?

Rachel lingered over a mouthful of wine, like she was trying to jog her memory. Well, I heard this weird rumor that she was orphaned when she was thirteen. Nobody seems to know what it's all about, or if it's true or not, but she wasn't living with them in Germany. She was

like a ward or something, of a German violin professor and his family. I really don't know the whole story.

Whatever happened to her, I said darkly, is her own business. If she feels like saying something about it, fine. But I'm not going to ask her.

And that scar, Rachel went on. Donna and some of the other girls said she got in a knife fight in Germany.

Brian started clearing the dishes away. C'mon, we better get going if we don't want to be late. We'll talk to you later, Rach. Where's this party, anyway?

I took her card out of my pocket and glanced at the back. Here's the address. Do you know it?

He took the card from my hand and looked at it. Yeah, we'll have to take the tram from here. She must have money.

Why?

This is kind of a swanky neighborhood.

Well, good for her. Let's go.

Crystal lived on Church St., almost all the way down to the waterfront, and Brian wasn't kidding about her lifestyle. The apartment complex was easy to find, right on the corner of Front and Church, across from a rust-colored building shaped like a thin sliver of layer cake. Brian and I stepped into the pristine lobby with its pseudo-Deco handrails and fake wood paneling. Beside the elevators, a potted plant sat on a glass-topped table, reflecting the glow from the double row of overhead lights. Are you sure this is the right place? I asked Brian. It looks like a hotel.

He checked the card again. This has got to be it. Fourth floor.

When the elevator doors opened, we could immediately hear the sounds of music and laughter coming from the apartment directly across from the elevator. This is it, Brian said, and rang the doorbell.

After several seconds of chain-rattling and lock-fiddling, an Asian girl opened the door and looked out at us expectantly. Yes?

Is this Crystal Cross's place? I asked.

Yeah, you found us, the girl said. Come in. She stepped to one side, revealing a small staircase. Just follow me. She turned and swept back down the stairs. Brian and I looked at each other and followed her.

The stairway opened into the most beautiful apartment I'd ever seen. People were everywhere, most young, some older, none recognizable through the haze of smoke, and all holding a drink of some kind in their hand. The Asian girl (who hadn't introduced herself) called to Crystal, who was standing at the far end of the monstrous living room, helping the bartender mix cocktails. I nudged Brian. A bartender? He shook his head but said nothing.

When Crystal saw me, her saucer eyes widened, and she came over to where we were standing, delicately picking her way around knots of people as if she were afraid they might give her an electric shock. Like at the recital, her jet-black hair had been swept up in a bun and twirled around a paintbrush, and she was wearing a shimmery jade Oriental-style dress that fit

closely around her throat. Her flawless skin was made even paler by black-penciled eyebrows and a delicate rose shade of lipstick. With the apartment lights turned down, her scar was hardly visible. She looked stunning, but a little strained, probably exhausted from preparing for the party. Sonya? Is that you? She looked Brian up and down as I introduced him, and showed him where he could put our coats.

I see you've got your Chinese thing going, I said, reaching out to finger her dress. It's gorgeous.

Like it? It was a gift from Wang Ling.

Oh, shit. I'm sorry. I didn't even think to bring anything.

Crystal laughed. No, no. I've been helping her with her composition. Just giving advice. Let me give you a quick tour.

She led me back into the living room, which was decorated in a Euro-modern style, mostly black and white, with a climbing ivy in the corner for color. A space was cleared near the balcony where a string trio in semi-formal wear was tuning up, and I was glad I'd decided to dress up a bit. The kitchenette and breakfast nook were off to the right of the living room, with the bathroom up a narrow flight of stairs and around a corner. It came furnished, Crystal told me. I don't know anything about decorating, but it looks okay to me.

It's amazing.

Just go on over to the bar and get what you want. Ted wanted to tend bar tonight, so I let him. He's not the best at it, but whatever. And... have a good time.

Thanks.

Brian already had a glass in his hand and was waiting for me at the bar. So that's Crystal, he said as I joined him.

The one and only. She looks like Audrey Hepburn in that movie.

Breakfast at Tiffany's?

That's it. But & different. Are you still drinking?

Brian looked down at the ice-choked glass in his hand, shrugged and took a stiff belt. Why not? It's free, right?

Sounds like something Vince would say. I took the glass from him and smelled the contents, immediately recoiling. Jesus. Smells like a rum and Coke, hold the Coke.

That's pretty much what it is. He rescued his glass and looked around the room. Do you actually know anyone here?

I stared at the groups of people around the room, but couldn't find any familiar faces. They seemed to be mostly upperclassmen or alumni, and they all seemed to know each other quite well. A middle-aged couple was holding court with a pocket of students in the entryway to the kitchen. Were they faculty? I remembered Curt warning me not to tell anybody about the party. Both the man and woman were drinking, so I wasn't expecting a bust, but it seemed strange for someone Crystal's age to invite so many older guests. Maybe this really was her circle, or maybe she was just pretentious. Spending three years in Germany would probably do that to a person.

From the bar, I watched Crystal as she flitted around the room, talking nonstop to everyone she crossed paths with. She would buttonhole someone for about five minutes, talking

and laughing, touching their elbow, tasting the hors d'oeuvres on their plates, sipping their drinks, asking for a light, and then leave them in a swirl of smoke and bright smiles when she spotted someone else close by. She was like an immaculate little whirlwind, but instead of blowing people off-course, she pulled them into her orbit.

Brian, meanwhile, had found someone he knew, another guitarist, and the two of them leaped directly into the middle of a conversation they must have started long before. I ordered another screwdriver and decided to wander around myself.

After playing the social butterfly for a while, making small talk, I wove my way into the kitchen. The three musicians from the balcony were crowded together in front of the refrigerator, laughing in that smirky way guys have when they've just heard a dirty joke. I turned and recognized Curt, who'd snuck up behind me. Hey, he said. Sonya, right?

Right.

Crystal told me to come find you here.

I raised my eyebrows. Really? You know, this is the second time you've followed me somewhere.

That's true. Curt's friends chuckled at the blush that appeared on his cheek.

I held up my glass. I just came in to find some more ice.

Curt opened up the freezer. Ever had a tequila blackout?

Excuse me?

It's a drink I invented on Spring Break. Me and a bunch of guys went down to Fort Lauderdale and got ripped for a week. It was awesome. He pulled out a shot glass of dark brown liquid and gave it to me. It's tequila and kahlua. I made about a dozen. He passed some around to the other guys. Take it down. We downed our glasses. I tensed up, ready for the greasy kick of the tequila, but it didn't come. The kahlua masked the taste, and the drink was actually... pleasant.

Wow, I said. Not bad.

Goes down nice, doesn't it. He handed out another shot. But be careful. There's a reason why it's called a tequila blackout. How old are you, anyway?

Nineteen.

Nineteen, he echoed. No shit! Really?

Really, I said, mocking his surprise. Why? How old are you?

He didn't answer, just cocked his head and looked at his friends and raised his glass. To nineteen. Great year. We tossed back a second shot. The moment the alcohol hit my stomach, I felt the room slide out of focus a little. All that wine I'd had wasn't sitting well and I put the glass on the counter, vowing not to touch another drop for the rest of the night. But Curt immediately put another glass in my hand. I like a girl who can hold her booze, he said.

So why does it shock you that I'm only nineteen? I mean, Crystal's nineteen, isn't she?

Yeah, but Crystal is... He trailed off with a shrug and smiled. I could tell he had an idea how good-looking he was, and I figured he had no problems finding things to do on a Saturday night. But I was annoyed that he thought I was immature. Maybe I still didn't know where all the cool clubs were, but I bet I could tell him a few things that would make him blush.

So, are we going to drink this shit, or just stare at it? I said, and belted back the shot without bothering to wait for the others.

Curt followed my lead, slamming his empty glass on the counter just as I did and high-fived his friends with a raucous cheer. I wondered if we were making too much noise, but the guys didn't seem worried. They just popped the tops off more bottles of beer and chugged.

So, Curt said, steadying himself against the refrigerator. How do you know Crystal?

I just went up to her after her performance and told her I thought she did an amazing job. I left out the part about stalking her into the park.

What about me?

I played it cool. Which one were you?

I was her pianist.

Yeah, I noticed you looked pretty stiff up there, I said, and immediately winced. Bad joke. Sorry.

I was, he said, without skipping a beat. But I never get performance anxiety. I'm famous for it.

Should I be impressed?

Most girls are.

Yeah, well, I also noticed you finished about ten minutes before Crystal did, so don't flatter yourself.

Curt's friends, who'd been quietly listening to our banter, shouted whoops of laughter. One of them mimed flushing a toilet. Curt broke into a broad grin and gave me a playful punch on the shoulder then held out his beer bottle for me to clink.

The five of us talked and laughed together for the next hour, trading insults about our mothers in between pretentious music theory bullshit and our favorite composers. I was steadily getting drunker, but I was having such a great time that it didn't seem to matter. Curt's arm had found a convenient spot draped around my neck, but I liked it there. I could feel his biceps bulging underneath his sweater, and I had a sudden desire to run my hand across his chest to feel his pectorals. The thought crisscrossed my tequila-fogged mind, and I was just about to reach up when I saw Crystal smiling at me from around the kitchen entryway. She gave me a satisfied little nod, and turned back to continue her conversation with Wang Ling. Somehow I thought they were talking about me, and I untangled myself from Curt's grasp, which was easy enough to do. I barely came up to his shoulder. He let me go with a quick glance and went back to the joke he was telling.

I needed to run to the bathroom, so I excused myself and asked Crystal for directions. She pointed down the hall. Looks like you and Curt are having a good time, she said.

Well, I don't know & I started to say. Why did you send him to tell me about the party?

Hmm, Crystal said, rolling her eyes up to the ceiling and touching her chin with a long, black-painted fingernail. I wonder why. As I walked away, I heard her whisper just loud enough for me to hear. I didn't send him. He wanted to go and find you.

I looked back over my shoulder, trying to think of a witty comeback, but just dropped the subject with a shrug. It wasn't really my business what Curt wanted to do anyway. As I walked down the hall, I found Brian in the middle of a deep discussion with an older professor-looking man. I couldn't catch what they were talking about, but Brian looked as if he were a six-year-old boy getting a lecture from his father. The older man was poking a crooked finger into Brian's chest with every sentence, and Brian looked so chagrined that he didn't even look up at me as I went by.

Like the rest of her apartment, Crystal's bathroom was a showcase of modern taste and luxury. It was bigger than my living room, with a thick rug over the cold white tiles. The enamel on the tub and sink was so white that it had the bluish tinge of new-fallen snow. The mirror above the long marble countertop was sectioned into three panels, angled outward and bordered with tiny light bulbs that gave my reflection a beautiful pink glow and brought a sexy-silver shine to my eyes. Even the little cold sore at the corner of my mouth was almost invisible. God, if I lived here, I could spend entire days just soaking in the tub, toweling off, primping in front of the mirror, and going back to the tub without ever coming out for air. Rachel would have to slide my meals under the door.

I scrubbed my face in the sink and looked up at the array of soaps and cleansers, loofah sponges and pumice stones on the counter. There were strange, spicy bath salts and talcum powders, but also a bunch of herbs in pots on the back shelf of the bathtub. The window above the tub was large for a bathroom window, and faced out toward Lake Ontario. To make sure the plants got enough light, Crystal had rigged up a hydroponics grow light system on the end of the counter closest to the tub, where she had little pots of mint and rosemary. Other flowerpots were placed around the bathroom where they'd get the best light—chrysanthemums, honeysuckles, other flowers I didn't know. I remembered Crystal saying something about spending two hours a day in her garden sanctuary. Now, I thought I knew what she was talking about. The tub was calling me. A long soak. Just what I needed right now.

A knock on the door snapped me out of my daydream, and I hollered, "Just a second!" In a hurry to wipe down the counter where I'd splashed water, I found a small face cloth in the linen closet and mopped up around the sink. I patted my face dry with the cloth, folded it neatly and left it beside the sink. After a moment's thought, I put a bar of olive soap on top of it, and opened the door. Curt was standing there in his ski jacket. "Oh, hi," I said. "You found me."

"No hurry. But a bunch of us are getting ready to go to the Apothecary. You wanna come?"

"Is Crystal going?" He shook his head. "Then I think I'll stick around for a while. I might meet up with you guys later."

"Whatever. There's about six more TBs in the freezer, if you want to keep going. We made up another batch."

"Thanks."

Curt looked like he wanted to stay behind. He kept turning around and mouthing words to someone out of sight in the living room. Finally, he smiled at me. "Listen, if I don't see you later on, can I give you a call sometime?"

I hesitated for a moment, then nodded. "Sure, that's fine. Let me give you my number."

He pulled a pen out of his pocket and held out his palm for me to write my number on. I grinned, but wrote my number down, drawing a little firecracker on his wrist. Thanks, Sonya. I've gotta go, but I'll talk to you later. He turned and caught up with the guys on the stairwell, waving to me before he disappeared out the door.

The crowd in the living room had thinned out to a few clusters of students. Full ashtrays and empty glasses littered the coffee table, and a couple was necking drunkenly on one of the sofas. Snack trays and other dinnerware lay scattered on the floor and piled up on the bar. The carpet needed a vacuum, but amazingly, no one had spilled their drink. Brian was still there, now chatting with a young couple who looked more interested in chatting with each other.

When he saw me from the corner of his eye, Brian nearly tripped over the coffee table trying to get to me. Where have you been all this time? he asked. I thought you must have found a hotter guy somewhere and ditched me.

I've just been in the kitchen drinking tequila. The second I said the word tequila, the room did a dippy-doodle dive and I felt myself sliding toward the sofa like I was caught in a tractor beam. I told myself to keep holding the room together, and sauntered as casually as I could to slowly collapse onto the sofa.

I think everyone's going to the Apothecary, Brian said. He was red-faced, but seemed stable.

You want to go?

I don't know. Do you know who I met to night?

Is Crystal around?

He jerked a thumb over his shoulder. She went into the bedroom with some guy.

As if by magic, the bedroom door opened, and Crystal came out, carrying a violin. She was still wearing the Oriental dress, but she'd let her hair down around her shoulders. She was unhooking the clasps of her violin case, and when she reached the sofa, she took out her violin and began tuning it. C'mon, siddown, I said, grabbing Brian's wrist and dragging him down beside me.

A group of girls who'd been pulling on their coats in the kitchenette now came over to say goodbye. Crystal saw them off with a wave, and they walked up the stairs, huddled up together to ward off the cold. By now, there were only eight people: a couple on the sofa, the other couple that Brian had been talking to, Brian, Crystal and I, and the mystery guy who hadn't come out of her bedroom.

Now, she looked up at Brian and me with a sleepy gaze. Have you ever heard of Nikola Unkowsky? We shook our heads in unison. She had this theory of color. How to play different colors. Alexandr Scriabin had a kind of similar theory, with different keys representing different colors. It's all just a bunch of theoretical bullshit, right? Has nothing to do with music or psychology, or the real world, or anything else, right? Want to try something?

Sure, I said.

She placed the violin under her chin, coughed slightly, then looked up at the two of us.

When you hear what I play, I want you to think of a color. Just the color you hear. Then, see if I'm right. She began to play.

The first piece was a beautiful, lilting melody, sweet and graceful, with just the right touch of melancholy. There was a coolness in the way the bow lingered on the strings, and in that coolness I felt the end of summer, a long, slow slide into September. I felt the shade of a majestic oak tree just as the sun was beginning to set, cool green leaves splayed out above my head, blocking the sun. I *heard* a dark, forest green, as clearly as if I'd been looking at a painting. She played for about two minutes, never once sounding a wrong note, and never once did the color green leave my vision. Green, she said, lowering the bow.

I opened my eyes and looked at Brian. He was staring down at her with a tiny smile. Green, I echoed. Brian nodded, but made no reply.

Crystal tucked the violin under her chin again and began striking the strings with a startling ferocity. The notes were short, intense, all upper-range, in a higher key, and my first impression was that of sunlight streaming through the tangled limbs of a tree. Then I thought of a madly chirping canary. Yellow.

She stopped playing abruptly, without decrescendo or cadence to mark the end of the piece. Yellow, she said, not even looking up at our faces, frozen in amazement, as if she knew all along what we would say. A lock of black hair had fallen over her eyes, but she ignored it, and began to play a slow, reflective melody, deeper than the first one, but moodier and more absorbing. Definitely blue. Blue, she agreed, reading my mind.

Damn, Brian muttered. How can you do that?

Instead of answering, Crystal adjusted the strings a bit, correcting a tuning flaw that I was unable to hear, and producing a sound like a screech by pulling the bow slightly lengthwise along the strings with each stroke. The slashing chords reminded me of the shower scene in Psycho, and I thought of blood swirling down the drain. The slashes crescendoed, but became more rhythmic, more passionate and sensuous. Red, she said, exiting the piece with an orgasmic flourish and a slow, spent drift into sleep. And she was right.

I opened my eyes and found Brian's riveted on Crystal, who was putting her violin away.

I'm disappointed with this one, she said. It's a Guarneri copy, but it goes out of tune a lot. It drives me crazy.

I didn't sound out of tune to me, I said. Brian squeezed my hand.

I think I'm going to send it back to Curtin and Alf. See if I can trade it in. She glanced toward her bedroom door, then stood up and stretched. Stick around if you want. I changed the other bedroom into a studio. There's a mattress in there. Sometimes I sleep on it. You should be all right.

Brian shook his head. You paint too?

My father was a painter, she said. He taught me the basics, and I just went from there. It helps.

Helps what? I asked.

Just things. I want to get started early with you guys tomorrow. We've got a log of work to do, but don't worry too much. Just be up by nine, that's all I ask. There's clean towels in the bathroom, but no toothbrushes. Sorry. Just use mouthwash. I hope you met some cool people.

I did, Brian said, squeezing my hand. Without warning, I turned and bit down gently on his earlobe. Crystal smiled and waved to us as she started down the hall. When she had disappeared into her bedroom, Brian caressed my face and kissed me. I threw my arms around his neck and kissed him back, laughing a little between breaths. What a crazy night, he said, pulling me toward the converted bedroom. Did I tell you I met Paul Caple and his wife tonight?

My head reeled as he dragged me down the hall. I couldn't stop giggling. Who's Paul Caple? Friend of yours?

No, he's a filmmaker. He makes documentaries. And his wife is a TV producer. It's like Crystal knows everybody. He found the door, opened it, and fumbled for the light switch. I also met this guy, Roger Worth. Really cool guy. He just opened up a studio downtown and he's looking for musicians to cut a demo.

I peered into the blackness. What's his studio called?

Funnily enough, the Darkroom. He found the light switch and flipped it. Huge sheets of canvas were strewn all over the floor. One standard-sized easel stood in the center of the room, and another, much larger, with a hand crank, was pushed into the far corner. Charcoal sketches in different stages of completion leaned against the walls, some piled in stacks, others thrown carelessly on the floor. I saw some very strange paintings. One was of a perfectly formed woman, but instead of a face there was a blank circle. The black bars of a jail cell had been painted where her face should have been, and a tiny gray androgynous figure was clutching the bars in a death grip. Another painting showed two huge hands shaking in the foreground. In the background, a man was crawling in what looked like a desert. His body was on fire.

But one painting completely captured my attention. As Brian inspected the mattress and the black comforter thrown on top of it, I walked over to get a better look at the painting.

Two figures, male and female, were holding hands against a plain white background, but something in their pose made me shiver. The male was bent at the waist, his body contorted at an unnatural angle, the muscles and even veins carefully reproduced, his arm stretched oddly back, his hand a claw. His featureless face was turned away from the female, but the strain of his rigid pose was evident in the jaw line and neck muscles. His claw hand, finger joints looking bent and broken, entwined with the fingers of the female, who was arched forward, also straining at the waist, as if she were trying to run the other way. Her face, like the woman I'd seen before, had been left strangely blank. What had she done to her models?

Before I had a chance to start looking through the other paintings, Brian had his hands around me, nuzzling the nape of my neck. He began pulling me down onto the mattress, slowly, studying me as I bent down to join him. I'm so wasted, I mumbled into his shoulder.

So am I, he answered, his hands moving under my clothes, tugging them over my head. Does it matter? I unfastened my bra and dropped it on the floor, feeling him pushing against me from behind. The only picture in my mind was of those straining muscles, those claw hands entwined, in a permanent state of erotic tension. We collapsed together on the mattress, but both of us were too drunk to do anything more than frolic a bit and pass out in each other's arms, not even bothering to get undressed.

I woke up at around eight-thirty, my mouth dry and full of plaster, and unhooked myself from Brian's zonked-out grasp. My head felt like a cement mixer on overdrive. Trying to stifle my groans of agony, I pulled on my skirt and blouse and opened the door of Crystal's studio. The smell of freshly brewed coffee picked me up gently by the nostrils and floated me down the hall and into the kitchenette, where Crystal sat talking with some guy I'd never seen before. When she saw me, she said nothing, but just dropped her lashes at the table, where she'd laid out freshly cut papayas, star fruit, oatmeal and yogurt, along with toast and steaming cups of coffee.

It's all ready for you and your boy, wherever he is, she said, with a small smirk. If you want to take a shower before you eat, feel free. But we got about an hour before we have to meet Roger over at the Darkroom. She looked up. What about Vince, that Marxist guy you told me about? Why didn't he come to the party last night? Never mind, we can call him and tell him where to meet us. You said he's got a van, right? If you want some water or juice, just get some out of the fridge. Don't mind all the weird science-projecty stuff in there. It's all part of my skin regiment.

In a daze, I wandered over to the fridge and opened it. Inside, there were about ten mason jars filled with all kinds of strange-colored creams and potions. I could see some of the labels EW-Hon (d), Com-Rasp (d), Hon-Avo BM (d), Clay-Milk (w), along with bottles of white wine, tropical-looking fruits and vegetables, and bottles of soy milk. Are you a vegetarian? I asked. Never mind, I muttered. I don't really want to know. I took out a bottle of clear fluid and held it up. This isn't formaldehyde or anything? Crystal looked over, smiled and shook her head. The guy was busy at the stove, stirring something that smelled like applesauce. I sighed and drank off a glass of cold water so fast it spiked my head and went to the bathroom for a long, hot shower.

With steam billowing out into the bathroom, I threw my head back and closed my eyes, letting the hot water wash down over my face. I didn't have a clue what Crystal was talking about—meeting Roger at the Darkroom, calling Vince. She couldn't possibly be thinking about practicing today. No, it had to be about something else. But in my damaged state, I couldn't imagine what else it could be.

When I finished toweling off and went back out to the living room, a place had been set for me across from Crystal. The guy was nowhere around. I noticed that someone had cleaned up most of the mess in the living room. All the hors-d'oeuvre plates, cocktail glasses and ashtrays were gone. The room had been vacuumed and straightened, and the beer rings had been washed off the coffee table and lamp stands. The only evidence that there had even been a party last night were the empty bottles lined up on top of the bar.

I sat down at my place and took a sip of coffee. Realizing I hadn't eaten anything except two stuffed mushrooms since yesterday breakfast, I was suddenly ravenous and tore into my grapefruit and oatmeal like a starving bear. While I ate, Crystal continued our earlier conversation as if my fifteen-minute shower had never happened. It's a good line-up, the four of us. Bass, violin, drums, guitar, piano if we need it. Anything else if we need it, really. But the big thing, the biggest thing for us is to get writing. We need a solid composition by December if we expect to get into the studio in February. I guess we don't have to worry too much. The studio probably won't be ready for recording until then.

The guy came back through the door, panting heavily. He took his shoes off at the top of the stairs, half-jogged to the table and put a plastic bag in front of Crystal. They didn't have your brand, so I got you some Nat Shermans. Same thing, right? And I left the bottles on the bar. I figured you'd want to hang onto those. Here's your change. He put a five dollar bill and three dimes on the table beside the bag. I have to go now. They want me in early today. What time do you want me to come in tomorrow?

Same as usual, Crystal said, barely glancing at the guy. *Danke schön, bis später.* How's the oatmeal? I mean, you can't really mess up oatmeal, but still & it's pretty good, huh? Where's your boy? Get him up and moving, we gotta get to work.

You summoned me? Brian asked. I jerked around. He came up behind me and put his arms around me. You're so quiet in the mornings. I didn't even notice you were gone. He planted a smacking kiss on top of my head and sat down in the other chair.

Okay, sweethearts, Crystal said, wrapping her hands around her mug and staring at us intently. Here's the deal. We go in, talk to Roger a bit, let him know what we plan to do, but let me do the talking okay? He's a little bit skeptical about experimental music, so let me smooth-talk him. He might take some convincing. Brian, you brought your guitar, right?

He looked up, his hand frozen in the act of grabbing a piece of toast. My guitar? No. Of course not.

Crystal turned her gaze on me. Just like at the café, her eyes switched *on* again, and I felt myself shrinking back in my chair. Not physically, but internally somehow. You mean, you didn't tell him about our practice today?

For a moment, I couldn't speak. I don't remember what I told her at the café, but the thought of practicing today had never once crossed my mind. I'm sorry, was all I could muster.

Crystal's eyes clicked *off*, and she gestured toward the living room. No problem. Arno left his guitar here last night to go out clubbing. You can use his.

Brian's eyes flicked from Crystal's to mine and then back again. Are you sure he wouldn't mind me using his guitar?

What are you worried about? Crystal asked. I said it was okay.

Brian held up his hands in an I'm-done-with-it gesture. If you say so.

Uh, I said, feeling like an idiot. You should give Vince a call and tell him to meet us & where? I looked at Crystal, waiting for her to give me the address.

It's just up the street, Crystal said. In the gay village. Just tell him to meet us at the corner of Church and Wellesley. We'll sort things out from there. And make sure he brings his bass.

When?

Now!

Okay, okay. I'll call him. But he won't like being woke up at this hour. Brian got up to phone Vince. He never even got a bite of toast.

Crystal dug the cigarettes out of the plastic bag, threw them in the garbage can at her feet and carried the bag over to the fridge. The guy had left a large kitchen knife on the counter next to a hacked-up grapefruit. Crystal picked the knife up and pointed it at me. Finish up quick. I

know we don't have anything for you to play, but Jacqueline left her trumpet here. Have you ever played a trumpet?

Never.

Good. I'll bring it along.

Brian hung the phone up and came over to the table. He looked confused. Vince is coming, he said. When I told him we were going to a studio, he just said, When and where? He said he'd be there in half an hour. He glanced over at Crystal, who was putting groceries into the fridge. He sounded excited.

That's hard to believe, I said, picking up my dishes and taking them over to the sink.

Crystal stopped me. Leave those. We have to go *now*. With that, she slammed the fridge door shut and went upstairs to get her coat and book bag. Brian and I traded glances, then followed her up the stairs and out the door.

CHAPTER 16

The Darkroom was nothing but a bottom-floor apartment that had been gutted by the city in a rundown, graffiti-tagged building just around the corner on Wellesley. Crystal took a ring of keys out of her pocket and unlocked the door. It swung inward with a rusty creak. The place was freezing. A stack of what looked like plasterboard panels lay piled up in the far corner. The floor was covered with sawdust and chips of peeled-off wallpaper, bent nails, and stray wires. Leftover piles of rubble were strewn all around the apartment, and when I looked through the empty doorframe into the kitchen, I could see big white splotches on the wall that marked the place where the fridge, cupboards and sink used to be. I shivered when I walked through the living room, my shoes crunching bits of packing Styrofoam from a huge box in the middle of the floor. I wondered if the apartment had been abandoned because someone had died and stood still for a moment, listening for the echo of ghostly voices. The only sound I heard was the wind blowing around the edges of the unsealed windows.

Crystal put her fists on her hips and looked around. I think the first thing we have to do is get this place swept up. There should be some brooms around here somewhere. In the closet, maybe. She poked her head into the box. I see the wall damping stuff's here.

Brian checked his watch. I better go wait for Vince on the corner. He should be here in a few minutes.

Crystal watched Brian leave, and looked at me, one eyebrow arched in a saucy smirk.

Curt told me he got your number.

Yeah, so?

She chuckled. Well, don't say I didn't warn you.

Warn me about what?

Crystal pushed the box of insulation aside and opened up a door in the far wall. It was a tiny broom closet. She dug out a pair of brooms and handed one to me. Let's try to get this place ready for when Roger gets here.

We started on opposite sides of the room, working our way toward the middle, and had managed to get most of the leavings into two big piles just as Brian and Vince trooped in, followed by an older man carrying a six-pack of Molson Canadian. I guessed he was Roger Worth.

Without bothering to introduce himself, Roger simply plopped down on the floor with an expansive sigh and started pulling cans of beer out of their plastic nooses, and handing them to Brian, Vince, and me. I took a can, my stomach doing a greasy somersault just hearing the fizzy sound of the pull-tab being popped. It felt like I'd been drinking steadily for three weeks now, and I was starting to feel a bit rundown.

Roger looked almost exactly the way I'd pictured him: a rock n' roller gone slightly to

seed, or maybe an ex-roadie dressed up a bit with a white collar poking up from under his black sweater. He had a week's worth of beard fuzzing his chin, straw-colored hair just starting to edge into grayer territory, a jowly smile, and light, energetic eyes that appraised each one of us with an eager curiosity. When we'd all opened our beers and taken a slug, he began to talk.

So you can see where we're at here, and it's not very far, as you can no doubt tell. I'm looking at soundproofing with an Iso-Wall system. We can all work together to put that up. I think it should take about a week to get the walls up and the iso-system in place. Then I think we should set up the mixer over more toward the corner, block off those windows, run a cable pass-through from the kitchen to the recording room.. He paused for a moment to guzzle from his can, then continued. Basically, the living room is going to be our studio, and we're going to set up the mixing board in the kitchen. That's all there is to it.

Vince piped up. How can we create some neat echo effects?

Roger looked up at him. That's all in how we mike everything. Now you can see we have a big enough space here to do it pretty much the way we want. If you guys wanted to spread yourselves out, we could lose some sound quality, but that's not necessarily a bad thing. You can get a kind of distancing effect that way, if that's what you're looking for. The acoustics of the space are under our control, as long as we're careful to keep everything totally soundproofed. That's really the biggest thing. He drained his beer can and immediately popped open another one.

What about equipment? I asked.

He shook his head and burped. Got it all coming on Wednesday. It's all bought and paid for, waiting for pickup. And I don't think it's going to take long to get everything set up, a couple of weeks maybe, once we get everything wired. But then, that makes me wonder something. How far along are you guys? He scratched his head suddenly, raking his fingers through the tangle as if he'd found a flea.

Not far, I ventured. We just sort of met last night.

The three of us have been working for three months now, Brian interrupted. Crystal's the new one. He pretended not to notice me glaring at him.

How many songs you got? Roger asked, this time looking over at Crystal. He seemed to want her to answer.

None, she said flatly. No songs.

Huh? He was looking at her—staring at her, frankly. So was I. Was this her version of sweet talk?

Crystal clasped her hands behind her back and leaned gently against the wall. She looked like a girl in some ancient ad for Coca-Cola, a girl with a Rita Hayworth do, leaning against a vending machine outside some general store, waiting for her Brylcreem-ed boyfriend to hand her a bottle of pop. We're not going to be doing songs. Not songs, *per se*.

Roger kept looking at her, brow furrowed. I don't get it. You mean some kind of *avant garde*, post-structural thing?

If that's what you want to call it, Crystal said, now bouncing a little, her palms pressed to the wall. She seemed to relish the stunned look on his face.

Roger quickly composed himself and tossed a beer tab at her. I'm sorry, he said,

turning back to the rest of us. I didn't even get your names. Although I'm guessing... He made a gun with his thumb and forefinger and pointed at me. ...you're Sonya. Right?

Good guess, I said.

He pulled his thumb trigger. Pow. And you're Brian. I remember you from last night, from somewhere deep in an alcoholic stupor. Didn't we talk about this band idea?

Brian nodded. But we didn't really talk much about it. You told me it was a cool idea.

And it is, Roger said. A very cool idea. That would make you Vince, right?

Vince had been listening to Roger's plans for the studio, but now seemed lost in his own thoughts. When Roger said his name, he looked up with a start. Yeah, I'm Vince. How do you know?

Roger stood up, wincing as his knees cracked with the effort, and picked up the last beer. Crystal called me this morning. She said you might be coming along, but she didn't know.

I'm glad I did, Vince replied. Very glad.

Well, I have to be going, kids. I gotta meet my business partner and talk about all the money I borrowed to finance this little operation. When do you want to get started?

Is tomorrow too soon? Vince asked. Roger laughed at that.

Maybe a little. But how about Monday night? We can all meet back here and I'll show you my blueprints for how I want to lay this place out. Sound good?

Awesome, Vince said, standing up to shake Roger's hand. I'll see you then.

We said our goodbyes, with Roger and Crystal exchanging a significant look. That left the four of us again. Amazing guy, Crystal said with admiration as Roger started up his car and drove off. Total alcoholic, of course. But you probably figured that out already.

Brian looked up at Crystal. What exactly did you mean by that? No songs, *per se*?

Crystal was in the midst of pulling her coat on when Brian asked the question. She stopped, coat pulled halfway onto her arm, and thought for a moment. I don't know how you see this band, but the whole idea of song structures, bridges, choruses, stuff like that. I'm not into that at all. I see us doing extended pieces, overlapping, lots of weird, complex structures. She finished pulling her coat on. Does that answer your question?

Sure. So we should get some writing done. Brian looked around at the rest of us, apparently hoping one of us would know what to say or do next. I just lied to the guy and told him we had our shit together, so &

Vince lay back down on the floor, hands laced behind his head. I got my bass in my van. Are we gonna get to work, or what?

Crystal took out her friend's trumpet and gave it to me. I turned it over in my hands, the cool brass cone sleek and unfriendly, and looked at my reflection in the polished surface. My face was stretched into a long mushroom shape, my eyes squidged up into two smeary blobs.

Look at that, I said to Crystal, showing her. If I try to play this thing, that's exactly what it'll sound like.

She smiled at me and tuned up her violin. The boys followed her lead. It's going to be tricky, trying to improv without a drummer, Vince said.

Just follow me, Crystal said, placing her bow on the strings. I'll do the heavy lifting. I just want to check your timing out, anyway. Sonya, whenever you find room, chisel some noise in there. I don't care what it sounds like, that's not the point. On four &

She started out in C minor to help Brian and Vince find their way into her rhythm, making simple circular patterns in the music, like a pencil sketch before shading, adding little hums and whispers as punctuation. Vince plucked the notes carefully, unsure of himself, and straining intently to try to predict the flow. Brian sank into the rhythm more easily, but stayed at a slow pace, picking his chords so quietly he didn't even seem to be touching the strings. The notes floated on a fragile pillow of air, so sweet and gentle I didn't dare breathe in case I disturbed them. I took a few mouthfuls of beer to get some saliva going and brought the mouthpiece to my lips.

My first sound was the ugliest noise I'd ever made in my life. It sounded like some black blob I'd dredged up from deep in my throat and spat on the wall. The boys' concentration snapped in an ear-scraping twang of twisted-up notes, but Crystal kept going as if nothing was happening, looking at me and nodding, trying to prod me to make another sound. I didn't really want to, but I did what I could, spitting and working the valves, and making an unholy racket of broken, crumbling notes that fit nowhere and stuck off at weird angles to what everyone else was playing. This bothered me, but the boys weren't doing a good job of holding in their giggles, which pissed me off even more. Finally, I gave up, putting the trumpet down and just listened to the three of them jam together, concentrating on the feelings I got.

I was amazed at how structurally sound our playing was, for a first jam session. Crystal seemed to be able to see deeply into the piece, knowing almost instinctively where the music was headed, and she guided the boys along like an experienced tracker leading a pair of lost campers out of the wilderness. She had an uncanny ability to predict how they would respond to her leads, even incorporating their mistakes and misdirections into the overall flow, doubling back to pick up broken phrases and rhythms, so that nothing sounded wrong—every note or measure, no matter how out of place it may have seemed at first, was folded back into place with perfect timing at a later interval. All I could do was listen with my mouth hanging open, and marvel at how she seemed to be inside the boys' heads with one part of her mind, behind them picking up their slack with another part, and off somewhere in the distance, almost out of sight, with still another part. She was like a chess grandmaster who could see checkmate unspooling from her opponent's first move.

For twenty minutes they kept it up, Crystal gradually speeding up the tempo, but controlling the rhythm so subtly that I barely noticed the changes. I could see sweat dripping off Vince's face as he struggled to keep pace with her. Brian's fingertips were bleeding a little, and I could almost watch the gears turning in his head as he tried to put chord changes together, his eyes darting back and forth from one end of the fret board to the other and back again. Meanwhile, Crystal was starting to leave them behind. She slashed at the strings with a furious intensity, the bow nearly bouncing up and down, wisps of sweaty black hair falling over her face.

As Brian and Vince sputtered out and tied up their contributions with a neat finish,

something snapped inside Crystal—some wall crumbled and let loose a torrent of sound, infinitely intricate lines of notes, all rushing out from some bottomless well in her mind, all needing a voice to skate across her violin strings, and Crystal tried—she tried to let each note speak, her bow sizzling, her body contorted like one of her sketches, black eyes glazed over, turned so far inward that I thought I was watching a ghost. What was she seeing? Did she even know where she was? I could feel the back of my neck shiver. Goose bumps popped out on my arms. My ears vibrated so intensely I almost cried out in pain. But the flood ended as suddenly as it began, in one last eye-throbbing rush that left me feeling like I'd just been swimming in a lake of fire.

Crystal moved about in a heavy silence after she finished playing, making sure her violin had survived the attack before she put it away, taking down a few notes in her binder, and inspecting the spit-flecked trumpet. Three pairs of eyes followed her every move, until she finally sat down on the floor and lit a cigarette. Vince and I joined her, and soon the air in the barren living room was so thick that I could see Brian, the only non-smoker, turning a bit green around the gills. But smoking seemed to be the only way we could communicate right now. Nobody had spoken a word since we'd started playing half an hour ago. We just watched Crystal smoke her cigarette in hungry drags and draw slow circles on the floor as if she were turning a globe with her fingertip.

Then the words came. This is such a kick, to be doing this with you guys! I know there's a lot of work to do, just to keep things humming, but I'm getting these incredible waves, just & gallons of sunshine, all of us staying together like that & I mean, of course we have to be more structured, but & I can't tell my teachers about this, you know that, right? If they found out that I was running off like this they'd be really upset with me. I'm supposed to be working on a symphony. Can you believe that? That's my two-year goal! So it's like I got eight parole officers hanging on my neck, you know? That's why you couldn't tell anyone about my party, it was very invite-only. They worry a lot about me. It makes me fucking crazy! I'm thinking some really strong, really complex chamber pieces. No trumpet for you, Sonya, let's end that experiment right now & But have you ever tried writing lyrics? If we want to get into the studio by February, we have to get to work now. Yeah, I can see it coming together & Her hands began to move, as if she were building the piece in front of us, out of coils and spirals of empty air. So, we need to set a lot of time aside, if we're gonna get something good in the studio. She looked at the three of us, her eyes sparkling like polished pearls. I know you don't put in the work I do. I know that, so don't even try to tell me you do. But is two hours a day too much to ask?

God, Brian said. It was the first non-Crystal word I'd heard since we stopped playing. I don't know about that.

Okay, fine. Two hours, four days a week. That'll give everyone enough time to get their other work done. You know, recitals and all that. Now I'm kind of a freak about discipline, so I want to make a pact now. If you guys are serious, let's make a pact. No bullshit excuses, we come together and practice. Like a Swiss watch. All right? She held her hand out, palm down.

Brian put his hand in. I did the same. Vince hesitated, but shrugged and put his hand on

Brian s. Crystal looked around at the four of us, her tractor-beam gaze making her eyes look huge. She was staring at me. Lyrics?

Ah, I could try, I said slowly. Let me get right on that.

Crystal stood up and shouldered her book bag. I ve got to meet my prof for lunch. So tomorrow 6:00. Here. Everyone good with that? When no one replied, she nodded. Good. Lock up when you leave, okay? And she was gone, out the door and halfway down the street before anyone else could move.

I wanted to go home by myself and just be alone for a while, put on some fresh clothes, and maybe go to Future s to warm my hands over a cup of hot coffee. My head was still buzzing from what I d heard today, and I knew Brian was anxious to talk to me about it, but I needed to digest things on my own. Both Crystal and Roger had rattled off so much information that none of it seemed true. Were they serious about wanting to record by February? An entire *album*? Was that even possible? I didn t know how musicians recorded I d never even seen the inside of a studio. Roger seemed professional enough, except for Crystal s offhand comment about his drinking, and I knew that even though Crystal had never done any solo recorded, she d been in and out of studios since she was little, playing with orchestras, and probably knew more about setting one up than he did. So I thought I could put my trust in them, as far as the mechanics of the whole thing, but then there was our side of the equation, meaning *my* side lyrics? I knew Crystal didn t do small ideas. I thought about showing her *Miniatures*, like I promised when I first met her, but a part of me resisted. I d never shown my work to anyone before, and Crystal didn t strike me as the most & supportive audience. I didn t think I was ready for a harsh critical analysis.

I said goodbye to the boys, who were still a bit stunned from the jam session. Vince said he had to go home and take a long shower. Brian offered to give me a ride home, but I turned him down, not really in the mood for company. Can I call you later?

Yeah, okay, just & give me the afternoon. I ve got Gladys s recital on Wednesday, so I want to go over that, and maybe & I don t know, do some writing or something.

He smiled. That s my girl. This ll keep you warm. He kissed me.

You re so gay, I said, beaming anyway as I buttoned up my jacket. Vince gave me a listless wave, but I saw something else in his eyes, an alertness that wasn t exactly welcoming.

Wrapping my jacket tightly around me, I walked briskly up to the corner to catch the bus back to the Annex. But before I got to Bloor St. W, I decided to hop off and cut through Queens Park to look at the Legislative Assembly Building. The bus dropped me off at the end of the tree-lined avenue that led up to the fortress-like building s triple-arched portico. Even though it was Sunday, and the place was deserted, I decided not to walk all the way up to the marble steps, but just sit on a bench under one of the scraggly trees until the fog cleared out of my head.

I was still shaky from all the tequila I drank last night, but I didn t know if my mild but steady headache was from the booze, the music, or the bulk of work Crystal suddenly laid at my doorstep. Probably a combination of all three. I decided I didn t need to go home now I could

find a warm seat at Future s and see if I could squeeze out some poetry. I d never tried forcing myself to write before; maybe a kickstart would help. I stared at the Legislative Assembly Building, at its turrets and cupolas, ominous archways and imposing brick façade, and waited for inspiration.

A half hour later, I left with a frozen ass and numb fingers, even though I d stuffed them into the pockets of my coat. Future s was too far away, and I was getting tired of going there anyway, so I thought I d just walk along Bloor until I found a place that looked nice, get a steaming mug of java. The street was quiet this afternoon. Students were all probably holed up in their apartments nursing hangovers. I decided to stop into a café called Dooney s. I d heard Vince talk about it a few times, as just about the only place in town that understood the true essence of *café* – a community meeting place for people who would rather drink arsenic than a Starbuck s medium roast.

I found a table in the corner, ordered an espresso, opened my notebook, and closed my eyes. I pictured the Legislative Assembly Building as an ancient castle, crawling with ivy and rose bushes, in the middle of a Scottish moor, a Gothic mausoleum for a haunted princess, with cobwebs draped over the antique Baroque furniture and a harpsichord tinkling creepily from down long hallways and behind doorways. A few lines of Poe-style poetry came, but I crumpled them up as soon as I wrote them. Too corny. So I sat and people-watched for a while, as groups of students debated, chatted, laughed, or just studied and read on their own. The smell of baking bread reminded me that I hadn t eaten anything since breakfast, but I wanted to push myself a bit, get into a hunger-fuelled reverie state, and try to grind out a page or two of poetry.

I took another sip of coffee and got a sudden image of two young lovers, standing naked in a hellish landscape, a wall of fire separating them. Tears ran down their cheeks as they tried to reach for each other, the searing heat leaving scorch marks on their arms. This image was wiped out by the Gothic mausoleum, and I saw a young beauty leaning out of her second story window and holding a bouquet of roses. Her cheeks were now filled with the glow of endless youth and romance as she waited for her lover to appear in the moonlit reeds below. Maybe she was trapped in the castle, doomed to wander the halls forever unless the man she loved rescued her. Yuck! Sounded like a bad fantasy novel. I put my pencil down and rubbed my eyes. For hours, caffeine and exhaustion had been locked in a delicate balance, using my poor aching head as a playground. Now, exhaustion was winning out, and I was having trouble keeping my head from sinking onto the table. I needed sleep. My half-full cup of coffee had grown cold. I pushed it away and got up to go, stopping just long enough to grab a pro-pot pamphlet from the rack beside the front door.

The sky had grown noticeably darker, the chilly edge of the wind honed against cheeks and chapped hands. Wanting to get home before the sky went completely black, I walked quickly, hood pulled up over my head, hurrying past storefronts and shop windows, pubs and cafes, street performers and grilling sausages, until I just wanted to collapse on the sidewalk and go to sleep while people stepped impatiently over my body. I did sit down on the steps of a convenience store, just to catch a breath. A homeless man was sitting on the sidewalk beside me, an upturned baseball cap in front of him. He might have been fifty, but his thin, wizened

face, hollow cheeks, and sunken, abandoned eyes made him look much older.

He was staring straight out at some point across the street, unmoving except for his matted hair. The ball cap held just enough to keep it from blowing down the street. On a whim, I dug into my wallet and pulled out a five-dollar bill. A gust of wind almost tore the money out of my hand, but I managed to put it in the cap. The man turned and said something, but his voice was mushy and indistinct. His lips peeled back in a smile, and he nodded to me in a friendly way before turning back to whatever he was watching across the street. What are you looking at? I asked. The man didn't answer. He might have been deaf.

I thought I could just sit there, watching people hurry past, until the streets emptied out and the world slowly filled with snow. I looked back at the homeless man. His face was a red mask, a roadmap of decades of nights, bars and back alleys, cramped tenements, government interference, cold baked beans on stale bread, empty pint bottles, winters spent on concrete floors with no one but the darkness for company, and now tossed onto the civic slag heap, the detritus of a social factory. Dead-alive eyes like burned-out cinders stared through the gaps under and around the hooked arms of couples walking by, through the spaces between the buildings and the moving cars, and out across the dead, black expanse of Lake Ontario. Swallowing those thoughts, I stood up and stretched. Streetlights were flickering on now, the sky having shaded from gray to charcoal. A long, hot bath was what I needed. Poetry could wait for another day.

CHAPTER 17

For the next few weeks, school and rehearsal sessions took over my life, and the pressure to juggle all the different demands on my time was becoming such a chore that I couldn't even think about writing poetry. But our practices were electric every day, it seemed we were coming up with new ideas for pieces, brimming over with opinions about which direction the music should take and where we should go with it. Gradually, measure by measure, the pieces grew into full-fledged complex suites, evolving and changing character each time we practiced. Crystal was probably the worst for taking our ideas, turning them inside out, and distorting them past all boundaries of structure and concision. But instead of pulling the works apart, her dislocations either helped the rest of us find their potential, like flowers suddenly bursting into a full bloom, or forced us to see when and how a piece wasn't working. By carrying the music to such lengths, with key and tempo changes, she could deconstruct it without ever once losing the internal rhythms. I don't know how many times I caught myself just listening to her, drumsticks hanging in mid-air, completely distracted from my own playing.

As November became December and the threat of winter exams loomed, my relationship with Rachel got worse and worse. Every time I got back from a practice session, she would make a snarky comment about all the orgies we must be having. She kept avoiding me, always seeming to have somewhere to go five minutes after I walked through the door, and spending as many nights as possible at Vince's place. Fuck, I said to the empty apartment, near tears after a rough practice. If I'd known this was how it would be, I would've stayed back in Truro!

Things had gotten so bad by the end of the semester that when she finished her exams, she packed up and left without even saying goodbye. All she did was leave a tiny little Post-It note stuck to the fridge, so well-hidden among all the restaurant advertisements, to-do lists and party pictures that I didn't even notice it for three days:

Dear Sonya,

Hey babe, make sure you keep the heat turned down when you're not in the house. The oil bill was way too high last month. And don't forget to throw out the food in the fridge before you leave. I don't want to come home to a fridge full of fungus. Have a great Christmas!

Love, Rachel

What kept me going was the work. I'd never felt like such a professional musician in my life. Here we were, the four of us, writing, practicing, discussing, rewriting, and celebrating a

successful days work with an endless flow of wine. The piece started to emerge, coalescing into a haunting, quietly intense jewel box of secrets and dreams. All I could do sometimes was just stand back and let the three of them create beautiful tensions out of the air and hope I wasn't ruining anything with my drum patterns.

Vince made a telling comment on the night of our last practice before vacation, as the two of us walked to the bus stop in a wine glow. We'd been talking about Crystal, and how neither of us had ever worked with someone so driven. A cold rain was starting to fall, the kind of rain that could slide its way down my neck no matter how big a scarf I was wearing. You got to step up more, Sonya, Vince said, staring down at me with a strange mix of concern and contempt. I'd learned to recognize this expression as his way of showing he cared without being sappy, but it still grated on me.

What do you mean?

I just think you could be a little more forceful, get involved in the writing a little more.

I'm finding it a bit hard with you guys. You're all so scary-talented.

Vince snorted. When he looked at me, his eyes glittered with abrupt anger. I hate false modesty. I really hate it. You should hate it too. It gets in the way of everything. He looked away again, walking faster now that the covered bus stop was in sight. The rain was starting to get obnoxious. We ducked under the glass awning.

Listen, I said, a bit breathless from trying to catch up to him. What am I supposed to do?

He sighed, an exasperated blast of air. Let me tell you something I've learned. People believe whatever's most convenient for them to believe. It doesn't matter if it's in politics, relationships, or art. Maybe it's just easier for you to believe that about yourself. But & I have a confession—out of all the others, you're the one I'm listening to. Do you understand that? Brian and I have been playing so long I can predict his every move. Crystal—she's too over my head. But you—I listen to you.

There was a tone in his voice I recognized and suddenly I was exhausted. My hair was dripping freezing water into my eyes, making me miserable. Don't tell me that, I said softly. I don't think I want to hear it.

I know, he said grimly, still not smiling. But it's the truth. As if on cue, my bus pulled up and I got on it a little too quickly, giving him only a half-hearted smile for goodbye. I hated leaving him standing in the rain like that, but I hadn't liked the direction he was headed in. Raindrop by raindrop, my spirit sank into a gloomy reverie that lasted all the way into exam week.

The same cold rain fell again the day after my final theory exam, stabbing the streets and sidewalks in a steady gray attack. Dad called in the afternoon, at the peak of the downpour, to tell me he wouldn't be home for Christmas. Snow had trapped him again, forcing him to hole up in a Holiday Inn until the plows could get through. Diane decided to fly out to meet him in Calgary for a Holiday Inn turkey dinner, and they'd put a little gift pack together for me, which was already on its way to Toronto. I half-listened as the sound of his voice mixed with the

steadily drumming rain, until every word he spoke was undercut by the torrential hammering outside, until I could barely make out a syllable.

What?

I said, your mother would love to have you. You should call her tonight before you go to bed.

Okay, Dad, I said, trying to keep my voice steady. Look, I've got to go. I've got to clean up the place.

Okay, dear. Love you.

Love you too. I hung up faster than I wanted to, then pushed the phone off my bed onto the floor where it landed with a clatter and the indignant bleeping of the busy signal. I wasn't going to call Mom. I hadn't even spoken to her since July. I found myself repeating

Rain, rain, go away, come again some other day over and over again, while the phone went on beeping shrilly. When I got sick of listening to our listless duet, I dialed Brian's number. He answered on the tenth ring, his voice sleep-fuzzed and cotton-hazy, but he perked up when I told him the news about Dad.

Don't think me a pig or anything, but that's good news. Now you can spend Christmas at our place.

Jesus, Brian, I don't know if I want to & I mean, what's your family gonna think if you invite some stranger to spend Christmas with you? Aren't they gonna wonder why I don't have a family of my own? I'd feel weird about that.

My parents are totally cool. I'll tell them your situation, and that'll be that. Besides, we go to school together, right? Just & ah, take out the stud and keep the hair out of your eyes. Oh, and my family is really into door-to-door Christmas caroling, it usually turns into an all-nighter, with us going around the neighborhood and knocking on doors and stuff. So you'll have to be ready for that. Sometimes people throw stuff at us, like dirty dishwater, especially when Dad gets on one of his Let Jesus save you! trips, but it doesn't happen often. Oh, awesome, you're the perfect person to be Mary in our nativity re-enactment.

I stared at the receiver in amazement. Are you crazy?

Kidding. Just kidding. No, the fam's cool. They'll love you. Just & say yes.

I kept my eyes on the gray slab of misery framed by my window. You know, it sounds a little bit like I'm auditioning for something.

What? What would you be auditioning for?

I wonder. I let my words hang in the silence between us. The rain seemed to be pelting the windowpane less intensely now, or was that just wishful thinking? Okay, I said slowly, measuring each word. But promise me I won't feel like a stranger.

An electronic hiss came from his end of the line. I didn't know if it was a sigh of frustration or relief. You won't. I promise. When is Crystal coming back from Germany?

I squeezed my eyes shut, remembering her last words to me before she got into the taxi, telling me what she wanted me to have ready when she came back. December 28th.

Okay, good. That gives us a week to ourselves. Can I come over later?

I lay back on my bed, resting my cheek on my heart-shaped pillow. Can you call me back later? I just want to curl up in bed for a while.

All right, Brian said and kissed into the phone. The noise sounded like an electric bug killer zapping a mosquito. The image made me smile and scrunch my nose up at the same time. Call you later.

Bye. I hung up and put on Joan Baez CD, a thousand thoughts racing tumbling over each other. I wanted a bubble bath. I wanted to chain-smoke an entire pack of cigarettes and then eat an entire tub of butter-pecan ice cream. I wanted to drink the quart of vodka in the cupboard under the stove, or maybe even roll some weed. Then I remembered that the five of us smoked the last of our stash two nights ago. I wanted to go outside in nothing but a nightgown and stand on the front lawn in the rain until I was soaked completely through and shivering from pneumonia. Instead of doing any of these things, I just lay on my bed like a lump, doing nothing more strenuous than breathing, until, undone by inertia, I drifted off into a ragged-edged sleep.

The phone rang several hours later, jerking me awake. Night had fallen and the moon was out, painting the top corner of my window in a white glow. I answered the phone in a mushy daze. It was Brian, letting me know his parents okayed the plan, letting me know they were really looking forward to meeting me, letting me know when and where he'd be picking me up. I heard all of this and didn't hear it, my mind picking up random signals beaming in from all directions—my dad, the band, the eerie, empty silence filling the room—with Brian's words only underlining my aloneness. When he stopped talking, I asked him if he wanted to come over.

Of course I do, he said immediately. What should I wear?

I groaned. I'm lonely. Everyone's gone. It reminds me of home. I just want you to come over and keep me company. All right?

I'll be there, he said, softening. Give me half an hour. He hung up without waiting for me to say goodbye.

We spent the rest of the night together, just talking and laughing quietly. He'd brought his guitar—not the Gibson he used for performances, but an old, beat-up Washburn with weird splotches of paint on it and the strings sticking out from the keys in an unkempt tangle of wires. Brian was eager to hand the guitar to me and help me make a few chords, but the only song I knew how to play was *Folsom Prison Blues*, and my fingertips were so soft I could barely get through it. I preferred just sitting silently, pressing the soles of my bare feet together, and watching him play old blues songs I'd never heard of. I was becoming a connoisseur of his postures and positions, the way he bowed his blond head over the strings, the way his shoulders tensed and relaxed on each downstroke, the crook of his fingers as they clenched, reaching for the chords. I felt I could rest my chin on my knees and watch him forever, like being absorbed in a candle flame. We stayed like that, passing the guitar back and forth, sipping glasses of wine, until nearly four o'clock, listening to the rain start playing the windows again. And when I drifted off for the second time that day, sleep came in a magic wash, clearing out all the dust in my head, thoughts of school, of Dad snowbound, Mom enjoying Christmas with her new family, everything that didn't have to do with the here and now, the me on the couch, the flickering candlelight on the walls, the rain pattering on the glass, the taste of wine on my tongue. What an idiot I could be sometimes.

My first Christmas away from home was light years away from anything I'd ever experienced before. Brian lived in a huge old two-and-a-half storied Victorian-style manor on Isabella St., not far from Yorkville. Even as we approached it from a distance, I guessed it was a professor's house. There was an academic flavor to the way the ivy clung to the west face of the house, even in the middle of winter. A perfectly trimmed hedge, just high enough to keep the neighbors from peeking over it, carved out a peaceful square of lawn and the two rose bushes in the tiny front yard were tastefully draped in two sets of white Christmas lights. Tasteful? I didn't think I'd ever apply that word to Christmas decorations.

The inside of the house was stunning. I kept quiet as Brian proudly conducted me on a whirlwind tour from the spacious living room, with its huge fireplace and oak furniture. The six-foot Christmas tree in the corner might have been trimmed by professional decorators, and the lush white carpet surrounded the tree stand like a layer of new-fallen snow. Along one wall stood a tall rack of shelves lined with books, antique-looking objets-d'art, little wizened black statues of spear-throwing natives, pottery pieces, and other knickknacks and bric-a-brac, an ocarina made from a seashell, a strangely filigreed incense holder that looked like a tiny coffin with latticed sides, decorative candle holders and candles in more flavors than an ice-cream parlor. An old Master's painting in a glass frame hung over the fireplace, a woman wearing a red cloak and a baby in her lap, swathed in strips of white cloth. I went in for a closer look.

That's *Madonna and Child With St. Anne* by Giacomo Coppi. Dad won it at Sotheby's about twenty years ago.

Your dad's an art collector? I asked over my shoulder. I kept staring at the sinister old woman in rusty dimness whispering something in the younger woman's ear. That was a saint?

No, that's the only original he's got. But he always says if the house caught fire, he'd save that painting before any of his family.

My eyes traveled over to the huge ceramic vase beside the front window. I guess this vase is probably too heavy, huh?

C'mon, let me show you the study.

Brian led the way down the hall and opened the last door on the right. All the other doors in the hallway were closed, and I giggled to myself, thinking they all branched into other long, dimly lit corridors, like some haunted English manor, all of them turning and twisting back on themselves to open back up into this same hallway. Brian was standing to one side of the door, pointing into the den. I poked my head around the door.

Three of the walls were lined top to bottom with books, all leather-bound and forbidding, spines embossed with titles and volume numbers in gold and silver thread. I couldn't read anything because of the fancy lettering, but I could tell who ever wrote them and whatever their contents, they must have cost thousands of dollars. Against the far wall was a huge executive desk covered with folders and papers. Even the drawer handles could have bought my entire winter wardrobe. Dad does all his grading in here, Brian said from behind me.

Is that oak? I asked, feeling stupid. Why did I even bother guessing?

No. It's walnut. C'mon, I want to take you downstairs.

We walked through the kitchen, which was almost as big as the bungalow's front room. The door to the basement stood open against the wall, where the door handle had made a tiny

smudge on the wallpaper. I wanted to touch it. Brian had already disappeared down the staircase, and I could hear his socked feet padding against the steps. I followed him down.

The centerpiece of the downstairs den was a snooker table, complete with an ornate abacus-style scoreboard and a rack of cues on the paneled wall. Four old gaslights mounted on the walls gave a smoky yellow glow that was totally overwhelmed by the long fluorescent tube that hung over the snooker table. Mom and Dad should be back soon. You want to play a game?

I looked at the rack of the cues. Which stick s not going to cost me my inheritance if I break it?

Hey, take any one you want. Guests are allowed to break stuff.

I labored over my choice while Brian set up the balls, finally settling for one with a crimson finish. Is snooker anything like pool? I asked, chalking up.

Except for trying to get balls in the pocket, I d say no. You have to pot the balls in a certain order. First a cherry those are the red ones.

I guessed that.

Then any color, then another cherry, then any other color, until all the cherries are gone. Then yellow, green, brown, blue, pink and black.

Sounds easy. I stepped up to the table, and suddenly felt much shorter than I remembered. I leaned over the rail, which pressed firmly into my belly, and looked down at the red triangle at the far end. It was like looking at fifteen red M&Ms at the end of a football field. Getting the cue ball down there was like pushing an aspirin with a chopstick. I gave it a love tap with my cue. It rolled down to the end and struck the red triangle with a lazy clink. The balls rolled away from each other for a few centimeters and stopped. Well, you never know what you can do when you put your mind to it.

Brian was looking at the mess on his end of the table. Tell you what, he said. Let me show you my room. It s right over there.

I looked. A large slice of the downstairs area had been sectioned off by wood paneling with a door planted in the middle. Nice segueway, I said, but I m not done kicking your ass here.

So Brian kicked my ass, but he did it sweetly, cutting his shots with little shrugs and aw-shucks grins when the balls dropped into the pockets, until I wasn t sure if I wanted to punch him or jump him. When he potted the last black ball, twenty minutes later, he was in the middle of a story about Darryl in a downtown club, spinning on bennies so fast he had the entire dance floor to himself for about ten minutes, or at least until four bouncers each grabbed a limb and dumped on the sidewalk. I was laughing so hard that Brian had me in his bedroom before I realized the game was over.

I looked around his room at his vinyl collection and guitars as he slid his hand down between my thighs. I closed my legs around his hand and arched my back with a soft sigh. He had an electric guitar, but it was resting in its stand in the corner of the room, more a decoration than something he actually played.

On his dresser was a framed black-and-white photograph of a serious-looking young man with a severe crewcut and a sharp widow s peak. Who s this? I asked.

Brian looked up. I thought I saw a brief flicker of pain cross his face, but he covered with a shrug and a wave of his hand. That's my older brother, Michael. He died in a car crash eight years ago. He stopped suddenly, as if something had just occurred to him. I guess I should tell you. I always visit his grave on Christmas Day. You don't have to come if you don't want to. I don't know how you'd feel about that...

I looked at him in surprise. Of course I'll come. Unless you don't want me to.

He got up from the bed and reached out his hand to me, a smile on his lips. I came over to the bed and let him run his hands through my hair, draping my arms around his neck. He unbuttoned my jeans slowly and deliberately, kissing me as he opened each one, first my neck, then my ear, then my neck again, moving down my throat with his lips as he worked at my jeans, taking his time, even though I could feel him swelling against my leg. His knuckles brushed my pubic hair, making me moan in a long, papery breath. He reached behind my back to undo my bra, sliding it out from under me. I pulled up his shirt, putting my mouth on his bare stomach, my hands writhing under his shirt, trying to pull it over his head. He helped me, throwing both shirt and bra onto the floor, and diving into my hair like he never wanted to surface again. I yanked his khakis to his ankles, laughed to myself a little bit, then pulled down his underwear. He plunged himself into me, bracing my head with one hand, thrusting hard enough to push me up onto my shoulder blades. I grabbed at his back, scraping at his skin with my stunted nails, breathing in ragged gasps, half-expecting his mother to swing the door open, three-quarters wanting her to, totally revving myself on the squeaking and creaking of the bed frame, joining it with sounds of my own, and letting go in a long, snaky shout that ended with my teeth in Brian's shoulder. He gave a harsh bark, but stayed in stride long enough to finish and lie down beside me with an exhausted groan. So, I murmured, so, so, so, so, so & I get rock songs now. I get 'em all.

Brian was twining locks of my hair around his fingers. His eyes were closed so far I could only see a tiny half-moon of white. Rock songs?

Yeah, that long finish, with the drums and guitars and everything. I get it now.

He breathed slowly, holding the air in for several seconds before letting it out in a long stroke. Want to see if there's any leftover lasagna?

While Brian heated up some lasagna, I stepped out onto the back porch for a moment to admire the backyard patio and barbecue pit, all cased in plastic for the winter. As I stood there, wondering why no one had bothered to bring the lawn furniture inside, Brian's father appeared around the corner with an armload of groceries, catching me in *cigarettes interruptus* and making both of us straighten up in surprise. Hello, he said, adjusting his glasses to get a closer look. He had a neat salt-and-pepper goatee, but I could instantly see where Brian had gotten his unruly hair and secretive smile. You must be Sonya. I'm Derek, Brian's father. He shifted his grocery bag around to free up his hand. I shook it, gesturing with my cigarette.

I hope you don't mind.

No, not at all. Has Brian shown you around?

Yeah. I've never seen a house with a walk-in fireplace before.

He laughed. It's going to get pretty crowded here tonight. My wife should be home soon and we've got my sister and her family flying in from Vancouver. Brian's sister and her husband are coming up from Los Angeles.

Los Angeles?

He's a computer engineer or something, I don't really know, exactly. Could you uh & He motioned for me to let him through.

Oh, sorry. I stepped out of the way.

Thanks. He went inside, calling Brian's name on the way by. I stayed out on the porch to finish my cigarette, angry at myself for letting him see me smoking. I didn't know why, but it felt like a strike against me. I flipped the butt into a puddle that had collected under the eaves trough and went back inside.

The smell of reheated pasta filled the kitchen, and Brian was in the midst of dishing out a plate of lasagna. I hung back in the doorway where I could watch them without being seen. Brian's father had jumped right into the meal preparation, pulling water and cheese out of the fridge with one hand while stirring a pot of soup with the other. As they worked, they talked to, at, around, and through each other, trading insults and wry observations like a stand-up act. So Dr. Henstridge is up for &

The human goiter?

Sabbatical, yes. She's put in her request.

Request granted?

With some reservations.

Like who's taking over for chair?

In a nutshell.

First, we gotta bump off Dr. Smythe.

Then run over Prof. McKenna.

And poison Dr. Frick. That should put you next in line for the throne.

And I could hire you for PR work, put a positive spin on the whole thing.

Right, like how could you accuse an upstanding member of the community, that sort of thing.

I need Scotch. Right now.

No, you need Scotch.

Neat Scotch. Sonya seems like a nice girl. Very pretty.

Very pretty, Brian agreed. She does have a nasty habit of eavesdropping, though. Brian tossed a grin back at me.

I stepped into the kitchen and took the plate of lasagna Brian was holding out. I see where he gets his sense of humor.

Brian's dad laughed and poured me some water. I meant what I said, of course.

So did I, Brian added. Enjoy. It'll be your last meal in peace for a while.

We ate together as the rays of the setting sun lit the kitchen in a pleasant amber glow, just eating and laughing together as if I were Brian's younger sister, home for the holidays. Brian's dad didn't ask me any of the usual 'get to know you' questions, instead asking me if I'd seen his Coppi painting. I paid \$33,000 for it.

No, you didn't, Brian sneered. It was \$23,500. He rolled his eyes at me. It gets more expensive every time he tells the story.

Bullshit, Brian's dad said, savoring the word. Bullshit. I paid \$33,500 for that painting at Sotheby's when I was in London & Brian was saying no over and over, but his father overrode him. & when I was in London on my honeymoon with your mother. It was a honeymoon present, and I won it for \$33,500.

Not \$33,500! \$23,500! And it wasn't on your honeymoon! It was when you and Mom went on your tenth anniversary, and I was a year old. You left Michelle and me at our granddad's, and you guys went to London.

Brian's dad turned to me. Let's ask our guest. How much do you think I paid for it?

I wiped some tomato sauce off my chin and looked from one face to the other, totally unsure of what they could possibly want me to say. Is this some kind of weird test? I asked.

Brian and his dad looked at each other. She's sharp, Brian's dad said. He combed his goatee with his fingers and poured himself another drink.

Brian frowned. The doctor said you're only allowed to have one drink a day.

Derek snorted. Yeah, well, I gave myself a second opinion. He took a drink, rolled his eyes back with a contented sigh, and dug back into his lasagna. I hope you don't think I'm rude, Sonya Lasagna, but after a long day slaving in front of a hot classroom, I need a little pick-me-up for dinner.

I glanced at Brian. Why would I think &? Brian laughed and took his empty plate over to the dishwasher.

Totally bewildered, I just kept my head down and worked on the last few bites of pasta. As I finished, Brian's mother burst through the door in a whirlwind of hair, jangling keys, and what sounded like three voices all speaking at the same time. I couldn't make out anything except chopped-up phrases spat out in a near-breathless release of complaint, relief and disappointment. God it's cold why haven't you taken the car in ate all the lasagna better only be apple juice in there buy turnips clothes need ironing the Kloosters New Year's party who's this? She stopped when she saw the stranger in her kitchen. Oh, you must be &

That's right, Mom, Brian said, scraping his plate into the garbage disposal. This is Sonya. Sonya, my mom.

Brian's mom looked out from under her feather cut, her cheeks instantly creasing into a thousand welcoming wrinkles. Oh, God, dear, I hope you haven't been scared away, left alone with these two boys.

I shrugged. Well, I'm still here. You guys have an amazing house. I could've fit my place in, like, your living room. Okay, that's a bit of an exaggeration, but there's some truth there.

Brian's mom put her purse down on the sideboard, and plopped herself into a chair. She was a heavyset woman, but she radiated such a shine of good-hearted self-composure that she had the simple energetic grace of someone who was very happy and had been for many years. But she did shoot her husband an evil look when she saw him polishing off his glass of Scotch.

Turning to me with a sweet smile, she said, Sonya, dear, I hope you don't try to find happiness at the bottom of a bottle.

Brian's dad gave his wife a patronizing pat on the shoulder. I don't need any artificial joy. Wasn't it Epicurus who said a man can still be happy even if he's on the rack?

Brian's mom reacted like she'd heard this quote a few times before. Anyway, she said, flashing me a bright smile. The boys are going to be picking up Brian's aunt and uncle at the airport soon, if you want to go with them. Or you can stay here with me and help me make turkey dressing. Up to you.

Uh & I looked over at Brian, but he was no help, as he was busy unloading the dishwasher. I'll stay here, I guess. Brian probably needs a lot of room in the car.

Great. Well, boys, why don't you get going? It's almost six o'clock.

While the boys were gone, Brian's mom dug out a big ceramic mixing bowl. We'll use this. Do you think it's big enough for & She stopped to count. &ten people? Well, there are two kids, so I don't think we have to worry too much about them. But then, people will want seconds, so & She turned to me, her eyes almost alarmingly blue in the last rays of the setting sun. Don't worry about me, I go through this routine every Christmas. She pointed at the cupboard in front of me. Bread's up there. Wash your hands before you start handling it, though.

I paused, then scrubbed my hands clean in the sink before opening the cupboard and taking down two loaves of homemade bread. Do you usually have a big crowd over for Christmas?

Certainly. Fewer than eight, and I'd feel neglected. I'll start sautéing the onions, you can start cutting up the bread. She turned the gas on. I'm touched that you decided to spend Christmas with us.

I stopped cubing the bread and squeezed my eyes shut. I don't want you guys to think I'm freeloading or anything. The moment the words were out I regretted them.

But Brian's mom didn't pick up that thread. She just finished dicing the onions and threw in the frying pan. Do you like raisins? I usually put raisins in my dressing, but I know some people don't like them.

I like raisins, I said.

Brian said your father was spending Christmas at a motel.

I dumped the bread cubes into the bowl, not sure I really felt like explaining my weird family situation to a stranger. Brian's mom, maybe sensing my discomfort, quickly switched gears. So how was your first semester?

It's been cool so far.

Brian's mom took the bowl from me and added some spices before sliding the sautéed onions and raisins into the mix. I didn't see what spices she'd added, but the smell was so strong and earthy I didn't want to wait until Christmas dinner. Brian's been really good, showing me around the town, helping me get settled. But for four months to go by like that &

Wait until you get to be my age. Those four months will go by like a lazy summer afternoon. She was kneading the mixture in the bowl with a spoon now, turning the bread

cubes over and over. But let's not bother with those thoughts. Hand me that spatula, would you? I followed her gesture and picked a spatula out of the batch of utensils hanging from a rack on the counter. When the boys get back, we'll have a little hoedown in the basement. It's kind of a Christmas tradition around here. You'll have a great time, don't worry. When she finished kneading the dressing, she washed her hands under the tap, humming an opera aria.

The circus began with the arrival of Brian's niece and nephew, a twin turbo engine of supercharged adolescent excitement. They came in squealing, arms full of brightly wrapped packages so big that the kids couldn't see around them to find their way through the kitchen. Brian came in with his arms full, as did his aunt and uncle—there were so many parcels and presents that the Christmas tree looked half-buried in tinsel wrapping paper. The kids didn't even look at me but went straight to the candy bowl on the coffee table, leaving a trail of coats and mittens, plunged both their hands in and stuffed so much chocolate into their mouths I thought they would choke. Brian's aunt and uncle acted more like traffic cops, making sure the kids weren't tracking mud all over the floor, picking up their clothes behind them and running interference for Brian's mom, who had just started mixing up a huge angel cake. By the time Brian got the presents under the tree and the kids downstairs into the TV room, I was starting to get a migraine. I only got the sketchiest introduction to the aunt and uncle, and never did find out which kid was Jessie and which one was Jamie. Things got crazier with the arrival of Brian's sister and her husband. I was juggling so many names and relations that I told Brian I thought everyone should be wearing those "Hi, My Name Is" tags.

Once we were all sitting around the table, my confusion didn't matter. The family embraced me into the fold with a few embarrassing ghosts of Christmases past, like when Brian lost his pants during a Christmas pageant when he was eight, or how the uncle threw up in the middle of a Brealyzer test one boozy Christmas Eve, and once I added my own Christmas story from when I was thirteen—opening up my present from Santa and finding sexy see-through black lingerie and a set of sensuous massage oils instead of the Sunday dress I was expecting—it was like I was a full-fledged member of the family. No one asked me about my parents or why I'd chosen to spend the holidays there instead of back in Nova Scotia, and, toward the end of the night, when the kids had been packed off to bed and we were all down in the basement drinking glasses of molasses rum that Brian's brother-in-law had brought with him from California, Brian's uncle put his arm around my shoulder and told me in a drunken slur that I was the most beautiful of all Brian's girlfriends. Everyone was silent, waiting for my response.

Shit, Terry, I said, seein' as he's only got the one, I better be!

For a beat, no one made a sound, and then the whole bunch of them broke out into gales of roaring laughter at the same time. It was a perfect way to end a perfect day, and when I finally did crash into Brian's arms down in his room, I gave him the longest, slowest, silkiest artist's dream of a kiss I'd ever given anyone in my life. Neither of us spoke for several minutes after it was over. All I could do was bury my face in his bare chest to keep from crying.

We finally got some snow on Christmas Day, enough for a coating just thick enough for Jessie and Jamie to want to go outside after they opened their presents and have a snowball fight.

Brian's mom couldn't wait to try on the leather gloves I'd got her, and his dad nearly fell over when he saw the Maple Leafs tickets. Brian bought me matching diamond earrings and a nose stud to replace the fake I usually wore. Any last lingering feelings of weirdness about taking up space in another family's Christmas were totally destroyed when I opened the little parcel from Brian's parents and saw the family photo. We really weren't sure what to get you, Brian's mom said. I hope you like it.

It's perfect, I said. And I meant it.

Is it hopeless to try to create the fateful moments that add texture and meaning to life, that seem to pop out of the cracks in the walls of reality? Are they really just there all the time and it takes a certain happy crisscrossing of time and space to bring them into focus, or maybe our minds have to be primed to receive them? Sometimes they happen just when you're looking for direction, and, suddenly, in a flash of energy that burns into you like the sun blazing through a dying cloud, you know exactly what to do. Was that how people created art? By just sitting at a typewriter or an easel, dabbling and doodling, jotting down words and ideas, until somehow, some kind of thread emerges from the jumble of colors and letters, and you're swimming with the current instead of against it? Or is it one of those accidents of fate—looking at the way the light falls across the wall of the window of the café where you're drinking your coffee, a snatch of overheard dialogue that seems to hint at an entire emotional symphony playing at an almost silent frequency, or the twist in the cords of a man's neck as he strains around to look at whoever is watching him, knowing his secret thoughts, knowing what he did just before he left the house this morning, seeing the instinctual cunning of a feral animal trapped, but calculating on a low, savage plane of where to bite, where to scratch, searching for the nearest escape route, intent only on survival.

As I stared down at the name on the marker, a shiver passed through me, jolting my skin. My mouth went dry. I tried to turn around quickly to find Brian, but my head moved in slow, tight jerks, like in a nightmare, until I felt like it was going to screw right off my neck and fall on the ground. My name was on the marker. *Sonya May 17, 1874 July 27, 1893*. No last name, no family information. Same name, same birthday. Sonya was nineteen when she died. From deep in my heart a ghost whispered. Someone—or something—had looked right into my soul and gotten a taste of cosmic déjà vu.

I started to call for Brian, but decided to keep my mouth shut. For some reason, I didn't want him to know about this. Not now. I backed away from the marker nearly tripping and falling over the stone behind me, and walked quickly back to where he was still studying his brother's grave. He was kneeling down, reading the inscription on the tombstone, and when I reached him, I knelt down beside him and took his hand in my mitten. I've got an idea.

He turned to me. Idea for what?

For the album.

Oh? He waited for me to tell him what was on my mind, but I shook my head and stood up again. What? You're not going to tell me? He stood up too, stuffing his chapped hands into the pockets of his new jacket.

Not yet. I turned to scan the rest of the graveyard, shielding my eyes from the sun. I stood still for quite a long time, long enough for Brian to give a low whistle under his breath.

You're like a queen surveying her subjects, trying to decide who to charge with treason. He joined me. What are you looking at?

I didn't answer until I was sure we were alone. I can't say anything right now. I have to & I have to think about this. My breath hitched. The world tilted on a smooth plane, the sun striking the surface of the gravestones and puddles at an oblique angle, throwing long shadows onto the ground, ornamented by the black pencil lines created by oak and elm limbs. My thoughts towered away into vast darkness. My death. The shadows of the tombstones all seemed to be pointing to a small, church-like charnel house in the farthest corner of the cemetery. I was nineteen. I was one hundred and seventeen. If only I could have told her, warned her, been there to save her. But did I really know any more than she did, now, one hundred years later? Why had she reached out from her grave and caressed my soul like that? What message was she trying to send? I remembered Brian standing at my elbow and stretched my lips in a big, phony smile. Never mind, I said, my words echoing up from the bottom of a dead well. I just got the creeps for a moment. Let's go get some coffee or something.

I could tell by the narrow look in his eyes that Brian wasn't convinced. But he shrugged and took my hand. I know this isn't the cheeriest place we've been together, but hey, it can only get better, right? He gave my lips a quick offhand swipe with his finger, and started walking back out to the main gate. I followed him, not daring to look over my shoulder at the charnel house behind me, not wanting to see a girl standing there. A girl with blank black eyes and a rotting smile.

Over a cup of black coffee and a fruit salad at Future's, I was able to get my thoughts under control. The waves of conversation around me helped bring me back to earth, and the fumes drifting over from Brian's pot of peppermint tea worked like a brain lozenge, clearing my head. But the sense of dread that had crawled over me at the graveyard was still there, pure and gleaming, and not to be pushed aside or buried. Something Crystal said to me when I first met her here, I started. She said she knew something about dying. I can't remember exactly how she put it & she saw beyond it and saw there was nothing there.

I don't get it, Brian frowned, sipping his tea.

I don't get it either. She didn't explain what she meant, and I was so weirded out I didn't want to ask her. But you know & I've really been having a hard time coming up with good lyrics. Now, I think I know what to do.

Brian slipped into his wise-guy act. Hey, you're killing me over here. Let me in on your thought processes.

Okay. I pressed my hands onto the tabletop, spreading my fingers as wide as I could.

Imagine if I did some research, on my own, and found four people who died all around the ages of nineteen or twenty, sometime in the last hundred years or so.

Yeah, so what?

But the catch is, they all have our names and birthdays.

Brian stopped, his cup midway to his slightly open lips. With a quick headshake, he put the cup back on its saucer. That's the last time I take you to a graveyard, sweetheart. It got your head all wrong.

I ignored this, instead trying to shape the vague idea growing in my mind. Four pieces. Maybe each one written for our own individual instruments. Each one about somebody who died a long time ago, with our names and birthdays.

Actual historical people?

I squeezed my eyes closed, opened them again and gazed at Brian. Yes.

Brian mocked my gaze by popping his eyes out for a second, then chuckled at me. I don't know. You're the lyricist. What if you can't find anyone that suits your purpose?

I waved my hand. I'll worry about that later. Right now, I want to get some writing done. While the fires are blazing.

Brian peered at me. You know, you're looking a little hollow under the cheekbones there. Are you eating all right?

Where were you when I was eating your mother's Christmas turkey and charming the pants off your relatives? I drained my coffee and got up to go. Well, stay here and worry about me if you have to, but I'm leaving.

Brian stood up and took our cups over to the counter. He came back and pressed a candy mint into my palm. All right, then. You get to work. I'm expecting genius out of you, you know that.

I gave him a snotty face. And genius you'll get.

We walked together to the tram line and Brian nuzzled me until the ominous visions of the cemetery were replaced by falling cherry leaves, pristine drifts of white snow, and the sweet noodlings of his guitar. I got on the tram feeling apple-cheeked, breathless, sexy and a bit stupid, waving to Brian as he stood under the awning of the grocery store across the street. His crazy hair was more mussed than usual, from my eager wanderings through it, and he was looking up from under his bangs with the little sideways smile that he wore like a merit badge. As the tram wound its way along Bloor, I fought to hang onto the sliver of existential creepiness that had lodged itself into the cracks in the walls of my mind.

CHAPTER 18

The day after Crystal landed back in Toronto, we had our first practice session of the new year. The studio was almost up and running. The layers of drywall and wall damp had been plastered up and all the cable pass-throughs had been installed. The only thing left was to set up the mixing board in the recording booth. Roger and his business partner (who I'd never met) were supposed to be bringing the console over sometime the next week. After that, the rest was up to us.

Crystal called me the morning after she landed, sounding ridiculously bright and focused for someone who'd just spent twelve hours on the plane the night before. I hope you had as amazing a holiday as I did, she sang.

Rachel was banging dishes around in the kitchen sink so loudly that I had to close my bedroom door to hear properly. I've got something, I said, grabbing my stack of poems. I don't want to say anything too much about it yet, but I got a wild brainstorm over Christmas and just went nuts.

Okay, I want you to read it out loud tonight.

I sighed and lay down on the bed, remembering my abortions on the trumpet. God, do you get off on my public humiliation?

Roger's real anxious to get us started. He's gonna put an ad in the New Music Express, to start drumming up business. She laughed, her voice a shrill bark in my ear. He's a traditionalist. When I told him we didn't have any electric instruments, he grabbed his chest like he was gonna have a seizure. He said he had to read up on recording acoustic instruments.

So you want me to actually sing? God, I'm terrified.

I say another two or three weeks getting the work sorted out, fitting in the lyrics, and just getting everything perfect. Oh, and we're getting a kit for you, on loan from the school. They were going to sell it, but I convinced them to let us rent it for five bucks a day. It's not like it's a money thing for them anyway, it was just sitting down in the basement. Crystal had a knack for just ignoring questions she didn't feel like dealing with. Be at the studio by six, she added.

Are you making us dinner, I asked in a snarky voice. But she'd already hung up.

When I got to the studio, the other three were already there. I'd been holed up in my room writing for nearly a week, not going out except for necessities, not seeing anyone. Brian watched me throw my bag on the floor, laughing as my keys and change purse spun out onto the floor. He helped me pick my stuff up while Vince and Crystal went over a sheet of music together. Why haven't you called me? I asked without looking at him.

I thought you wanted to be alone for a while. And I did call you once, a few days ago. There was no answer. Are you not answering your phone?

I crammed a pack of breath mints in my bag. I got something.

As if she'd only been pretending to listen to Vince, Crystal looked up when I said that. Okay, everyone. She slid off her chair and onto the floor. Gather round. Sonya's going to read to us.

What?

Crystal arranged herself on the floor Indian-style, nestled between Vince and Brian, hands folded and elbows resting on her knees. She was looking up at me with a show-me expression. Her bangs were sheared straight across her forehead, in a severe pageboy, and she was wearing a black sweater and jeans. All she needed was a beret and she could have gone to Karl Lagerfeld's funeral. Vince and Brian seemed slightly uncomfortable with Crystal under their arms. I stood in front of them, rattling pages, clearing my throat, and wishing desperately that I were somewhere else. Montana, maybe. I regretted not rewriting my poems on clean paper—now, along with being stared at ominously, I'd have to struggle with incoherent scribbles, cross-outs, underlines, and ink smudges. I could feel an icy trail of sweat slither down my armpit.

This is my first public reading, I started to say, but Crystal stopped me with an abrupt headshake. Okay. Can I explain a little bit what I was after with these poems?

Please do, Brian said after a moment's silence.

I want to say I didn't think much about how the lyrics work with the music. I tried fitting them together, but I after a while I just couldn't concentrate anymore, and let the words come on their own. So I don't know how it'll play. But basically, I did some poking around through microfiches and stuff, and I found a few people with our first names who all died when they were nineteen. I glanced around nervously, expecting some kind of negative reaction, but the three of them just looked at each other and then back at me, waiting for me to continue.

I also want to say that I didn't write the poems based on anything specific about us, so any resemblance to actual living persons is completely unintentional, blah blah blah. I cleared my throat again. In no particular order.

Sonya (b. Aug. 10, 1886, d. Nov. 29, 1905)

Clocks make most treacherous friends
 On May nights dancing at star ends.
 The hours pass into depths unseen
 And into the fragments of our dreams,
 Leaving only the cracks of age
 On our faces, Time's footworn stage.
 And when at last the play is run,
 We're unmade, and all our knots undone.

But only when we're holding hands
 Can we conjure other lands
 To fly to, escape the ties of home

The shadowed eyes, the family tomb,
 The rancid threats and thudding blows
 Of true love's bitterest hated foes.
 We're only children of our parents now,
 But soon the grass will bend its brow,

The winds will turn to ashen pillows,
 Tattered to shreds in the limbs of willows.
 The future lays bare our only path,
 And if we're to survive the coming wrath,
 I pray love guides you to this spot
 And shows you what your faith has wrought
 These lines your soul has torn from me.
 A love sublime my gift to thee.

I read all four poems without stopping for a drink of water, keeping my eyes focused on the pages in my hand. I knew I sounded robotic, the tremor in my voice hitching on every line, but I just wanted to get through the poems before I drowned in floss sweat. I wasn't even really interested in anyone's opinion about what I'd written. Instead of waiting to hear what the guys said, I stuffed the papers back into my bag and unwrapped a cold pita sandwich.

I think we can work with that, Vince said. It's romantic, but it fits.

I think you really got into the minds of those people, Brian said. It's simple and direct. Not fancy.

I peeked at Crystal, but her face was closed off and unreadable. She was looking over the sheets of music and tapping her pencil on her knee. Her hair was draped loosely over her shoulders and, while I watched her, she grabbed a handful and twisted it savagely into a ponytail. When she looked back up at me, her face was working and coiling the way it was when I first saw her walking up the aisle toward me, after her recital. The Crystal in my poem had been a young model for an older portrait artist. Her musings tied passion and art up with lust, delighting in her role as muse and inflating her importance to the artist she posed for. When she's replaced by a younger girl, she runs off, crying, into the woods. Had I touched a nerve?

&I mean, they're simple stories, I think, Brian was saying to Vince. Just kids full of hopes and dreams, you know, passionate emotions. They're on the verge of living, of spreading their wings.

But they're dead, Crystal murmured. That quieted everyone. I sat on the floor, reflectively munching my sandwich.

That's & creepy, Vince said. You don't mention anyone dying in the poems.

Of course not, Crystal barked. That's what the music's for. She suddenly stood up and opened her violin case. We could add some reverb or echo. I'll have to talk to Roger about that. She took out her violin and began tuning. C'mon, guys, let's get your asses in gear. Vacation time's over.

Man, you can be a hardass sometimes, Vince growled, but he set up his bass all the same.

No drums for you, Sonya, Crystal said. You're gonna sing.

I gasped in disbelief. No way. I'm not singing, nah-uh.

Crystal set her violin carefully on the floor and stared at it, as if she were trying to keep her emotions under control. Then she flicked her eyes up to mine in a whiplash glare. Suddenly, there were just the two of us in the room. Our eyes locked together. I don't really know you, do I? I don't know what's inside of you, to write those kinds of things. Some kind of pain, maybe. I want to hear it. Hear if it's real. So sing.

On rubber legs, I stood up and dug out my poems again. What was she looking for? I smoothed out the creases in the paper as well as I could, and tried to calm my nerves.

Crystal set her metronome for the first number Sonya. Just stay at the same tempo this time. We haven't practiced together in two weeks so I wanna just get the kinks out. Yeah, you guys! Our singer needs us now. She gestured at me with her bow. We'll give you a lead-in. Four bars. Okay, on four &

Singing my lines in front of Crystal was the hardest thing I'd ever done. Everything I learned in choir practice disappeared the moment I started to sing my own words. My voice sounded cracked and detuned, crawling around on top of the music, without fitting in anywhere. It didn't help to hear Crystal, who was at my elbow, making strange mutterings and murmurs. I couldn't tell if she was trying to give me instructions, throw me off-course, or she was just making noises to herself. When I finished singing, my nerves were so shattered that I could scarcely keep from crying. Not sure what to do, I jammed my poems back into my bag and walked quickly over to the farthest corner, not wanting to speak in case my voice started hitching.

Brian knew something was wrong. He strummed a few chords on his guitar and came over to where I'd crouched down, pretending to be looking for something in my bag. Brian knelt down beside me and put his hand on my shoulder. I tensed up. He took his hand away, but only to brush my hair back behind my ear. You're something special. I didn't know that's what you sounded like. You got some power. I know it wasn't easy.

I looked at him. He seemed to be searching for something else to tell me. I'm okay, I said. Really. The ice is broken now.

Look, you know Crystal's got a lot of baggage. But I'll tell you this she's the difference between this band being a hobby and being a definite possibility. Look around. He gestured at the newly finished studio. We're going to make a record here. That's what working with Crystal means.

I couldn't answer him. Vince came over and stood behind Brian. I'm gonna order some pizza. You guys want in?

On that note, the process began. The drum kit arrived the day after the mixing board, and from there, Roger wanted us in the studio practicing whenever we could shave a few hours from our class timetable. To ease the burden, I opted out of a spring recital, taking two accompanist jobs instead, and scheduling them for late in the spring, so I could forget about them for a while.

The day-to-day routine was a little trickier to manage. I'd gotten through the first semester without skipping a class, but it was going to be a lot harder this time around. My teachers knew my name now and had warmed up to me over the first few months, with Dr. Lalande especially, toning down her frustration with me. Now, all she had to say to get results, was, Maybe we should try something a little easier. Then, I'd grit my teeth and get the work done. God, I was still such a sucker for that!

The strange thing was how secretive Crystal told us to be about our recording sessions. I couldn't understand why her professors kept her under such tight scrutiny. If she was doing her work, why would they care about what she was doing on the side? It wasn't really my business, but for someone who could talk for hours at a time, Crystal could be maddeningly opaque. My life is a secret world, she told me once. And no one can get into it. Not my friends, my professors, lovers, no one.

One night toward the end of January, the four of us were over at Crystal's apartment, having a few drinks after a frustrating rehearsal session. After Crystal had poured the three of us a glass of wine, she held up her own glass of cranberry juice and was about to make a toast when the phone rang. A frown creased her face, and she answered the phone with a puzzled, Hello? When she heard the voice on the other end, she held the phone out to Vince. It's Rachel, she said.

While Vince talked on the phone, Crystal seemed to have forgotten what she wanted to say, throwing nasty looks over her shoulder at Vince. Brian asked her what was wrong.

She shouldn't have my number, Crystal replied, sipping her juice.

Why not? I asked.

She waved an irritated hand. Just don't tell anyone else, okay?

By now I was getting fed up with all the subterfuge. It wasn't like she'd explicitly told us not to give strangers her number, not that I would have anyway. But what could possibly be the problem? Rachel wasn't a stranger, either. I also remembered a couple of times that I'd passed friends in the hallway at school, and they asked me how my recording was going. I couldn't remember telling them about it, or even if I'd told them at all. Maybe they'd heard from Brian or Vince, or talked to Rachel, or read something written on the bathroom wall. How should I know? No one could stop up all the cracks. Getting paranoid about it was pointless.

Vince came back over to the table and drained his wine glass. Rachel's all fucked up about her brother. He got into a car accident, so now he's laid up in the hospital.

Jesus, Brian said, alarmed.

It's not that serious, said Vince. He busted up his legs, and he's got a bad concussion but he'll live. But I've got to drive Rachel out there.

Where's the hospital? asked Brian.

Hamilton. I think I'll have to skip school tomorrow. He pulled his leather jacket on.

Crystal was looking up at him with a strange, almost eager expression. Does that mean you're skipping practice too?

Vince looked at her as if he hadn't heard her correctly. What'd you say?

Are you skipping practice tomorrow? she repeated, enunciating each word. Vince kept staring, speechless.

Brian spoke up. You know, he started slowly, I can't speak for everyone around this table, but I'm prepared to accept that excuse.

Crystal ignored him. She didn't even seem to know he was there. You can't miss practice tomorrow, Vince, she said, her bottomless eyes shining in the dim light.

Everyone seemed to be holding their breath, waiting for Vince to lash out or tell her what she could with her practice session. But all he managed to croak out was, Fine, I'll be there. Then he turned on his heels and left so fast that I thought I felt a tailwind.

Crystal watched him go, her eyes never leaving the back of his leather jacket. And don't tell anyone else my number, all right? Vince's only answer was a door slam.

She turned back to her cranberry juice, wearing what looked like a victory smirk. I burned to say something. Crystal, you got some serious privacy issues. I wonder why? Are you wanted by the cops?

She traced a line of condensation with her fingernail, her head leaning slightly to one side. She seemed to be gathering strength. What is your biggest fear? I mean, when you're lying alone in bed at night, all your defenses are down, and there's no one around to talk to. What do you worry about?

The mood around the table suddenly darkened. Brian swirled his wine, shrugged and smiled, as if he'd never heard the question before. I was thinking deeply, thinking about Dad fumbling around in the dark, listening to Hank Williams. I thought about the rain-scarred Paesanella sign, my mother in Vancouver, my brother twisting in the wind somewhere in Halifax, me coming home to an empty house. I felt like I'd been alone most of my life.

You know what I'm afraid of? I said. Brian leaned closer. I'm afraid that one of these days, I'm going to bump into one of my professors, and he's going to be looking at a sheet. And he says to me, Sonya, we've got a serious problem here. We never accepted your application. You're going to have to leave the conservatory. And everyone—you, Brian, Rachel—everyone would start acting like they'd never known me. That I was just some weirdo who'd snuck past security or something. And I'd have to go home.

Crystal let my words settle around the table before asking Brian the same question. My biggest fear, he said, stroking his chin. I guess ever since I was a kid, I've been afraid of dogs.

No, no, Crystal said. Not phobias.

In that case, I guess it would have to be fear of failure. Fucking up. I know, it sounds lame. But it's true. And what about you, he said to Crystal, when she made no comment.

Me? She looked into my eyes, as if I'd asked the question. That's an easy one. I'm afraid of losing my mind. My father was schizophrenic. It's congenital, so I've heard. Her voice wavered. I get these moments—maybe you noticed—when I get kind of locked in. Her fingers rose to touch the scar under her eye. I didn't think she was aware of what she was doing. I get nightmares a lot, almost every night. I'm lucky if I get three or four hours of sleep a night. But I've gotta push myself, because— Tears started leaking from her eyes into her glass. —and because things may start going wrong soon, and I just want to get things done.

Suddenly, she drew in a deep breath and let it out slowly. I think you guys should go now. I'll see you tomorrow.

Brian nodded. Okay, he said. We'll leave you alone. We got up and put our coats on.

Crystal waited until I had my hand on the doorknob. Sonya, I never told you, I know. But I've been thinking a lot about your poems. I looked back at her. Her head was turned away from me, but I thought I could see her watching my reflection in the glass door of the balcony.

I don't think you know what you wrote. But they're a lot more complex than you think. Really deep. You've got talent.

Thanks, I said, not sure what else to add. Brian and I left her there, staring at the blackness out the balcony door.

Since Christmas, I'd taken to spending a lot more nights at Brian's house. His parents seemed delighted with my company, enlisting me in all kinds of projects, like renovating the rec room and helping unload a truckful of wood into the cellar. Both Derek and Carol were big on family cooperation, and since I'd spent Christmas with them, they simply thought of me as another member of the family. Derek took to treating me like he did Brian, contradicting things he said two minutes before and arguing with me about it or acting like I was speaking Swahili. Carol kept my ears buzzing with a steady stream of gossip about what was going on behind the scenes at U of T. Since none of the gossip involved anyone I knew, I came to thinking of the entire academic staff of the university as a soap opera that I never tuned into often enough to follow the characters and plotlines.

I felt most comfortable working with Brian on my lyrics, singing them softly in his bedroom while he accompanied me on guitar. I loved the way we worked together, slowly, picking at things for a while and then taking a break, going back to work when we were both ready. He was able to key in to how to best weave my vocals into the songs and take his minor adjustments back to the studio to listen to the others' opinions on our work.

Like everyone else, Roger deferred to Crystal's judgment a lot of the time, letting her dictate the pace of the sessions, but balancing her perfectionism with his own brand of passive-aggressive crowd control. There would be times when we'd let a jam go too far, and Roger would come out from behind the glass, shaking his head. If that's what you guys want to do, fine with me, he'd say. It's your album. Then he'd go back into the booth without waiting for us to answer, and I knew we'd have to tighten up.

Vince chafed the most under the strain. He was always the first to pack up his gear and leave the studio at the end of a session, which made Crystal madder and madder. She would follow him out with a baleful stare, and when he was gone, she'd go back to her Chinese take-out, or whatever we were eating for dinner, and make comments about how badly he'd played. Her complaints never made sense to me. I thought he was doing fine, but Crystal could pick up mistakes that no one else heard, and she kept them all filed away in her computer brain, so that she could slap Vince with them at the next session.

For myself, I was surprised that I'd held up as well as I had. I was overdubbing three different parts—vocals, drums, and keyboard—and even though the drumming was being used

more for texture than propulsion, I still had to figure out how to drum and sing at the same time. But Roger loved the drummer-as-vocalist idea, and he kept fitting me with more mikes to catch as much ambient sound as he could, down to putting my ragged breathing on tape. When we listened to it during playback, I sounded like I was being chased, and my screams of fear came out as lyrics. I hated listening to myself, but the others really liked it. Vince said it fit the creepy mood like Dracula fit a coffin.

We started mixing down on February 21st, just as the sun broke through the sky and started melting the last few scraps of snow. Crystal had vetoed most of Brian's interesting ideas, like knocking snooker balls together and running through heavy reverb, or tearing paper close to the microphone, but she did open the door during a heavy wind and let him record a tunnel effect. Roger subtly mixed the sound back into the piece, where it added a spooky underlay to my vocals. Other than that, Crystal wanted to keep the sound as pure as possible, so that all the instrumental interplay could be heard. Vince and Roger stayed in the booth for hours at a time, putting the finishing touches on the master tapes, and every time they played back to us, I could hear the sound getting clearer and instruments meshing better.

On March 1st, six of us gathered around in the studio—the band, Roger, and Rachel—to listen to what we hoped would be the final mix. We turned out all the lights except for a single candle in the middle of the floor, and sat down around it. With the first haunting strains of Crystal's violin, I leaned closer to the flame, my body still, my hand in Brian's, and just let the music wash over me. I listened especially carefully to my vocals, which had been treated to sound as if each word were encased in ice. I'd been more concerned with fitting the lines strategically into the music, instead of trying to sing and use my voice as another instrument, so the lyrics took on more of a spoken-word flavor. But I loved the way they floated through the mix, disappearing for five or more minutes at a time before reappearing at some strange U-turn in the music.

Roger and Vince had done an incredible job stitching the pieces together so one flowed into the other in a continuous web of sound. The effect was hypnotic, yet heartbreakingly fragile. Although nothing was explicitly stated in the lyrics, the piece had a ghost-town feel, timeless in a way that I couldn't describe. My voice still sounded old, but somehow it fit perfectly, more like a found artifact than a true singing voice.

When it ended, with a few carefully plucked notes from Vince's bass that echoed Crystal's opening measure, everyone sat perfectly still. The only sounds in the room were the repeated clicks from the master tape and the wind blowing outside. Then, Rachel sniffed and wiped her eyes. I just don't know how to feel, she whispered. I & She stopped, unable to go on.

Roger stood up to turn the lights back on. Brian blew out the candle and leaned back, smiling with trembling lips. Everyone waited for him to speak. Ladies and gentlemen, he said softly, I think we just made our first album.

The party lasted the rest of the night. Nothing mattered except the endless flood of wine and beer and the tape sitting on the spools in the mixing booth. Everything else was forgotten. School was a memory that belonged to someone else. At laughed at Roger's jokes without

knowing why I was laughing. Vince told a story of how Brian once tried to pimp him out, as a joke, on Yonge St. Roger and Brian improved a song called *It's Only Murder If You Mean It*, and we all tossed band names around until three in the morning. But none of it mattered. Everything was shadow and echo and when I woke up the next morning, my tongue glued to the roof of my mouth, I had a terrifying moment of utter displacement, just like the moment before a long freefall.

I was alone in the studio. Sunlight beamed in through the door window, hitting me full in the face. For some reason, an image of the homeless man appeared in my mind, staring out at the lake between the cracks in the city wave upon wave beating against the shoreline to a cosmic work song seeing nothing that was before him, hearing nothing anyone said to him except the call of the water, a call not to action but to what? I shifted around until I could find Crystal curled up on the couch. As I stared at her, she opened her eyes and gazed back at me for a few seconds, her face composed and neutral, and then closed her eyes. Had she seen through my reflection again? I remembered what she'd said to the couple at the café: *I'm sorry, I didn't see you there.* Now I knew how ghosts felt.

CHAPTER 19

At eight o'clock the next morning, Brian called with the news. Roger had gotten us a gig at the AWOL Gallery the following Saturday night. Awesome, I said, once I managed to shake the sleep out of my head. What's the AWOL Gallery?

It's this cool little art gallery down on Ossington. Roger got us a gig there. And I want you to be wide awake for this—he sent our demo to Marquis!

Great! You know what I'm going to ask next, don't you?

Brian's sigh whistled into my ear. Marquis is a classical label. But they've got a lot of avant garde bands on their roster too. You never know. If she likes us, we might &

Brian, we don't even have a name for the band yet.

He snorted. Who cares? Listen, why don't we get together at Future's for lunch, and you can name us. Sound like a plan?

Fine, I yawned. I'll see you then. I hung up, wanting to crash out again for another hour, but every time I tried to force my eyes closed, they sprang open again like a window blind with its cord snapped. A tiny flicker of possibility sparked to life in the back of my mind—could I really be thinking of doing this for a *living*? I threw off my covers, spun around and slid my feet into my slippers. Rachel was in the kitchen, cooking up a mess of god-knew-what, but it smelled good and I was suddenly ravenous.

I padded down the hall and poked my head into the kitchen. Rachel was frying up a panful of hash browns, with a skillet of scrambled eggs on the side. Good, you're up, she said, giving my bedhead a once-over. Sit down. Coffee and o.j. are on the table. I didn't know how you liked your eggs, so I scrambled them. Hope you like 'em.

She slid the eggs onto a plate and scooped up a spoonful of potatoes. Chin in hand, I watched her put my breakfast together, smiling at the way she kept muttering to herself about where she put the utensils. When everything was on the table, she sat across from me and watched me eat, a mischievous grin on her face. Besides the potatoes being a little hard in the center, it was actually pretty good. Okay, I'll bite. What's this all about?

It's just my way of congratulating you, said Rachel, pouring herself some orange juice. Vince said something to me last night. About you.

I looked up, fork halfway to my lips. What did he say about me?

He said you and Brian looked perfect together. I could see that last night. Other people are saying it too.

I kept my voice toneless. Oh yeah?

Yeah, the way you were holding hands and looking into each other's eyes. I could totally see it. Vince is right.

And that's worth breakfast? I laughed. Who am I to complain, eh?

Vince cheated on me before. Don't let on I told you, Rachel said, raking her hands through her frizzy hair, which she'd been letting grow in all directions since Christmas. Her face was puffy from fatigue and she'd tried half-heartedly to cover a fresh outbreak of acne on her cheeks with too much foundation. You don't want to hear all that, so let's forget it. I just want to tell you I thought you guys were amazing last night. You're all really talented. She started carrying the dirty dishes over to the sink.

Just a second, I said, draining my glass. I'll wash up. You go take a shower. I've gotta meet Brian for lunch—he said we've got a gig at some place called the AWOL Gallery. Does that mean anything to you?

She thought for a moment, a dirty pan in each hand. The name sounds vaguely familiar, but I've never been there.

Well, we'll be there next weekend, so you gotta come and give us some moral support.

Ha! Like you guys need it. She stepped back to let me finish clearing the table.

Okay, then you wanna do dinner tonight?

Not sure. I might be back too late. I'll call.

Okay. And she shut the bathroom door behind her.

After I finished the dishes, I read poetry until it was time to go.

Brian was already drinking his tea when he bustled into Future's at half-past twelve. Before I even sat down with my coffee, Brian showed me a large, black-and-white photograph. When I took a closer look, I recognized the charnel house from the cemetery we visited together. The photograph was artfully blurred and it looked like someone had scraped nails across the surface, making strange silvery lines all over it. Did you take this?

Yeah, he enthused. I took the picture, but I gave it to a photographer friend of mine for the treatment. Nice, huh?

Nice. Is it for me? I held out my hand, but Brian snatched the picture back.

No, this is for the album cover. So did you come up with a name for us yet?

Actually, I did. I pulled out a scrap of paper and showed him the lines I'd written there:

And hiding from darkness in barns
They can be grownups now
And the murderer's ash tray is more easily
The lake a lilac cube.

He looked up. Yours? I shook my head. So what's the name? I pointed to the last two words I'd written. Lilac Cube? What's that mean?

Oh, come on, Brian, you should know better than to ask a question like that! I grabbed his arm. We're the Lilac Cube. Say it—we're the Lilac Cube.

The Lilac Cube. He rolled the words around, tasting them. The Lilac Cube. You know, I like it. Thought-provoking, yet meaningless. It's a deal.

I leaned over and gave him a sloppy kiss, knowing how much he hated coffee breath. That s for being supportive, I said. But aren t you jumping the gun a little, with the album cover?

You want the long answer or the short answer?

Short answer.

No. He finished his tea and checked the time. Do you want to go over to the Wax Museum and have a look around?

I took his hand and kissed it, running my fingers over the blond hairs and tracing the calluses on his fingertips. Except for the calluses his hands were small and delicate, hardly a man s hands at all, and as I sat there, I felt time slow down to let me just sit and caress his hands and not worry about somewhere I had to be or something I had to do. Brian seemed to recognize this, and kept silent, just looking into my eyes until I was ready to come back to him. When I finally smiled at him, he said. Lost you for a moment.

We spent the afternoon browsing for old vinyl at the Wax Museum, competing with each other to see who could find the most outlandish album covers, and playing spot-the-narc with the dreadlocked clerk. Brian bought a couple of old blues records, while I took nearly an hour deciding between two Cure albums before choosing the one with the more colorful jacket. Walking arm-in-arm along Bloor, we bumped into Vince on his way to my place. He seemed in better spirits than I d seen him in a long time, grabbing us both in a bear hug and asking Brian about the weekend gig. Sonya s got our name, Brian said, pointing at me.

Oh? I ve got hear this. He crossed his arms and gave me a playfully forbidding glare. Out with it.

The Lilac Cube.

His brows darkened as he tried the name out a couple of times. Then he brightened.

Well, it doesn t really matter what the name is, does it? My face fell. I m kidding, I m kidding, he said, smacking my arm. It s fine. Where are you guys going now?

We were just killing time, I said, waiting for the sun to shine.

Actually, I was thinking of taking her over to Carlton to see a movie. Any idea what s playing?

None at all. But I ve gotta run. I think I forgot Rachel s birthday or something. He strode off, nearly skipping along the sidewalk, arms swinging at his sides. I watched him until he disappeared in a knot of people.

Brian looped his arm in mine again, and tugged me towards the theatre, but I resisted for a moment. What s the matter? he asked. Don t you want to see a movie?

I studied him for a moment the devilish grin under the mop of sunny blond hair, the raised eyebrows that made him look like he d either just told a joke or just heard one, the dimples at the corners of his lips. The way he stood there, waiting for me to follow him like he could wait forever, radar-alert and knowing all he had to do was hold out his hand and I d come, like a little girl at a carnival, afraid to lose her father in the jostling crowd. Just like that.

But why not? We looked perfect together. Yeah, we do, I said out loud.

Brian just looked at me, now a touch of impatience in his eyebrows. Are you coming or not? he asked.

I gave him my brightest smile. I'm coming. Let's go.

The gallery crowd took their seats as the lights went down. There was silence as we tuned up. Crystal took the microphone and tapped it. A whine of feedback screamed out into the small makeshift performance hall, but she didn't flinch. We're the Lilac Cube and this piece is called *Threnody*, she said, her voice harsh and dusty. And this is our first posthumous performance. She stepped back from the microphone and counted off.

We played the record note for note, wanting the crowd to get the full force without breaks or stops. Crystal glided us from one piece to the next on her violin, intoning the name of each one, and hacking at the strings so crazily during her long solos that sweat from her hair was hitting me in the face. It was the first time we'd ever played the whole record straight through, and it was the most intense performance I'd ever been a part of. The lyrics welled up like a volcano and burst from my lungs in jagged moans. Brian threw off his usual gentle style and tore at the strings of his guitar with a ferocity I'd never heard before. Vince plucked his bass in a demonic frenzy, and he and Crystal turned their argument in the middle of the piece named for him into a heated battle that raged for nearly six minutes, fighting for the possession of Brian's soul. In the swirl of strings and drumbeats, my voice reached a howl that seared my own ears and disappeared into a throaty croak on the last word—alive. Crystal brought the set to a shuddering end with her slashing violin chords, each scrape of her bow digging into its note, making it cry out against its own decay. When the last echo died in the heavy air, the crowd gave out a collective gasp, and started slamming their hands together, their shouts mingling into a single appreciative voice.

For two hours after the set, people lingered, sipping wine and munching on the cheese and biscuits at the buffet table, sometimes stopping by the table where the five of us were sitting, to congratulate us on the show and gush about the anachronistic existentialism of the lyrics.

They're, like, deliberately melodramatic, one guy told me, but the way you sang them was so &—he pulled on his braided beard, trying to think of the exact word—gone. I don't know how else to explain it. Like the characters were already dead, they knew it, and they were screaming out against it. He held out the lyric sheet for me to sign.

When the guy had drifted back over to the buffet table, I buried my face in my hands and groaned. Brian gave me a reassuring shoulder squeeze. You'll get used to it, he said. My advice—charge by the syllable.

Crystal suddenly dragged her fork across the surface of her plate, making my hackles bolt upright. Rachel, she said, without turning to face her, could you leave us alone for a couple minutes?

Rachel looked around at the rest of us in surprise, shrugged, and stood up. I gotta go pee anyway. She tipped her glass to her lips and stumbled a little against Vince's arm, spilling

a few drops of wine. I'll leave you amazing musicians to talk about whatever it is amazing musicians talk about. She started to walk away, then turned back and leaned into Vince, giving him a loud, wet kiss, and reached down between his legs. I couldn't see what she was doing, but Vince's shoulders tensed up and he gripped her tightly around the waist. She left again, but not after giving us all a little smile.

Crystal waited until the bathroom door was fully closed behind Rachel. You know I'm supposed to be working on a symphony. That's what they want from me. I'm holed up with Dr. Stellarton and Barberi every day, in the same room. They want it done and ready for the orchestra to perform by this time next year. And I want to do it. It's what I've been working my whole life towards. But I'm getting headaches again & I'm this close to quitting the school. Just quitting the school, flying back to Germany and I don't know, just playing by myself on a riverbank somewhere and never seeing anyone. She looked at me. You know what I'm talking about. She stared into my eyes until she found what she was looking for there and nodded, as if I'd agreed with her. But Roger thinks we have a good chance to get a deal with Marquis Records. He's meeting with a couple label reps tonight. If we do, then we're going to have to make a lot of decisions. Like how far we want to go with this.

Brian, Vince and I looked at each other to see who would speak first. I took the plunge. What the hell? I love being at school, but working with you guys has been the most incredible kick I've ever had. I threw my arms around Brian and Crystal. We're recording artists now. I thinned my voice to a music critic's snotty drone. Pretentious young recording artists The Lilac Cube have released their debut album. Everyone, duck and cover. That got some laughs.

Brian ran a hand through my hair. I go where you go, he said. I can't speak for Vince, but I haven't had much trouble juggling the band with my school work. I mean, it helps to have my pedigree, I know that. But Vince and I have been accompanying each other for two years now. I'm sure we can double dip. He looked over at Vince. What do you say?

Vince reached across the table and shook Brian's hand. Count me in.

So, Crystal began, raising her glass, we're all one now. And I'm sorry to send Rachel away like that, but this is about us. She touched Vince's glass first. Body. She touched Brian's next. Heart. Then held up her own. Mind. And finally, touched mine. Soul. We drank.

Rachel came back to the table just as we put our glasses down. You missed a very strange toast, Vince told her, rubbing her stomach.

I think you better take me home, she said, fingering his hair playfully. C'mon, pack your bass up.

Allright. God! I'm coming. Great gig tonight, guys.

Yeah, great gig, Rachel agreed. She was pulling on his arm. He let her drag him off with a rueful wave at us as they left.

Crystal finished her wine. I guess it's my turn. She glanced down at her watch.

Roger'll be calling soon. She started pulling on her coat, then suddenly reached over to grab us by the hands. The flame from the candle flickered across her dark eyes and gave her scar a lightning-streak glow. I love you guys! The fires were dancing in her eyes, jittering with every breath she took. She leaned back, looking into the candle flame now. I wish my sister

was here, she said softly, to herself. None of us spoke for a minute. Her eyes turned slowly up to me. When are we going to get together again?

I don't know. I looked at Brian. Tomorrow?

Okay. I have to go now. She tied her hood up and bent down to pick up her violin case.

Brian and I said goodbye to her and watched her leave. She walked slowly to the door, like a girl searching for a lost diamond ring when she knew deep in her heart that it was gone forever. Strange girl, said Brian in a low voice. Strange, strange girl. He slid around to the other side of the table so he could face me.

The wine was starting to hit me, putting me a nice, low-watt trance. Crystal had forgotten her red pack of cigarettes on the table. I put one between my lips and stared at Brian over the candle flame. It took him a beat, but he got the message and held the candle to the tip of my cigarette. Puffing thoughtfully, I listened to the chilly electronic mood music coming from the speakers. Only a few stragglers remained now, lingering over the buffet crackers and cold cuts. I looked back at Brian. Thick clouds of smoke wreathed his face, and in the yellow glow of the candle he looked like a Victorian seducer, looming out from the gaslit fog of a London night. My heart lurched. The music added an earthy edge to my languid wine haze, and I leaned across the table until I could almost rub noses with him. I want to dance.

Without saying anything, he stood up and held out his hand. I put out my half-smoked cigarette, and took his hand, letting him guide me into his arms. Together, we shuffled slowly to the music, my chin resting against his shoulder, lips curled in dreamy bliss. One by one, people came over to congratulate us as we danced. Soon, Brian and I were the only ones left in the gallery. We kept dancing as the lights dimmed, the music stopped, and the owner told us she was closing up for the night. Brian pulled back so he could study my face in the dying light. I love you, he said, brushing my cheek with his fingers.

I didn't answer, just smiled and put my cheek back on his shoulder. Behind him, a bar of moonlight from the window fell on the floor, and I gently pushed us back until we were both standing in it, bathed in cool white light. In my mind, I watched us from our table. A statue of two ghosts locked in a final embrace, knowing that the moment had come for the man to ride the moonlight and leave the woman alone in the cold winter snow. Hands slipped from shoulders and the two bodies broke contact. He kissed her one last time. From my chair, I closed my eyes and turned away, not wanting to see the end.

VITA

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