

A close-up photograph of a person's hands playing a blue electric guitar. The person is wearing a dark pinstriped jacket and blue jeans. The background is a bright yellow-to-orange gradient. The title 'FEEL THE MUSIC' is overlaid in large white letters.

FEEL THE MUSIC

A Rock and Roll Story of Determination

Steven Richard Hoffman

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<http://www.feelthemusicbook.com>

“The magic’s in the music and the music’s in me.”

-- John Sebastian

1

Garrett Grimes loved to crash parties. As Garrett and his shock rock band “Rebel” shoved through the crowded living room, Adam stared suspiciously. Rebel could only mean trouble for Adam’s rock band, Blue Denim.

His music pulled Adam back into his passionate world of melody and lyric. As he sang, his wavy blonde hair bounced and sweat fell to his white dress shirt and faded blue jeans. In his mind, the sounds became whirling notes of different colors that rode a ribbon of scales through the audience. He precisely executed each guitar note, his blue eyes bright and his smooth voice flowing.

At the song’s instrumental, Adam bent strings, twanged his whammy bar, and pushed his black Stratocaster to its limits. Only when he played did Adam feel his true self. When he played, he viewed the world in a surreal world of light and sound; he lost himself in the melody and swam in a euphoric state. Intoxicated by the music, his addiction craved one more lyric, one more note.

To Adam’s right, Mike’s freckled-face beamed with fascination; his skittering fingers typed electronic keyboard notes as his fire-red hair flickered like flames. On his left, Gabe solemnly swayed his tall and lean frame to the rhythm of the bass. His smoke-black hair was messy and glistening; his sunken eyes dark and serious. Just beneath their backdrop, scrawny Brad in a sleeveless shirt and sunglasses drummed a thundering heartbeat.

They were behind schedule because Brad had arrived almost an hour late—an action that had not surprised any of them.

“Butler, we should be starting right now,” Gabe had said, pointing to his watch. “Where have you been?”

“It’s not my fault. My car wouldn’t start,” Brad had replied and lowered his eyes, his breath clashing of mints and beer.

Gabe folded his arms and scowled. “This is a paid show! How can we make any money if you can’t be anywhere on time?” Brad coiled as if ready to orally strike back, but Adam intervened and insisted that they all help unpack Brad’s drums.

But that had been a million notes ago; now there was music and dancing and—a cute, dark-haired girl trying to capture Adam’s attention. Denise Austin’s suggestive gazes were even more blatant than those during American History class. Under different circumstances, Adam might have found Denise attractive. But women, his band agreed, were a time-consuming diversion from their music. And with that thought, Adam looked away.

Huddled in the far corner, their four Rebel foes glanced around and exchanged exclusive whispers. Their pierced and tattooed appearances were contrary to this luxury home on Boulder’s Lake Valley Golf Course. Their shaggy-haired leader, Garrett Grimes, was on parole for a handful of petty crimes. The band’s street-smart lead vocalist, Lucy Parker, never missed flaunting her bleached-blond hair and the she-devil tattoo sitting above her left breast. Frank and Joey, both sophomore dropouts, aimlessly followed Garrett around like baby chicks who didn’t know any better.

As the song’s end drew near, Adam pulled his harmonica from his back pocket and passionately inserted the final poignant sounds. During the applause, he quickly exchanged his Stratocaster for his electric acoustic and drifted into the soft prelude of the next song.

“Thank you,” Adam said. “Happy 18th birthday, Brianna Duncan, and hello to all of you. We are Blue Denim.” Scattered clapping made him beam as Garrett Grimes sneered toward the spectators. “This is a slow song we’ve recently finished. It’s called ‘Friend to the End.’”

The dance area multiplied with couples, among them Boulder Valley’s football captain Bobby Wilmar and his girlfriend, Angel Irving. Bobby’s chiseled nose and penetrating eyes were his ticket to any girl’s heart. Angel, both Head Cheerleader and Homecoming Queen, was undeniably the most popular girl at school. The cafeteria gossiped how Bobby and Angel would get married someday; both from affluent families, both bursting with brains and beauty and bucks. But Adam knew better.

Angel folded her arms over Bobby’s shoulders and he clutched her slender waist. As the music changed the ambiance in the room, each couple swayed to the sedate rhythm.

*The first time that I saw you
I’d known you for a thousand years*

*And in your eyes I knew
I'd dried a million of your tears . . .*

Denise squeezed herself and a partner into a space just below Adam. He felt her eyes beckoning his view, so he purposely avoided visual contact. Adam knew Denise would incorrectly interpret even a friendly smile as romantic interest.

*When you need a shoulder to cry on
I've got a tissue to lend
'Cause I'm not just a friend
I'm a friend to the end . . .*

Bobby's wandering eyes found Brianna, the one for whom Angel and her friends were hosting the party. Brianna raised a flirting eyebrow to Bobby and delivered a discreet wink. In return, Bobby stared at her intently and fashioned a cheating grin.

*You caught your boyfriend with your best friend
And now your whole world has come to an end
You traded his lies for your self-respect
And now you must suffer the pain of regret . . .*

Ignorant to their signals, Angel followed Bobby's swaying lead. Adam couldn't help but sneak a glimpse at her dark flowing hair, her milky white smile, and steady indigo eyes. Adam imagined having a girlfriend like Angel someday. But they were from different worlds—she from money and he from dreams. As she lifted her head, she caught Adam's eyes and returned a friendly smile. Angel had more personality and more genuine sincerity than any girl Adam had ever known. Inside her boyfriend's arrogant substance, Angel must have discovered some unimaginable quality.

*When you need a shoulder to cry on
I've got an ear to lend
'Cause I'm not just a friend
I'm a friend to the end . . .*

Adam closed his eyes and swayed during the instrumental. Pastel-colored notes floated like feathers from heaven and faded softly as they landed on each head, on each shoulder. When he opened his eyes,

Adam spotted their drummer Brad looking toward the Rebel corner. Brad's eyes darted toward Adam, then to the audience. By this gesture, Adam dashed his view toward Rebel where Garrett Grimes abruptly turned away.

*You're parents have their expectations
While they fail to see your frustrations
You wish you could just break free
Wish you could find self-liberty . . .*

As the final chorus approached, Adam let down his guard and Denise captured his eyes. In that instant, the girl sensuously rolled her hips as though offering an invitation.

*When you need a shoulder to cry on
I've got some time to lend
'Cause I'm not just some friend
I'm not just any friend . . .
I'm your new best friend
I'm your friend to the end*

The song faded with the smoothness of silk, and then the dream ended. The audience applauded enthusiastically while Mike leaned over his keyboard and said, "Thank you. We'll be back after a short break."

Adam carefully placed his acoustic in its stand. As he stepped off stage, he combed his fingers through his damp hair and joined Mike and Gabe at the refreshment table. Sonya Jackson and other school friends followed to offer compliments and make requests. Meanwhile, Brad wiped his shining face with a towel, stomped off stage with his heavy boots and scuffed toward the back door.

"Hey! Where are you going?" Gabe asked. All nearby faces turned toward Brad.

"Out back, for a smoke," Brad replied, and added sarcastically, "that all right with you?"

"A smoke?" asked Mike. "I thought you quit."

Brad just shrugged and wiggled into his jacket.

"Don't forget to come back, Butler." Gabe called. "We still have another set to play."

Brad ignored the comment as his wiry frame disappeared through the back door. Brad had agreed to quit smoking and drinking when he

joined the band in October. But since the New Year, he had resumed his bad habits.

“Adam, awesome show,” came the voice of Stephen Chan. He looked over his granny glasses and held out a crisp business card showing a flower. “Dude, take this. Check it out—I’m working at Primrose Recording Studio as an assistant to the Sound Engineer. I’m getting paid to play with sound equipment and guess what? My boss said I could use the studio when it’s not booked to get more experience. Are you interested in cutting a professional 32-track demo?”

Right beside Stephen, long-haired school newscaster Eddie “The Cruiser” added, “Get me a CD and I’ll play it at school during lunch hours.” Adam viewed the card, showed it to the others, and gave both the boys a high-five.

“Oh, Adam, I’m having so much fun,” Denise’s voice shrilled to capture his attention. She stepped toward him, throwing her hair from her face. “You are an incredible guitarist. I mean it. I just love your music. I’d love to be in a band someday. Maybe you could teach me how to sing?”

He smiled graciously but did not respond. He noticed Angel and Bobby still on the dance floor, forehead to forehead, conversing softly. Bobby told her something and she lifted her lips to meet his.

“I’m so glad you’re playing tonight,” Denise continued. “I don’t think I could stand hearing Rebel again. The last time they played I had a headache for two days.” She stuck her thumbs in her belt and stepped closer to Adam. Denise always wore mismatching earrings, this time a cupid in one ear and a heart in the other. “I have some good news! Remember I told you about my cousin Jesse in San Francisco? He’s moving to Boulder next month. Isn’t that exciting? I can’t wait for you to meet him!”

Adam barely heard her, his mind preoccupied with Bobby and Angel. If Angel only knew the jock-talk he so liberally shared in the boy’s locker room after P.E. Bobby thought Angel a challenge—he only wanted one thing from her—and when he got it, he’d callously move on.

“You do want to meet him, don’t you?”

“Who?” Adam asked, shifting his mind back to Denise as Angel and Bobby walked hand-in-hand toward the kitchen.

She swatted his shoulder. “Jesse! Weren’t you listening?”

He vaguely remembered Jesse’s name from one of her rambling monologues. “Sure. Jesse. Right.”

The kitchen lights blinked out and candlelight cast shadows and a yellow flicker through the large kitchen entryway. The birthday song broke out as tiptoed bodies hovered around.

"Oh, we have to sing!" Denise grabbed Adam's hand and tugged. "Come on."

"You go ahead. I'm giving my voice a rest."

She briefly hesitated, then released his limp hand, and tore away. "Oh! You're no fun!"

Stepping next to Adam, Mike grinned and his eyes sparkled with mischief. "Oh Adam," he mocked in falsetto, "I just love your music. You're my idol. Don't you love my earrings? I always wear two different ones, just to be weird . . ."

Adam grinned at Mike's comedy. Although he didn't want to encourage her, Adam sympathized with Denise. As an overlooked only-child in a poor family, she never stopped craving attention.

"Speaking of weird," Mike continued, "I saw Garrett Grimes come in during that last set. He and that psycho singer of theirs, Lucy Parker."

"Yeah, but not just them," Adam said, "Grimes and the whole Rebel gang." Adam mentally reviewed how many he had seen with Grimes, wondering if maybe one had been missing.

Mike handed Adam some punch. "It's obvious they're checking us out before for the Morp competitions." Morp, the literal and grammatical opposite of prom, was the school's most popular Sadie Hawkins dance. At Morp, the girl asked out the boy and sprang for dance tickets and dinner at a fast-food restaurant. But the music at Morp made the event legendary—students long anticipated Morp, which always featured Boulder Valley High's best current hometown band.

"The whole school knows that the competition is between us and them," Mike continued.

"Talking about us behind our backs?" Garrett Grimes suddenly appeared behind them. "Don't tell me you're even thinking about auditioning for Morp."

Adam turned around to find himself surrounded by Rebel. "The auditions are just a formality, Grimes. Blue Denim is playing at Morp."

"While Rebel is on-stage at Morp, the only thing you'll be playing is with yourself," Garrett jabbed and tossed his shaggy mop away from his dark eyes, his hooligans chortling witlessly.

"And after Morp, it's on to Colorado Battle of the Bands," Lucy injected with an east Coast tongue, "with the whole school cheering for us." Her black eye-shadow formed the shape of cat eyes. Adam

wondered what Lucy looked like under the layers of cosmetics. Overhearing the conversation, Gabe stepped behind Mike and Adam to see what Rebel wanted.

Adam held a cold stare with Grimes. They used to play music together and Adam had considered Garrett a friend before he knew better. When they were both sophomores, someone had stolen Adam's most treasured possession—the guitar Adam's father had played just hours before he died. A month later, Adam came across the guitar in Garrett's garage. Grimes fabricated that he had forgotten to tell Adam he had borrowed it. Unconvinced, Adam called the police and had Grimes charged with theft.

"Busted any friends lately?" Garrett asked and stepped forward, his breath bitter with beer.

"I only thought you were a friend," Adam replied. "I'd do it again in a heartbeat."

Wildness grew in Garrett's eyes and he gritted his teeth. He spent his sixteenth birthday in juvenile hall serving a 30-day sentence for the crime. "I'll never forgive you for that. I ought to . . ."

Gabe reached over and wrinkled Garrett's collar in his fist. "You ought to what?"

Without hesitation, Grimes twisted sharply to bust Gabe's grip. He stabbed a pointed stare at Gabe first, then Adam. "Better watch your back, Jensen," he said and shoved his way out, his motley crew swaggering behind.

Gabe stepped forward to pursue, but Adam grabbed his arm. "Let him go, Gabe. He's not worth it."

Gabe grinded his teeth as he watched them walk away. "I want to kick his ass so bad."

"Easy, Gabe," Adam said as he handed him some punch to cool his fiery nerves. "We have a better way to fight back."

Mike threw his arms around his musical brothers. "Yeah, we'll kick their asses at the Morp auditions," he said. "And they can forget about playing at this summer's Battle of the Bands."

With some help from Adam and Mike, Gabe settled down, but insisted on getting some fresh air outside before their last set. As Adam replayed the scenario in his mind, one shocking realization suddenly struck him: Rebel *did* have one person missing—Josh, their spitfire drummer.

2

In Boulder's Southwest front range, the jagged Flatiron Mountains penetrated the earth's flesh like mighty, ancient arrowheads. Their cold, blue surface was a natural monument to the Arapaho Indians who once roamed and hunted the region. In a valley south of the Flatirons, Gabe's house sat next to an enclosed barn. The back of the barn displayed a painted mural bursting with colorful notes, musical instruments, and on a musical staff, the words "Blue Denim."

Inside the barn, a frosty front window dripped with condensation while only the sounds of guitars and keyboards escaped out. Posters and instrument advertisements decorated the walls and a propane carpenter's furnace emitted warm air. Below the stage, two eleven-year-old girls danced while a third younger girl looked at Adam, mesmerized.

On the final note, lead guitar and keyboards tied for first place, and the girls cheered and clapped. "One more song," one of them pleaded. "Oh, Gabe. Please!"

"Oh, Gabe. Please!" Mike mocked the girl's voice, causing her to stick out her tongue at him. Never above lowering himself to childishness, Mike returned the gesture.

"Megan, you and your little friends have to go now," Gabe raised his voice to his little sister and stepped off stage. "We said you could stay for ten minutes and you've been here an hour. Beat it!"

"What'll it hurt if they stay a little longer?" Adam asked. But Gabe, frowning dark eyes at the unmanned drum set, rebuffed the suggestion with a solid "No!" Adam and Mike exchanged glances, both knowing why Gabe was even grumpier than usual.

"You just don't want us around so you can talk," Megan said.

"And we know what you're going to talk about," Sarah added. "Girls!" The two older ones then ran toward the door in squeals and laughter.

“Good-bye, Adam,” said Sarah’s younger sister, Christina. “I hope I can see you again soon.”

“I hope so, too,” Adam said, winking to the girl who blushed and scampered away.

The girls failed to close the door and Sam, Gabe’s scruffy, one-eyed tomcat, invited himself inside. Measuring fifteen inches high and two feet in length, only a studded dog collar fit his abnormally thick neck.

“Sam, what are you doing in here?” Gabe asked.

“He wants to hear us play,” Mike replied. “He’s a rock and roll animal.”

As Sam strolled by, Adam noticed a slash under the cat’s good eye. Sam had acquired a proud display of battle scars and regularly expanded his collection. Inside him brewed the primordial genes of a saber-toothed tiger.

“Jealous boyfriend?” Adam asked, pointing with his eyes to Sam limping in.

Gabe shook his head. “Wilson’s Rottweiler again. Sam’s had a grudge ever since Killer chomped off part of his ear when he was a kitten.” Gabe stepped offstage and slammed the door. “I wish he would pick on somebody his own size.”

“Yeah, where’s a cougar when you need one?” Mike said and chuckled, appreciating his wit more than anyone else. Cougars occasionally wandered out of the foothills into Boulder looking for food during the winter months.

Gabe fell into an old easy chair in an area they called their “office.” Informally calling a break, Adam and Mike joined him, each taking an end of the couch.

“Is your dad working, Gabe?” Adam asked.

Gabe shook his head. “Construction is still slow.” He reached for a back issue of Bass Player magazine from the coffee table. “The wolves are snarling at the door and you’re burning money heating that barn,” Gabe said, imitating his father’s voice. “When are you going to stop pretending you’re a rock and roll star?”

“Don’t worry. It’s not just your dad. My mom thinks music is just a phase I’m going through—like puberty or something.” Adam reached for the stereo power switch.

The three of them had played together part-time for years until they agreed that they needed to make music a priority over everything else—over regular jobs, over school sports, over heavy homework loads—even over girls. So the previous September they quit their jobs and dedicated their existence to music. While it didn’t pay much, they earned

enough at their gigs to provide a modest amount of spending money—with 10% always going into the band savings fund.

While they talked, the disc jockey's voice linked one song with the next. "It's three-oh-eight, I'm J. Drake, and I'll be with you until six tonight. Right now, a dedication from a girl with the initial 'D' to 'someone special.' Here's 'I'll Be Thinking of You' from, 92.5 KFTM—The Rocker!"

"Crap!" Gabe suddenly barked, overhearing the time. "It's already after three o'clock and Butler still isn't here! He's either late or leaves early or is half asleep or drugged or something."

"You worry too much, man," Mike said, frowning. "He's just working out a few problems."

"And you don't worry enough," Gabe fired back. "*His* problems become *our* problems. We all got home late after the show but we agreed to meet today at one o'clock. And that was two hours ago!"

"Don't you have the least amount of compassion?" Mike asked. "You know what happened to his old man and his mom—"

"His old man skipped out on them and his mom flipped out and lives in some kook-house and now Butler lives with his scummy sister who smokes dope and drinks too much. I know all that, and I'm sorry. But it doesn't excuse him from following the band's rules. He hasn't been on time in weeks. And he 'forgot' about rehearsal twice. How does somebody forget about rehearsal when we meet every day?"

Mike rolled his eyes. "Well, why don't you call him?"

"He never answers when I call." Gabe cracked his knuckles. "We wouldn't have this problem if we had a different drummer."

Mike sighed. "Gabe, just wave a magic drumstick and ask the music fairy to magically find us another drummer." He stood and pressed a synthesizer key, making a magic wand chime. "Music Fairy, bring us a drummer."

Words disappeared and the furnace metal ticked like a cooling pistol. Mike and Gabe rarely argued but finding a good drummer had been a frustrating mission; Brad was their third attempt since summer and they chose him out of desperation.

"There's something about Butler I think you should know." Gabe ensured that he had captured the attention of them both before lowering his tone to continue. "Last night, during our break—"

Without warning, the creaking door hinges announced Brad. He steeped inside wearing a Coors beer cap backwards. "What's happening?" he asked, his voice rough and his words sticky.

“Crazy little thing we call ‘rehearsal,’” Gabe said. “Do you know what time it is?”

Brad stumbled behind his drum set, ignoring both Gabe’s question and his needling eyes. Adam stepped back on stage smelling the stench of tobacco smoke while Mike and Gabe followed. Brad tapped the snare, adjusted his seat, and then belched as though an indication he was ready.

“That’s it? That’s your warm up?” Gabe asked. “Isn’t there something you want to tell us before we start?”

He looked at the eyes around him, and released an impatient sigh. “So I’m a little late. Big deal. Do you want to play or not?”

Gabe nodded and lowered his stare. “Have it your way.”

Mike showed Adam a puzzled expression; whatever news Gabe had about Brad was not for public discussion. “Butler’s ready to get going,” Gabe said. “Let’s go.”

“Let’s start with ‘Keep On,’” Adam said. ‘Keep On’ was a recent Blue Denim original. Adam had been trying for weeks to make the lyrics fit the melody. Then one night he awoke at 2:00 AM and his subconscious delivered revised lyrics to him. “For a cleaner finish, let’s try repeating the last measure twice.”

Each agreed and took position; Brad performed the count. “One, two, a one-two-three-four—”

Snare drum introduced bass drum, followed by bass guitar, meeting keyboards a few chords later, and then lead guitar. But each felt their synchronization askew as their pulse lumbered slowly through the second verse. Adam’s vocal and instrumental attempts to accelerate the beat were unsuccessful and he waved a terminating hand in the air. “Wait a minute!” He shouted above the instruments that screeched to a halt. “The beat’s too slow.”

“Yeah, I feel like we’re in slow motion!” Gabe said, and Brad diverted his eyes to the ceiling.

“Okay. Let’s do it again, from the top,” said Adam and they restarted. The tempo picked up but after the first stanza, it again lost power and staggered along. Gabe dropped his arms from his guitar, spun toward Brad and leaned on an amplifier until the other instruments ceased. “Is there some reason you can’t make those sticks move any faster?”

Brad’s closed his bloodshot eyes, and then the splintering ends of his sticks rapped against each other. “One-two-three-four—” The swift beat remained constant through the first chorus. But as they progressed, the beat treaded faster, forcing the other instruments and the lyrics recklessly forward.

The last line stumbled beneath them. Brad forgot to repeat the last measure, and the ending shattered with the jaggedness of a broken window.

"We were going to repeat the last measure," Adam reminded Brad.

"I forgot," Brad said, dully.

"You're always forgetting something, Butler." Gabe bumped a cymbal. "If it isn't forgetting to come to rehearsal, it's forgetting how to play a song. Maybe you wouldn't forget so much if you weren't always partying your brains out."

Brad's eyes squinted toward the window and he drew a long, deep breath. The others could tell Brad was holding tight to his composure, but his grip was slipping. "What do you want?" Brad asked. "Do you want to do the last part over?"

"The last part!" cried Gabe. "The whole thing was too fast. The song was over before it got started."

Brad stared without expression at Gabe. "Is it your time of the month or what?"

Gabe's face froze cold, and then his eyes fired like spark plugs. "I know that hangover in your eyes is from partying last night with Rebel."

"Rebel?" Mike asked. "What are you talking about?"

"During our break, before the final set last night, I stepped outside for some fresh air. Around the corner, I overheard Garrett Grimes say, 'We're into, you know, taking rock to a whole new dimension. None of that sissy crap in there.' Then I overheard Butler say, 'I know what you mean. I'm just doing this 'til something better comes along.'"

All eyes pinned Brad down. His head moved from face to face, his eyes those of a rabbit cornered by wolves. "I don't need this!" He barked and hurled his drumsticks against the opposite wall where they clamored to the floor. Barreling from his drum set, his feet tripped over a cymbal stand, and he fumbled forward toward the door.

"Brad, hold on," Adam said in his calmest voice. "Let's settle down and discuss this."

"Forget it! Yeah, I was talking with Rebel last night. And yeah, they offered me their drummer spot. I thought I'd give you guys one more chance, but obviously that was a mistake." Brad ripped open the door and then slammed it so hard that the window shook and Sam stirred from his catnap.

"There he goes, Gabe," Mike said. "There goes our only chance at playing at Morp."

They heard the sound of Brad's car starting and his tires spinning off. "We're better off without him," Gabe said, stomping off stage and out the door where he slammed it shut. It became obvious to Sam that he had picked the wrong place to get some sleep.

"This is all Gabe's fault." Mike shook his head and folded his arms. "All because he's such a hot-head."

"Maybe," Adam drew a deep breath and sighed, "but I wouldn't blame it all on Gabe. He heard Brad talking crap behind our backs. And to Gabe, rules are rules. This was bound to happen."

"What do we do now? We have two parties, Morp auditions, and no drummer." The two friends searched each other's eyes, as though a secret hidden in each might solve their dilemma.

After long, uninspired consideration, Adam replied, "Pray for the music fairy to bring us a drummer."

The sky sprinkled soft, large snowflakes when they left—in his mind, Adam saw somber notes dropping from the heavens like a classical requiem. He burrowed into his coat, kicked through the piling powder, and fished out the keys to his vintage Chevy truck. Chipped, white paint spotted the truck's surface like age spots, and rust gnawed at each wheel-well. But besides these cosmetic flaws, his faithful truck had transported the band's equipment to a dozen gigs in a year's time.

The truck's hinges squeaked at the opening door. Adam reached for his ice scraper, brushing against the cross hanging from his rear-view mirror. He chiseled at the frosty windshield and whisked away the snowy crystals. Trapped beneath the wipers he uncovered a frozen envelope and dusted off the icy slivers covering his name. A sigh sneaked from his shaking head. "Not again!"

The seat springs creaked under the cold, duct tape-mended vinyl. He inserted and pivoted the key, kicking the whining starter over until the engine roared through the corroding muffler. As he warmed the motor, he opened the envelope.

Saturday

Dear Adam,

I was just driving by and saw your truck. I enjoyed the party last night. I love the way you play guitar but I would have loved more to dance with you.

Good luck at rehearsal. I can't wait to see you at school on Monday. Until then, sweet dreams.

Love always,

Denise

P.S. I can't wait for you to meet my cousin Jesse.

He shoved the letter and envelope behind the seat with the accumulating pile of other notes she had left him. He felt flattered by her notes and attention, but he could never develop any feelings for Denise. He knew they could never be anything more than friends.

As he pulled away, his mind rehashed the day's activities. Without a drummer, Blue Denim would forfeit Morp to Rebel. But even more critical, without Morp, Blue Denim forfeited vital support at the summer competition of the Colorado Battle of the Bands. For years, Adam had dreamed of performing at the event that could open the door to a brilliant musical career. Battle of the Bands attracted club owners, agents, producers, and a stadium full of music fans. As one of the twelve select bands, each hoped for exposure to agents, bookings, and the coveted first prize—a contract to open for an established band on their next tour. Battle of the Bands was more than a day in the sun—it was the most important shot Blue Denim would ever have.

And without a drummer, they didn't stand a chance.

3

The stinging cold pinched Adam's cheeks, nose, and fingertips, and his truck's broken heater offered no comfort during his slippery journey home.

The house at 13th and Columbine shone a half-blinking eye through the second story window. He retrieved the house key hidden under a brick next to the front steps and unbolted the door. As warmth rushed up to greet him inside, his mother's telephone voice and a lengthy giggle cackled down the staircase.

In his room, he lit his desk lamp. Adam kept an organized room, but his accumulation of guitars, foot pedals, amps, and other equipment cluttered the small space. He reserved a special corner, a shrine, for an old weathered acoustic guitar. Over his headboard hung a crucifix and above his computer, a poster of a sprinting runner. Sweat-drenched and his eyes aflame, every thought and muscle propelled the runner forward with unrelenting determination.

A bulletin board adjacent to his desk contained a calendar and a collage of newspaper and magazine clippings, notations, and guitar picks. Scribbled on a fast-foot napkin were the words:

*Let the notes calm your fears
Let the lyrics dry your tears
Wherever you go, whatever you do
Feel the music inside of you . . .*

With careful nurturing, these budding lyrics would someday be one of his greatest works. He didn't know what else the song would contain or even when he would finish it. But he promised that this song would be his philosophy of life, his dedication to music, and his gift to the world.

Adam peered into a large, dry aquarium. He tapped a fingernail on the glass and inside, a strip of scales crept to motion.

“Wake up, Fluffy.”

A six-foot boa constrictor slid over a rock and curled around a stick. Winding toward the top, his reddish-gray face lashed out a black tongue the shape of a slingshot.

Adam reached in and stroked a finger along the creature’s shiny body. “No, you can’t come out. I have to clean up and do homework.” He nudged closer and lowered his voice. “And then I’m sneaking out to visit Calvin. Try to keep your trap shut ‘cause I don’t want Mom to know.”

He slipped out of his shirt, exposing a tattoo—a blue musical note—on his left pectoral. A present to himself on his eighteenth birthday, the tattoo represented his fidelity to music. “We are all musical notes in God’s great symphony of life,” he had told the tattoo artist who expressed no reaction. Outside of the band, few knew about it, except P.E. classmates who had seen it in the locker room. Even his mother didn’t know—not because she might not have approved, but Adam had had no reason to tell her.

He fake-dribbled and tossed his shirt into a corner clothesbasket. He then disappeared into an adjacent bathroom and showered away the penetrating coldness from his feet and hands.

After drying off, he combed his hair, and revealed a three-inch scar trailing the ridge of his hairline. Any lower, he would not so easily have concealed it for the past 13 years. As he shaved, he considered growing a goatee, and painted a facsimile of shaving crème on his face. He liked how this changed his appearance; it brought comfort to his reflection. He admired his work from several angles, deciding the summer a good time to begin his new look.

In his room, Adam slipped into some boxers, jeans and a sweatshirt. From his window, he heard a brushing sound against the outside bushes. Adam felt an immediate panic—as if somebody was watching him—for he had heard the same sound several times in previous weeks. He resolved his thoughts irrational, that a neighborhood cat or an icicle falling from the gutter had been responsible. But being he had forgotten to close his drapes, he pulled them shut.

Adam snatched *The Grapes of Wrath* from his desk; he had yet to read three chapters and compose a short essay for American Literature by Monday. He settled into his chair, but his calendar diverted his attention. Leaning toward it, he verified a notation in the date box of Saturday, January 15: *Snowblind at Rocky’s* and *Dad’s B-Day* (43).

He dragged out an overstuffed, denim-fabric scrapbook saved deep under his bed. Blowing off the dusty cover, Adam paged to a portrait of a man in his late-twenties. The man's face had an olive tint, and he had light hair and a dark, trimmed goatee. Adam solemnly stared into his bright, blue eyes. "Happy birthday, Dad."

More photographs followed—candid shots and posed stills of young Adam and his father having a snowball fight, playing cowboys, his father strumming a guitar. Adam's eyes sparkled with fond reminiscence as he rediscovered each page. For an instant, he regressed to a time of boyish dreams, remembering the man who taught him all things—especially about the music.

But on turning the last page, his warm smile dissolved. A black headline engrossed him. And as he read the article, old feelings re-stirred in his head and in his heart.

Accident Claims Local Man

BOULDER — A local musician died early Sunday morning when an oncoming vehicle reportedly dodged a deer and veered into the opposite lane of traffic.

At approximately 2:45 AM, a vehicle driven by Richard Jensen, 28, was struck and forced off Colorado Highway 36, four miles north of Boulder, when a car driven by Robin Love, 33, swerved into the oncoming lane.

Jensen was killed while returning from the Lone Star Lodge in Estes Park with his wife and son after performing with his country band, "Six-Pack." Police reported alcohol did not appear to be involved.

The Jensens and Love were admitted to Boulder Community Hospital where they are in serious but stable condition.

The memories crashed over Adam with complete clarity: A radio dial . . . a country song . . . the scent of his father's cologne . . . the warm heater on his feet . . . screeching tires . . . tumbling . . . blackness. Sometimes when he felt stressed, the experience would repeat itself in a recurring nightmare. Just when he thought he had outgrown the condition, a week or a month later he would spring up in his bed in shivering sweat, and suddenly he would be five years old again. And each time the realization that his father was dead was just as traumatic as the first time.

Gentle rapping on his door startled him to his senses, and his mother's nose poked through. "Adam, are you awake?"

"Yeah," he replied, blinking and wiping the dampness from his eyes.

She stepped inside wearing a robe. She was trim with a balanced posture, especially for a woman dangerously approaching her 40th birthday. While her face had a youthful shine, her eyes were tired from the long workday and from many years of raising a son on her own. Her chestnut hair combed down, Adam avoided staring at the few grey hairs coming from her part and temples.

"I didn't hear you come in," she said. "When did you get home?"

"Just a little bit ago."

"You look tired," she said. "Are you getting enough sleep?"

"Plenty," he said, causing her to frown suspiciously. A flight attendant for the airlines, work flew her away three to five days at a time. He had not seen her since Wednesday. "When did you get home?"

"A couple hours ago." She seated herself at the foot of his bed, noticing his scrapbook. "Been at rehearsal?"

He nodded.

She shook her head. "I'll bet you spend more time in that dusty old barn than in your own bed."

Her comment reminded him about Brad and he felt a sinking feeling inside, but he wouldn't tell her; she never showed interest in the band. "I heard you giggling on the phone when I got in."

"Giggling?" she asked, withdrawing. "School girls giggle. I was—talking, with a friend from work. Maybe I did giggle a little."

Since his father's death, his mother had never dated, and the thought of her with someone else disturbed Adam. "A man or a woman?"

"Well, a man," she said, a red-pink washing over her face. "But Adam, he's just a friend. So don't go thinking anything else." She smiled and kissed his cheek. "You know, you're looking more like your father every day."

He knew this was her way to change the subject. But he accepted her words as a compliment and made a reply with the same soft, patient eyes he remembered his father having.

"Is it that late already?" she asked, noticing the time on his desk clock. "These flights to Tokyo are wearing me out." She yawned. "I think I'll turn in. And you need to catch up on your sleep, too." She stepped toward the door and asked, "You are staying home tonight, aren't you?"

"I have a ton of homework," he said truthfully, his eyes darting to his books.

"I'm going to seven-thirty mass tomorrow. Join me?"

He scrunched up his face. He really didn't like church but it made her so happy when he went with her. "That's so early. How about nine o'clock mass?" he replied, which brought an expected smile to her face.

"Okay, then. Nine o'clock. Sleep well, dear."

He waited to hear her gentle footsteps creak up the staircase before he picked up his cell phone. Weekends were the only time he could keep up with the local music scene, and he had waited months to see Snowblind.

He entered the number and waited for an answer . . . "Good evening, Rocky's." He heard voices and laughter in the background.

"Hey, Calvin. I want to see Snowblind tonight. Can you get me in?"

"Yes, tonight Snowblind is back for one show only, but you better get here early."

"I can't get there until about eleven. I have to wait until Mom goes to sleep."

"Ten dollar cover charge."

Adam knew Calvin must have been at the front door and within earshot of customers. "Put it on my bill." He laughed. "I'll call when I get there. I really need to talk to you."

"Better hurry or you won't get a table."

Adam set his cell phone alarm and cracked open *The Grapes of Wrath*; he didn't want to take a chance on falling asleep and missing the show. When he wasn't playing a Saturday night gig, Adam usually tried to get over to Rocky's; sometimes with Mike or Gabe or both. During their 13 years as friends, the bond between Adam and Calvin had grown deeper than friendship, to the fringe of brotherhood. "Soul brothers," Calvin once phrased it.

And if anyone could help them with their drummer problem, it was his soul brother.

4

Adam knew his mother would hear him if he tried to sneak out the front door. So instead, he slowly, slowly opened his bedroom window. He held his breath and listened for a bed squeak or footsteps from his mother's room. Absent of any noises, he nervously hoisted himself over the sill and wiggled through the bushes. His face cringed with each footstep that crunched through the yard's hard under-snow. He could have just told her the truth, but he didn't want to create contention. And besides, sneaking out gave him a brief but thrilling rush of adrenaline. When he reached the sidewalk, he verified his mother's upstairs window to be dark and empty. From there, Adam paced briskly to Baseline Road, leaving the old brick house sleeping quietly under the shoulders of the foothills.

Rocky's had carved out its musical niche in Boulder, specializing in stylistic rock, country rock, and the "Sunday Night Blues." Booking only the region's best bands, Rocky's attracted an energetic, young crowd. One night Adam dreamed Blue Denim had performed at Rocky's—a dream so vivid he awoke questioning if it had really happened.

Mike joined Adam the last time he went to Rocky's. Even as young boys, their friendship revolved around music. Neighbors when Adam's father died, the Slades watched Adam while Sharon worked—first for a Denver tailor, then during her new job with the airlines. At eight years old, Adam and Mike took piano lessons. For Adam's tenth birthday, his mother gave Adam his father's treasured acoustic guitar. Adam still relied on its charm as the initial thread in weaving a new song. The emotional depth from the rosewood and spruce created both intimate ballads and blistering renditions. To Adam, his only inheritance contained the living spirit of his father's musical wonder.

When they were 13, Adam and Mike patched together their first band, playing in garages and basements with almost anyone. For a few years they played for little or nothing at parties and junior high dances.

After a tumultuous year of unreliable players, they decided to search for permanent band members. For a year, they scoured newspapers, placed ads, and posted signs searching for a permanent bass guitarist and a drummer. They had to find the exact formula of individual, artist, and musician, a soul who shared their same passion for music with style and substance.

They met Gabe testing a new bass at Alpine Music. They had seen him at school and had considered him unfriendly and a recluse. But as he plucked each note, his serious eyes suggested a hidden surprise within. Taking a chance, they invited him to jam in Mike's garage. In song, they achieved music's extended dimension of reality—a dimension where they certified the honesty of each others' musical souls. Sharing the right chemistry, Gabe became Blue Denim's third member.

For six months, they rotated through drummers. Brad auditioned one day; he was knowledgeable and skilled but lacked confidence and experience. Adam thought they could help him through his deficiencies by building a friendship with him, by injecting the words of their songs into his heart, by giving him exposure. But Brad never let anyone get too close—he seldom participated in conversation and never hung around after rehearsal to talk. At first, the band disregarded what seemed like legitimate absences. But then Brad started calling in sick or claiming to have forgotten about rehearsal—once they had to cancel rehearsal when he arrived too hung over to play.

Nearing Rocky's, the wail of a screaming guitar quickened Adam's pace while the chill stung his naked nostrils. He ducked into the back alley and vaulted over the chain link fence. Waiting in a dark corner, he imagined the nightclub breathing to the swift tempo, the compressed music inside propelling out notes of every shade of blue. Humming to the melody, he pulled out his phone and called Calvin. A few moments later, a bearded black face peered from the back door and surveyed the grounds. Absent of witnesses, Calvin nodded, and Adam bolted forward.

"Look at what the wind blew in," Calvin said, pulling the door shut. "I've got to learn to keep this back door closed." His lips producing a half-moon of ivory teeth. "You just don't know what criminal element could get in."

Adam threw unthreatening punches that Calvin blocked with his large palms. This ritual carried on until Calvin shifted to the offense, threw a fake, and smacked Adam's abdomen.

"That didn't hurt, did it?" Calvin asked.

"No," his friend gasped. "Not very much."

Calvin laughed. “Be cool. I’ve got to get back out front. I’ll be back in a few.” He threw a fake hook and vanished through the bar door.

The large office doubled as a small warehouse, cluttered with cases of beer, files, and old sound and lighting equipment. Regulations restricted Adam from entering the bar, but a two-way mirror gave him an unobstructed view of the stage and dance floor. Vents above the mirror delivered the music inside.

Calvin greased through the crowd like a football player in a kindergarten playground. He waved to a patron, a glimmer reflecting off his star-shaped ring. Adam recalled seeing a member of the “Colorado Road Hogs” biker club along downtown’s Pearl Street Mall. The man’s cheek bore a scar the size and shape of Calvin’s ring—punishment for troublemaking in Rocky’s.

The music pulsed and couples squeezed onto the bulging dance floor. He liked to pretend that Blue Denim was on stage, sizzling the audience with high-energy songs, then mellowing them with cool, soft tones—all the while instilling words with wonder, music with meaning. Other times, he imagined he was dancing with a girl. As the wave of sound circled them and swept them together, she’d smile, and the music would envelop them into a sea of clouds. He’d feel her tender, warm shoulders and waist, inhale her perfume—her scent subtle but intriguing, soft but wild.

He snapped himself from his daydream. He couldn’t tempt himself with such foolish thoughts. A romance could complicate and destroy everything he and his band had worked so hard to achieve. He promised never to become a victim of love.

Employees passed through, knowing of Adam’s special-guest status. His favorite cocktail server, Debbie, usually stopped for a quick chat, but Monica always seemed too busy. Most of the bartenders were cool, especially Neil who flipped glasses, artistically poured spirits, and juggled garnishments. And Tom, who spent every waking off-hour on the slopes.

Calvin scooted back in, a glass of soda and a bottled water in hand. “How’s your mom?”

Adam accepted the soda, toasted Calvin, and sipped. “I don’t see her much. I think she’s got a boyfriend, but she denies it.”

“Your mom? A boyfriend? It’s about time!” He exclaimed and then laughed. “You tell her she’s breaking my heart. She deserves a good man after all she’s been through.”

The comment prodded at Adam's heart. Calvin meant no malice, but Adam chose to ignore the possibility of his mother with someone besides his father. So he diverted his attention to the band.

Snowblind was a local favorite. The Daily Camera newspaper featured Snowblind's story: Six Boulder County snowboarding buddies with regular day jobs who, over seven years of playing nights and weekends, attracted a following from the southern states to California. Their second CD featured two songs making the Top 40. The article credited their success to positive attitudes and the vision of lead singer, Steve Morrison. But Adam knew their relentless persistence to individual style and sound was their greatest attribute.

"How was your show last night?" Calvin asked. "Did you earn any money? Or are you still doing charity work?"

"We took your advice," Adam said. "No one cared when we raised our rates. Last night, we got three more inquiries. But we probably won't . . ."

"I have something for you," Calvin interrupted, reaching into the desk drawer. He handed Adam Snowblind's latest CD, *Worlds Apart*.

On the cover, Adam read the words aloud, "To Adam. Music is magic. Steve Morrison." Adam excitedly looked at Calvin, then at Steve Morrison on stage. Snowblind wasn't just some three-ax band—they reached for depth in music, incorporating keyboards and saxophone, flute and violin, even bongos. "Thanks," Adam said, genuinely touched. "Thanks."

Calvin ruffed up the back of his head and straddled the desk chair. "Steve told me before the show that they just signed a contract with the Battle of the Bands Committee. The winner of this year's competition is going to be the opening band for Snowblind's fall tour."

Adam stared at Calvin with glee, then dropped his head back in frustration. "That sucks!"

"What?" Calvin responded in shock. "I thought you loved Snowblind. I thought you wanted to play at Battle of the Band."

"Of course I do! But today, Gabe and Brad got into it again. And Brad quit."

"Brad quit?" he asked, his eyes reflecting the stage lights. "Blue Denim was the best thing to ever happened to that kid."

"He not only quit. He joined Rebel."

"Rebel! They're losers! They call here every couple of months asking for an audition. I just hang up on them."

"The problem is, we have two shows scheduled next month. And Morp auditions after that." He drew a note in the condensation of the glass. "I'm hoping you have a lead on drummers."

"They all flew south for the winter," Calvin replied, smiling wryly. The expression on Adam's face showed his disappointment. "But listen," he threw his arm around Adam. "Don't worry about this little problem."

"Little problem! If we don't play Morp, we may as well forget about Colorado Battle of the Bands."

"Dude, have some faith! You know, it's only a big problem if you make it one." Calvin let the words sink in. "Like every problem, this one already has a resolution waiting. You just don't know what it is. Doesn't that transform the problem into an adventure?"

"No!" Adam said.

Calvin laughed and mouthed silent words to the ceiling. "Okay, look. Pretend it's a year from right now. With the perspective of being able to look back 12 months, imagine how silly you will feel worrying over this. Just because you don't know who your drummer is now doesn't mean there isn't one out there just wishing for a band to play in—your band. Why, I bet the solution to this little problem is right under your nose."

Adam spent a long time in thought. Calvin could usually present a perspective Adam didn't see. Still, there didn't seem to be any quick solutions. "Calvin, a drummer isn't going to just fall from the sky. We need someone with heart and soul and talent. We need someone like Gabe and Mike and me. And we need that person now!"

Calvin's face hardened with seriousness and he stared at Adam until it made Adam fidget. "Let's try an experiment. Close your eyes," Calvin said. "Go on, close them. And keep them closed."

Adam did as instructed; Calvin always pulled this kind of stuff.

"What do you see?" Calvin asked.

"Nothing. Darkness."

"Take a deep breath. Relax. Clear all the clutter from your mind. I want you to visualize. Now, tell me, what do you see?"

Adam considered the question a long time. "A drummer?"

"Good," Calvin told him. "Male or Female?"

"Definitely male. Gabe would explode at the thought of a girl in the band."

"Don't think about Gabe. Just think about your drummer. He's male. Is he tall or short? Stocky or thin? What's he look like?"

Adam didn't answer directly. He inhaled another deep breath as the picture took shape. "He's tall and stocky. He's got curly, dark hair. And brown eyes."

"What else? What's he sound like?"

"He's kind of soft spoken. But confident and focused."

"Now what's he doing?"

Adam felt calmness encompass him, like warm water, like he had fallen into a dream fully conscious. "He's in Gabe's barn. He's behind his drum set and he's warming up—positioning the cymbals, tapping the snare, the toms, his bass drum. Now he's playing, starting slowly, moving to different beats. He's getting faster, faster. He's got the beat, the time, the rhythm. He's doing a drum solo, he's wailing—his arms are flying. He's sweating, his tee-shirt is saturated. He's on fire!"

So silent was Calvin he may have left. But when Adam opened his eyes, his friend beamed a wide grin. "I think you just found your drummer."

5

An obnoxious clanging surrounded Adam and seemed to come from everywhere. Finally, he realized it to be his cell phone alarm clock, having taken several minutes to penetrate through layers of deep sleep. He and Calvin talked long after Rocky's had closed, and Adam slid back into his cold room past three o'clock in the morning. The day's events and his fatigue gave him trouble sleeping. Soon after he had fallen asleep, a recurring dream invaded his peaceful slumber—the same nightmare he dreaded, that wouldn't stop, that played over and over in his head. The cab of the truck bounced, curves shifting Adam side to side, and then the truck plunged into the darkness of the foothills—rolling, rolling. So terrifying was the dream that he sprang up in bed, sweating, fingers trembling, reaching into the empty darkness for the father who wasn't there.

In the morning, he fumbled from the warm covers with squinting eyes, too tired to stretch or yawn, and emerged in the previous day's wrinkled clothing. He scratched through tangled hair and reached for the radio. A shot of morning music was as important as a Nutritionist's initial dose of B-complex or a monk's first Gregorian chant.

" . . . Praise brothers and sisters and hallelujah. The Lord came to forgive our sins, yes He did, pah-raise . . . "

"No offense, Lord," he said, selecting a music station. "Morning, Fluffy," he mumbled toward the bathroom. Cold water wedged open his eyelids, and he dragged a brush unsuccessfully across his head.

In the kitchen, the scent of fresh coffee guided him forward. His mother sat at the table, browsing the Boulder Daily Camera newspaper and spooning a grapefruit. He yawned as he scuffed passed her.

"You're dressed already?" Her face crinkled as she observed him closer. "I hope you're not wearing those clothes to church. It looks like you slept in them."

He evaluated his appearance, finding more wrinkles than he thought possible, and chuckled. He turned on the jukebox-style radio and poured some coffee. Sitting down, he slurped the hot brew until his mother's frown scolded him.

"Sorry," he said, sipping more politely, staring half-coherently at the headlines: Eldora Ski Resort Opens New Lift. "Could I have the entertainment section?"

She scooted the portion over and he checked the concert listing and top forty hits. A syndicated column entitled "In the Groove" featured a profile on different musicians. Adam never missed it—he studied changes in music, its direction, and searched for tips to spark the creative flame. Every effort he spent in pursuit of the music.

"I ordered information on state colleges," his mother said, wrinkling a page over. Adam sipped his coffee as the article passed through sleepy eyes. "Colorado has some excellent universities. C.U. is most convenient as you could live at home. However, there's also C.S.U. in Fort Collins or U.N.C. in Greeley. The information should be here in a couple of weeks."

The words came slowly to his ears and he looked up. "Colleges?" he asked, his voice rough. "If I wanted that stuff, I could get it at school. And I told you—I'm not going to college. Blue Denim is going to play at clubs when Mike turns 18 in April. And when school is over, we're going to write songs during the day and perform at night."

Regulations restricted musicians under 18 years old from performing in public nightclubs that serve alcohol. And Adam knew nightclubs were essential to gaining exposure.

"Adam, you need college! You won't get anywhere without at least a bachelor's degree. And many jobs require a master's." She slapped her grapefruit spoon on the table. "College is important."

"You're right," he said, pausing for effect, "for some people. For me, music is more important. When I was younger, you were always buying me sheet music and encouraging me to practice. Why can't you be more like that?"

"Adam, I encouraged you to try many things. But a musician's life is hard. I know. There's no steady income, no benefits. It takes more than talent and persistence—it takes something you can't control: Luck. Unless you hope to live in poverty forever, you have to go to college. And consider music a hobby."

"A hobby!" He wanted to say more but instead gritted his teeth. When previously expressing his immeasurable passion for the music, her eyes just glazed over. In her heart, he knew she meant no offense. She

had forgotten how music could transform despair to hope, inspire new emotions, save life-long memories—friends and Friday nights and first kisses. Adam knew that music was his sole purpose in the universe.

Due to their different schedules, they drove separately to Mass. Next to Holy Trinity Church, Adam waited for elderly Mr. and Mrs. Dempsey to hobble across the driveway. Parking between a new Mercedes Benz and the Dempsey's 1967 Buick Special, music thundered from his truck. As he combed his hair, he spotted Mr. Dempsey scowling and gesturing at him. *Such disrespect!* Mr. Dempsey seemed to say. *When they were his age, they never blasted that loud music in the church parking lot on Sunday mornings. What the hell was the world coming to?*

He trotted to the church, a chill noosing his neck. He had changed into an ironed dress shirt and a clean pair of jeans. This pleased his mother, and possibly even the Lord.

Above the three double doors, a statue of Jesus Christ welcomed all with open arms. As he drew a cross on himself with cold holy water, he absorbed the comforting scent of burning beeswax and the richness of Johann Pachelbel's "Joy." Cranberry-colored carpets spilled down each aisle. Brilliant stained glass of the Nativity and the Crucifixion illuminated the front while the side walls exhibited the twelve apostles.

They took their customary pew as the steeple bells chimed. Organs signaled all to stand for the entrance hymn, No. 317, "Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee." The music flooded them like a wave of notes breaking through a dam and barreling forward. Altar servers lumbering large candles and a polished crucifix lead the procession. Shiny-headed Father Michael O'Brien, with wire-rimmed bifocals and a voice that could scare the devil out of anyone, marched from behind. Father O'Brien was as timelessly Irish as he was conservatively orthodox.

Adam's eyes trailed to a captivating face across the center aisle. Angel, the oldest of the Irving's two children, sat with her family who regularly attended nine o'clock Mass. Doctor Irving taught at C.U., and Mrs. "Kate" Irving chaired the volunteer committee for the summer's classical Colorado Music Festival at Chautauqua Park. As Mrs. Irving would tell anyone, they lived in the prominent golf course community of Lake Valley.

"The Lord be with you," Father O'Brien boomed through the microphone, outstretching his arms. "Let us begin our celebration in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit . . ."

The readings were like verbal sedatives that caused Adam's drowsy head to bob. However, his sleepy mind registered scattered phrases of Father O'Brien's succeeding homily, each word a musical note that floated away like a helium balloon and faded into thin air. When Adam's mother noticed his swaying head, she gently elbowed him to stay awake.

During the Eucharistic Prayer, Adam again found his view on Angel, taking in her shapely posture and cascading hair. She started but refrained from turning, as though she felt his eyes on her. Later in prayer, Adam felt from her direction an unusual sensation, as though Angel was observing him. But when he turned her way, the girl had not moved.

Adam had first seen Angel in September of their junior year. Everyone chattered about the new girl from New York City. As Angel spoke with a new friend, Adam drank in her poise, her mannerisms, her charm. Unlike ever before, his body chemistry boiled as if a mad scientist had been experimenting inside his heart.

Angel joined the French Club, Leadership, the Spirit Club, and the cheerleading squad. Bewildered by her affect on him, Adam kept his infatuation for her a secret. And when she offered him a friendly greeting one day, her pearl smile and shimmering eyes persuaded him to ask her out.

Two anxious weeks of procrastination passed before he gathered enough nerve. He had limited experience with romance and had never met anyone as emotionally intoxicating as Angel.

He waited for her in an alcove close to where she passed between classes. His heart hammered; his palms perspired. When she arrived, he sucked a deep breath and was stepping hastily to catch up when he overheard Brianna talking to her.

"Has he said anything to you yet?"

"Not yet," replied Angel's voice, "but I hope he will soon."

"What are you going to do? Are you going to go out with him?"

She giggled. "I'd be crazy not to."

Adam's heart sank. Every popular boy at school talked about her. But maybe, he resolved, he could persuade her to go out with him instead. He breathed deeply, straightened his posture, and was stepping forward when he heard Brianna's voice again.

"But what will your parents say?"

"My mother wouldn't approve." She sighed. "But I'm not going to let that stop me. Would you?"

"Well, he's so cute, I'd go out with him," Brianna replied with a giggle, "even if he isn't captain of the football team."

Adam had heard all he needed to know. As he sulked away, he reflected on the last comment from Angel's best friend, "He's so cute . . . even if he isn't captain of the football team." He should have known Angel's dream boy was a football player—probably some brawny, silver-tongued rich kid.

At the final blessing, Father O'Brien painted a cross in the air. "The Mass has ended. Go in peace." The organ pipes sounded the recessional hymn and the priest bellowed a thundering chant down the aisle. Again, Adam glanced toward Angel but diverted his view. *Don't even tease yourself*, he thought. *Anyway, she's Bobby's girl.*

Father O'Brien clogged the flow of impatient parishioners, backing up the exit worse than rush-hour traffic. As Adam and his mother approached, the priest beamed and enthusiastically waved them over.

"Here are the Jensens. Nice to see you attending mass together." Adam stretched toward the man's chubby hand. "Adam, I'm sure you have many plans for the future. Good morning. Good morning." Exiting parishioners interrupted him. "You'll be graduating this summer, right? What colleges are you applying at?"

The Irving family swaggered passed and the priest bowed his peach-colored head. "The fact is, Father," Adam said, slipping his hand from the man's grip. "I'm not going to college—"

"What he's saying Father," his mother interjected, "is he hasn't decided which college. Yet." The Dempseys restlessly waited next in line. Mrs. Dempsey whispered behind shielded hands.

Adam glowered at his mother. *You never give up, do you?* "I'm going to pursue my music career."

"Oh, a musical career? Do you play jazz? Classical? You know what they say, 'Classical music is as timeless as the soul.'"

"Yes, it is," Adam replied, for he loved and respected music of every place and time. "But my calling is to play top forty rock, classic rock, and originals."

"Rock and roll?" he asked, almost laughing. "Listen to your mother. She knows what's right for you. It was very nice to see you together. Good day." Father O'Brien then moved on to the Dempseys.

Adam felt discouragement attacking from every side. Brad walked out without notice; his mother persisted forcing him into college; even Father O'Brien couldn't offer an encouraging word. Were these a test of his stamina? Or a wake up call that destiny had never intended him to be a musician?

The Irving family mingled outside when Adam finally escaped with his mother. Dazed from his thoughts, Adam's eyes fell on the scattering crowd. His mother's eyes followed her son's line of vision. "She's a beautiful girl, isn't she?"

"Who is?" he asked, knowing only too well whom she meant.

"You know who."

He invoked his right to remain silent.

"I always thought you liked her."

Adam didn't reply. He would neither agree nor disagree with her aloud. He wanted her to sense his anger for her self-appointed college-recruiting mission. But inside, Adam suppressed feelings for Angel that he dared not share with anyone. Especially his mother. Especially now.

The Irvings sauntered away like a Saks Fifth Avenue display window that had come to life. As they passed Adam's truck, Mrs. Irving scowled—perhaps wondering how such a loathsome wreck could park next to their discriminating automobile.

Adam walked his mother to her car in cold, sleepy silence. "I'm visiting friends in Los Angeles for a few days," she said when they arrived, "and then I'm off to Hong Kong and Singapore. I'll be home on Friday. Do you need any money?"

He shook his head, even though his truck needed gasoline and he only had three dollars. He spent last party's earnings repaying Mike for a loan to fix his truck's water pump.

"You sure?"

He nodded. Because of her persistence about college, he wouldn't grant her any satisfaction of control over him. Mike would give him a ride to school and rehearsal, and the house had plenty of peanut butter and jelly.

Striding to the parking lot, he watched the Irving's car pull away. He unlocked his truck and started the engine while the corroding muffler grew louder. As he turned to go west, the snowy morning mist swallowed the Irving's car to the east. And for a moment, he thought he saw Angel looking back at him.

6

The next day after school, his truck sputtered from the cold school parking lot. The engine backfired, jerking him and knocking over his backpack as the truck lugged to a red light. Adam revved the engine and inserted his new Snowblind CD “World’s Apart,” hoping the music would lift his lowly spirits. He needed an inspiring shot of music to prepare for the short-staffed rehearsal ahead.

*I can't give you finer things
Like fancy cars and diamond rings
What I have is worth more than gold
A secret until now untold . . .*

The truck’s tail pipe exhaled white exhaust in rhythm with the bass. The music energized him, pumped motivation through his veins. He drummed the steering wheel, delivered a verse in harmony, and strummed an imaginary guitar.

*Every time you walk by me
I get this tugging in my heart
'Cause even right in front of me
You and I are worlds apart . . .*

In the left lane, a cherry-red BMW pulled beside him. When he glanced over, he found Angel Irving laughing at him from Bobby Wilmar’s car. Adam blushed and smiled crookedly. On her lap, a toy-poodle in a pink sweater yelped wildly at Adam’s random moves and the bass booming from his truck.

*Take my hand and I'll show you
How to make a brand new start
Say good-bye to the world you once knew
And live the truth inside your heart . . .*

Angel calmed the animal with soft caresses and whispers. He absorbed her beauty, every second unable to pull his eyes away, and feeling like a deaf mute hearing his first melody. But realizing he'd never hold Angel, never kiss her full lips, his smile dissolved. Like the song, they were from different worlds—she from money and he from dreams. And he turned away like a poor boy turning away from a puppy in a pet shop window.

When the light changed, he lurched his old truck forward; in seconds, Bobby's racer blasted passed Adam full throttle. The music now annoyed him, taunted him, and he stabbed the power button.

At Gabe's house, a frozen gust shook the bare, frigid tree branches and sent a howling moan over the chimney. Adam's bad mood escorted him through the barn door. Mike glanced up from his keyboard and greeted him with an improvised ditty. In the corner, Gabe tightened a clamp on his free-weights.

"Without a drummer, why bother rehearsing?" Gabe asked to no one in particular.

"Same reason as all the other times," Adam said, pointing a frame on the wall that displayed their motto: *Pursue the Music with a Relentless Passion*. Over the years, he had repeatedly expressed these seven words; he had written them, he lived by them and would die by them. Without complaint, Gabe came along, first heaving a dozen bench presses.

With an imaginary drumbeat, they undertook familiar songs. But Mike started too early or too late, Gabe's bass chords were too fast or too slow, and Adam's guitar licks jabbed the notes like a dull knife. Without a pulse, the instruments' sounds slipped and slammed into one another. After the fourth attempt at an original, Mike spoke up.

"Adam, you hit those strings any harder you're going to snap them."

Adam rubbed his eyes. The thoughts clouding his head restrained him from connecting with the music. He would have to cancel next weekend's show and they had no leads on a new drummer. But more, he couldn't erase from his mind the girl he had seen at the stop light.

"Nobody is into playing today," Mike said.

Adam made no argument. "We need to spend time finding a new drummer."

"I'll search online," said Mike, "and check the bulletin board at Alpine Music."

"I'll check with the other music shops," Gabe said. "And search the newspapers. But first I'm going to hit the weights."

"I'll post notices at the other high schools and the university." Adam inhaled a deep, renewing breath. "Whatever it takes, let's make it happen!"

As Adam and Mike gathered their coats, Gabe curled his fingers around his weight set and hammered a series of stiff grunts.

"Before you got here, Gabe and I had a good talk," Mike told Adam after they had left. "He's churning his frustrations into muscle. With Brad gone, we agreed we'd try not to argue."

Adam nodded and they scuffed toward their vehicles, steam flowing from their mouths and nostrils. When they got to Adam's truck, Mike grabbed Adam's arm.

"And what was up with you today? Something besides this drummer problem?"

Adam's face sprang with surprise at Mike's intuition. Mike had known him too long for Adam to conceal many secrets. But this secret, he had to keep to himself. He had to single-handedly overcome these feelings about Angel himself.

Adam laughed, but not joyfully. "It's nothing," he said, dropping his eyes, thinking of Angel.

"Are you sure?" Mike asked. "You can tell me anything. Remember that garter snake you put in Diane Baldwin's desk in the second grade? Remember how loud she screamed when it slithered out? I didn't tell on you then."

"I always liked snakes," Adam said and grinned at the mischievous memory. "But as I recall, it was your idea in the first place."

Mike smiled, freckles changing position on his cheeks. "Well, if you ever need to bend an ear, I'm here."

Adam briefly reflected. "Sounds like the verse of a new song."

Mike immediately broke into a blues tune. "*If you ever need to bend an ear . . .*" He poked Adam, signaling him for the next line.

Adam grimaced but finally gave in at Mike's persistence. "*When you feel like singing the blues—*"

"*I'm the one who is always here—*"

"*When all your headlines read bad news.*"

Mike chuckled in his cackling way. “This is going to be a big hit!”

“You’re right,” Adam said, affectionately smacking Mike’s shoulder. “See you tomorrow.” This sent Mike off, repeating and improvising the next verses to himself.

As they had agreed, Blue Denim cranked up their marketing machine in search of a drummer. They divided their time rehearsing and following up leads. Like fishing, they could do little else but wait for a bite.

Years behind in History, and miles of dusty roads to go in *The Grapes of Wrath*, he knew he should do homework late that evening. But he hadn’t run in days and his mind, body, and spirit had lost their symmetry. More than homework he needed to catch up on five miles of sweat and thought.

With such a tight schedule, Adam resorted to running whenever he could budget the time—mornings, afternoons, evenings, nights. Warming up, he pivoted his upper torso, cracked his back, and stretched his leg muscles. He dressed warmly, wrapping himself in layers and adding mittens, a ski mask and scarf.

He greeted the late night air with a deep breath. The chill nipped at his nostrils and at the warm whites of his eyes. Setting his watch, Adam bounded into the street. At his peak during cross-country, his best time over five miles had been 28 minutes 31 seconds; in cold slippery weather he rarely broke 30 minutes. Adam hoped after he graduated, he’d have more time to maintain a disciplined running schedule and break his previous personal record.

He treaded along Baseline up to Chautauqua Park and jogged along the barren tree-lined streets with the dark Flatirons towering above. He circled the playground with its thick snow piled high on the swings and slides. While frosty slivers gathered on the nose of his ski mask, he heeded his steps over frozen icy patches of snow. Ahead approached another chugging bundle of steam who extended a raised hand in greeting.

His days so consumed, he could seldom sort his thoughts, assess his progress, and adjust his bearings. School and rehearsal were each full-time endeavors. Learning and social interaction from school stimulated his mental spirit—but every minute he anticipated playing music to satisfy his creative spirit.

He returned down Baseline and rounded the corner North on Broadway. He accelerated up to Flatiron Market where he had stocked and bagged groceries in his junior year. He still regularly visited, buying

peanut butter and coffee and greeting old friends. François, the owner, had never taken away Adam's discount privileges and always found time to chat.

Everyday Adam grew more frustrated with their drummer dilemma. He recalled Calvin's words: *I'll bet the solution to this problem is right under your nose.* He tried to think positive, to have faith—but to this predicament there seemed no easy answer. Blue Denim needed more than a drummer—they needed a friend, a team player, and an artist; someone who shared their ambition to change people's lives through music. And he thought again of the mental image Calvin had helped draw for him.

In the past four months, Blue Denim had accomplished more than in years of irregular practice. Yet, in his sacrifice to his music, he missed the Friday night pizzas and window-shopping along Pearl Street Mall and homework dates that ended in a make-out session. Perhaps his stunted social life explained his obsession for Angel. Or was it something else?

As an artist, he wanted to stir emotions of faith, of hope, of love. But without experience, could he write and sing of love with authority? Still, a romance could destroy the band's momentum and future. He had to be strong, be a model for his band. He wouldn't look at or think about Angel. Adam decided that, in his mind, Angel no longer existed.

A mile later, he pushed into the final stretch home. Running with such infrequency, he had lost his previous 40-mile-a-week stamina. Tempted to stroll the last quarter mile, he hurried to the reward of a mind, body, and spirit in balance.

He unlocked the door and replaced his hidden key under the brick. Once inside his room, he tore off his ski mask and cranked out his usual fifty push-ups and sit-ups. The hot water of the shower invigorated his muscles and washed away the sticky sweat from his skin.

Drying off, he stepped to his dresser and dropped his wrapped towel. He dressed in boxers and a tee-shirt, feeling peacefully tired and refreshed. Walking to his desk, a shadow raced passed the bushes outside his bedroom window. It could have been a cat or stray dog, or even a piece of paper blown by a breeze. But a cold chill ran down the back of his neck—the feeling that something, or someone, had been watching him again.

7

For a month, Blue Denim searched online, inquired at music shops, posted signs, and spread the word. At first, Adam's answering machine filled up with messages from their online ad. Most replies had little or no experience; those with experience wanted an older band with nightclub bookings or didn't complement the Blue Denim chemistry. In desperation, Mike took up the drums—until the others confessed that his drumming sounded worse than Adam's rusty muffler. When Adam forfeited their second show, the others lost faith they would find a drummer in time for the Morp auditions.

One afternoon, Adam heard his name shouted over the bustle and prattle in the school halls. He saw Denise Austin swimming through the crowd and tugging on the shirtsleeve of a reluctant male student. "Adam! Adam, wait!"

"Adam, this is my cousin Jesse from San Francisco and today is his first day at Boulder Valley." Adam recalled Denise previously mentioning him. Denise touched Adam's arm. "Jesse, this is Adam. Adam Jensen."

Adam accepted the boy's firm grip, taking in his husky frame, solid brown eyes and curly, dark hair—he looked familiar. The boy smiled, perhaps embarrassed by his cousin's introduction.

"Denise has told me a lot about you."

Adam grinned, knowing Denise's tendency to say 500 words when five would do.

"I told him we have History together and about your truck and how you played at Brianna's party and—" Denise rambled.

"Have we met before?"

"I'm sure we haven't," Jesse said, and Adam scratched his head. "I heard you have a band. Blue Jeans? I'd like to hear you sometime."

"*Blue Denim*," Adam chuckled and corrected him. "In a few weeks we're auditioning to the student body for a school dance." Adam chose not to elaborate the band's drummer dilemma to a stranger—even though he didn't seem like a stranger. "There'll be an assembly where the students will vote for their favorite band."

"Jesse visited during summer vacations," Denise said. Adam noticed her different earrings of the day: one a playboy bunny and the other, red lips. "Sometimes we would go to San Francisco and although my Dad doesn't like to travel my mom loves to travel and—"

Conscious of the class tardy bell sounding soon, Adam pointed to his watch. "I better go. Coach Robbins makes the last one to suit up do twenty extra sit ups."

"Mrs. Griffin makes tardy students get an excuse from the attendance office," Denise interjected as if it had direct relevance. "And if you're really late you have to plead for a slip from that slimy Mr. Knudson, the vice principal. He gives all the girls the creeps."

"See you around," Adam told them and scurried toward the gymnasium. Robbins could make the hour even more miserable if a tardy student caught him in a foul mood. As he hustled away, Jesse's voice called after him. "Adam, let me know if your band ever needs a drummer."

Adam waved, already mentally doing twenty extra sit-ups. An expression of surprise painted his face when Jesse's words sank in. *Did he say drummer?* Adam spun around and chased after them. "Hey, wait up! Are you a drummer?"

They stopped and the boy nodded. "Yeah. Didn't Denise tell you?" Then Denise broke in.

"He's a very good drummer, Adam. He's excellent—"

"How long have you been playing?" Adam asked, hushing her with a waving hand.

"Ever since I was six—about 12 years, I guess. Before moving, I was in a progressive rock band called 'Heart of the Bay.'"

"You have drums?"

"They're brand new," Denise injected. "He showed them to me. They're really pretty—"

"Five-piece—three toms, snare, and bass, plus cymbals and brass. A '70 Dodge Challenger hubcap adds some funk." Jesse's eyes glimmered, and then he lowered his view. "I bought them with the money from my dog. I had an AKC Labrador but our apartment here wouldn't take animals." The boy's eyes became glassy and he cleared his voice, fighting back something inside.

Denise had never mentioned Jesse was in a band. Just like Denise to babble non-stop about everything except important matters.

Adam teetered between curiosity and excitement. The kid had experience, new drums, and needed a band. Still, maybe he was just another rock-and-roll-star-wanna-be. “Coincidentally, we *are* looking for a drummer.” The tardy bell rang, but Adam forgot his concern over the extra sit-ups.

“Sounds interesting,” Jesse told him. “Let’s jam sometime.”

“We’re not looking for someone to jam with. Try out if you’re interested. But we practice everyday. Weekdays. Weekends. Holidays. We miss parties and dances and don’t get out unless we’re performing or critiquing. Don’t try out unless you’re willing to commit to that.”

Jesse nodded. “I’ll try out. But I don’t plan to join just any band.”

“We’re not just any band,” Adam told him. “We’re Blue Denim.”

“You’re going to love how he plays, Adam.” Denise added. “He’s really good and knows a bunch of songs. He even has a drum solo. I remember . . .”

The next night, sweat soaked the underarms, back and chest of Jesse’s ‘I Love my Golden Lab’ tee-shirt. He shook his wet hair and perspiration sprayed like a water sprinkler. Jesse had a musical ear for rhythms and while trying a Blue Denim original, developed the beat and suggested a twist on the intro.

Adam’s face expressed new hope. Mike reflected delight and even Gabe seemed to enjoy himself more than he had in months.

They spent two evenings rehearsing, talking, and learning about Jesse. They tested him, tried his stamina, saw if Jesse shared Blue Denim’s virtues, priorities, and goals. He knew many commercial titles and his nine-minute drum solo showed his creative diversity. Since Gabe didn’t sing, Blue Denim wanted someone to help Mike with background vocals; Jesse had more vocal range than did Brad. After rehearsal that evening, Jesse accepted their invitation to become Blue Denim’s long-anticipated drummer.

On Friday evening, Gabe’s little sister and her friends be-bopped to the beat of a new drummer. Music in the shed had never been more alive and Adam imagined each molecule transforming to a musical note and the notes chasing each other in an arcade of sound. While playing the evening’s last song, headlight beams swooped through the window. The girls rushed to peer outside as a car door slammed.

The barn door burst open and the music died a dissonant death. Brad staggered inside, his chin sprouting dark bristles and his hair messy and tangled. Wet patches spotted his dirty jeans and coat.

"I hope I'm not late," he said. Eyelids at half-mast, he gaped at Jesse and frowned. "Is that me? Have I been here all along and nobody told me?" He chortled and stumbled forward. The girls huddled against the back wall.

"What do you want?" Gabe demanded.

"Hey. I got my drums out."

"You busted the padlock getting in," Gabe said. "All you had to do was ask and I'd have let you in."

"No, didn't want to disturb you." He drew a liquor bottle from inside his coat, unscrewed the top, and swallowed. "Want some, anybody?" He held the bottle forward to each. "Mike? Adam? Me?" He laughed again, sipped and belched. "Gabe, how about a celebration drink?"

"We've already celebrated your departure." Gabe unbuckled his guitar strap and coiled like a cobra. "Now get out!"

Brad slobbered down another gulp and drooled. "Okay, okay, I'm leaving! But check it out! Rebel has gigs every weekend. We're even playing at a club in Denver tomorrow."

"Yeah, we heard you got booked at some dive by the railroad tracks," Mike said.

"We play anywhere to get exposure. What about you? Where are you guys playing?"

With Jesse so new, Blue Denim hadn't yet gotten any bookings. And none of them responded.

"Just what I thought." Brad gulped another swig. "We're going to kick your butts at Morp."

"Get. Out. Now!" Gabe gritted between teeth, legs ready to spring.

Brad stumbled toward the door, and then offered the bottle to the young girls. "Hi girls. Want a little drink?"

They fearfully crowded closer together and screamed as Brad approached. In an instant, Gabe had Brad's shirt collar in his fist. "I warned you, man. Doesn't anything register in this screwed-up head of yours?" Gabe jangled him, a button popping off Brad's shirt. Then Gabe dropped him, Brad's body crashing to the cement floor.

Brad drunkenly attempted to rise. After his second unsuccessful attempt, he rolled over, coughed, and vomited.

* * *

Under the History classroom whiteboard, gray-haired teacher Mrs. Griffin stared into space, seeing chapter eight unfold, or perhaps recalling it first hand. She waved and tapped her metal pointer to reel back wandering minds and drowsy heads.

Adam slouched in his chair, his text opened to page 176. He doodled on a paper and daydreamed through the window. Two rows over, Denise stared at him with dreamy eyes, only the Lord, or the devil, knowing her thoughts.

“ . . . and then at daybreak, January 9, 1861, the first shot of the Civil War was fired,” Mrs. Griffin said nasally, pacing behind her desk. “Across the Charleston Harbor, the vessel ‘Star of the West’ carried necessary supplies to Major Anderson—” She spotted Denise and followed the girl’s line of vision. “However, the ship was forced to return to New York before reaching its destination. Who can tell me why?” Several arms flagged the air but Mrs. Griffin ignored them. “Adam?”

He jerked as though snapped from a trance.

“Will you tell the class why the Star of the West had to return to New York?”

He had heard of the star of the North—there was one in the west, too? “To be honest, Mrs. Griffin, I don’t know.”

“Take a guess, then.” Her suggestion surprised him. “The Star of the West carried food, ammunition, medical supplies. Why would the vessel return knowing its cargo was so desperately needed?”

Adam saw but ignored Denise mouthing her guess: *It forgot something*. “I’m sorry, I’d just embarrass myself.”

She stared long over her glasses. “You’ve already embarrassed yourself, Mr. Jensen,” said Mrs. Griffin, who seemed to Adam to be a flat note in an inspiring symphony. “Did you read chapter eight last night?”

He shook his head. “After rehearsal last night, I tried. But I fell asleep.”

“You need to understand the importance of setting priorities. We’ll discuss how to form good study habits after class today.” She stepped toward Adam’s desk, and he attempted to shield the sheet with his hands. “With only two miles to go, the Star of the West returned to New York when it was fired at from Morris Island.” She slid the paper from him and observed guitars, notes and lyrics forming, what Adam thought to be, a creative musical collage. Mrs. Griffin folded the paper and paced to her desk. “After the attack from Morris Island . . .”

The bell ended each student's daily American History prison sentence. "The first 12 pages of chapter nine for tomorrow," Mrs. Griffin called over voices and slamming books. Adam watched each student leave, Denise last, stepping backwards and waving. The teacher called Adam and pointed to a chair beside her desk. As she unfolded his paper and slid up her glasses, he feared she'd punish him with a Star of the West essay assignment.

"All I want is to see you again, I don't know where and I don't know when. But it's you I must fight, and you I must beat, to avert your deadly kiss that is sweet." She stared over her glasses again. "Adam, this is very touching, almost Shakespearean. But what does it have to do with the Civil War?"

Knowing the question was rhetorical, he didn't answer.

"Young man, you have a remarkable talent for propping up your head and taking naps during American History. Are you getting enough sleep at night?"

He nodded and said, "Unless I have to stay up late doing homework."

"Adam, I shouldn't have to tell you this," she lifted a pencil and tapped the eraser like a gavel. "You have to set priorities. Studies come first. Squandering time playing music is not a priority."

Squandering time! Did anyone ever tell Michelangelo to quit squandering his time painting? Or Mark Twain that he wrote too much? Or Mozart that practicing piano was not a priority? "Music is the most important thing in my life, Mrs. Griffin. Even a greater priority for me than History."

His comment stunned the old woman, like the volume on too high when the music starts. "I take offense to that, Mr. Jensen. In my class, there is nothing more important than History. Do you understand?" She asked, her fixed stare like sharp prods poking him. He looked down, refusing to let himself agree with her, just waiting for her to assign that big, fat essay.

"I want you to consider the value of History when you take a short break from reading chapter eight tonight," she said, "and the first 12 pages of chapter nine. You will be sorry if you come to class tomorrow and you haven't read them."

He wasted no time arguing. He rose and darted away, but her voice caught him like a lariat. "Adam?" She held forward his sheet of paper. "I give only one warning. The next time—" she inhaled and said, "there better not be a next time."

Safely out the door, he anticipated the tardy bell for his last class, American Literature. Hustling toward the classroom, Denise suddenly appeared beside him.

"What happened, Adam? Are you in trouble? Did she give you an essay to write?"

"Just got a lecture on History. And a final warning," he told her, his eyes peeled straight ahead. "I dodged the bullet—this time."

"I didn't read chapter eight last night, either," she said. "American History is so terribly boring."

"I don't think it's the subject," he said. "I think it's how it's being presented, if you know what I mean."

"You know, since we're both having trouble staying interested in that class, I thought we could, you know, get together and study."

"I'm too busy with rehearsal," he told her. "Jesse's doing great but we need to tighten more songs before the Morp auditions."

"You have to study sometime." He reluctantly stopped as she produced a folded paper, touching his fingers handing it to him. "Here's my cell and home numbers. We can study either at your house or mine. Or somewhere else, if you want. The library would be okay, but you can't talk there—"

"I won't be able to—" he said, trying to break free.

"But Adam, I need you. I, I don't know who else can help me." Her eyes pleaded. "You're my only hope."

He stepped backwards as the halls started to empty. "Look, Denise, I'm going to be late."

She grabbed hold of his arm. "Promise we can study sometime?" Her eyes so big, she looked like a desperate puppy kicked too many times. "Please."

He thought to suggest she ask another friend—but he never saw Denise with other friends. Every day she traveled to and from each class alone. Even when she talked with other girls, she seemed displaced—a girl with a thousand acquaintances but not one true friend. Except for him.

"Okay. I'll call you," he said out of compassion.

He swiftly turned around and suddenly bumped into and spilled the texts held by another student.

"Oh!" the student cried.

He retrieved the fallen books and when he glanced up to return them, he was staring into the eyes of Angel Irving.

8

Over the audio-video system, Eddie “The Cruiser” delivered the Daily Flash, a newscast announcing school news and events. “The Spirit Club will sponsor Morp on Friday, March 31, starting at 9:00 p.m. in the school gymnasium. Morp is a fundraiser for the prom and features Boulder Valley High’s most promising band. Audition and band requirements for Morp have changed from previous years. Interested bands must pick up a requirements sheet and official entry form at the Student Activities Office . . .”

At rehearsal that afternoon, Adam pulled a printout from his back pocket. “Morp just threw us a curve ball,” he told them, their expressions between curiosity and concern. “Number eight: Discrimination. Each band must demonstrate sexual non-discrimination by representing each sex either vocally and/or instrumentally.”

“What does that mean?” Gabe ripped the sheet from Adam’s fingertips, his smoky hair falling over his forehead. “Are they saying we have to add a girl to the band?”

Jesse leaned against Gabe to read it for himself. “Can they do that?”

“There is only one thing we can do,” Mike said, his tone serious but his eyes sparkling with some quip, “Dress up the new kid in a wig and pantyhose.” Jesse frowned and pressed his lips tightly together. Not until Mike shrugged and stepped away did Jesse grin at Adam.

Adam had contemplated this since he had picked up the requirements. “Everyone knows the competition this year is between Blue Denim and Rebel. Fortunately for them, they already have Lucy.”

“And fortunately for us,” Mike added, “we *don’t* have Lucy.” This got a chuckle out of Jesse and Adam, but Gabe’s unblinking eyes kept re-reading the incomprehensible words.

“As for us, we aren’t left with much choice,” Adam said. “We have to temporarily add a female vocalist to sing backup and harmony—at least until we play Morp.”

“Forget it,” Gabe stated. “Morp is only a stupid high school dance. I say we fight it, or we forfeit.”

“Gabe, without Morp we won’t have the support we need at Colorado Battle of the Bands. In this business, you need a following that endorses you, says why you’re better than the rest.” Adam swung an arm over Gabe’s shoulder. “Listen. We’re going to turn this lemon into lemonade. We’re going to put up posters advertising that Blue Denim is auditioning for a female vocalist. Here is every girl’s big chance to land a singing position with an established band. I can already imagine the excitement it’s going to spark. And when audition time comes, everyone will be dying to hear what we sound like with our new vocalist.”

“That’s a great idea,” said Mike. He stopped to mimic Gabe’s frown before continuing. “We’ll make it a big publicity campaign.”

Jesse raised his arm to get their attention. “Yeah, and we’ll get someone from the newspaper staff to write an article in *The Spartan Gazette*. And get Eddie ‘The Cruiser’ to announce it during the Daily Flash.”

All eyes pointed at Gabe. He gestured a state of shock, as if his closest allies had turned on him like rabid wolves. “What about after Morp? Do we dump her when we’re done?”

Adam screwed up his face. “Maybe, maybe not. It’s hard to say. We’ll have to see.”

“I don’t believe this!” Gabe kicked an empty soda can from the stage. “Forget it! I’ll quit before we surrender to this kind of reverse discrimination.”

A lengthy silence made the mood stiff and cold. Without blinking, Adam captured Gabe’s attention. “None of us want to do this, but we have to. We have to, if we want *to pursue the music with a relentless passion*.”

Gabe folded his arms and sighed. “A female singer is the worst thing that could ever happen to this band. If you don’t believe me now, you’ll see.”

When he got home, Adam heard the house phone ringing from the front porch steps. He dropped his heavy backpack and quickly retrieved the key from under the brick. Poking into the darkness, he finally found the key hole and unlocked the dead bolt. He scrambled through the

kitchen, nearly tumbling over a chair leg, and caught the call on the fourth ring.

"Hello, Adam? It's me, Denise," her voice exploded inside his ear. "How are you?"

"Oh, hi," he said flatly. He flicked on the light, the kitchen clock displaying 10:10 p.m. He shuddered, anticipating the mountain of History pages awaiting him.

"How is Jesse working out?" she asked, Adam pulling the phone several inches from his ear. "I just knew he'd be perfect for you."

"He's doing great," Adam said, carrying the phone to the front door to retrieve his backpack and close the door. "But listen, I can't talk now. I still have at least three hours of homework to do."

"Me, too. I've been studying all night," she replied. "I was wondering if maybe tomorrow afternoon you wanted to come over and study with me?"

"Tomorrow, I can't Denise. I have rehearsal."

"Oh." Her tone dropped. "Well, how about tomorrow evening, then?"

"We rehearse every afternoon. And we continue in the evenings or have meetings or study music together." She had left enough notes on his windshield to have memorized his schedule.

"Well, how about Sunday afternoon, then? Maybe I can make us some banana splits. I make great banana splits." And then with a pleading tone she added, "You promised."

"Well, Sunday afternoon—"

"I know you're busy, Adam. But I really need your help."

How could he wiggle out of this? Recognizing her sincere need for assistance, he decided to just take his bad medicine and get it over with. "Well, just for a while. We are rehearsing then, too, so I can't stay long. I'll try to be over around three o'clock."

"Three o'clock is great!" she replied. "You know, you sure rehearse a lot. I would love to hear you play again. The last time I heard you play at Brianna's party I was thinking 'wow, these guys are the best.' I bet Jesse sounds good with you. Maybe I can come over and watch some time."

"Sure, maybe, but look, I have about a million History pages to read so—"

"She sure expects us read a lot in that class. Like chapter four was it? I kept reading and reading and reading—"

"Yeah. Listen, I got to go—"

“Chapter three was bad, too,” Denise resumed. “But at least it had more of those corny old pictures, but I think it took longer to read because it was so boring. I read about one hundred pages before I realized that I didn’t remember a single word, and then I had to start all over—”

“Denise!”

“Yes?”

“I am going to hang up now. Good-bye.”

“Oh, Adam?”

“What!”

“You won’t regret this, I promise.”

He hung up the phone and closed his eyes. Unfortunately, he suspected Denise would have more on her mind on Sunday than just studying.

9

Adam didn't know why he hadn't thought of the idea earlier. With four, large, empty coffee cans in each hand and a woodshop magazine under an arm, Adam hurried to the barn. With a foot, he knocked on the door. Mike followed close behind, lugging several two-by-six boards and a roll of electrical wiring over his shoulder.

Gabe opened the door and scooted to the side. "What's all this stuff?"

Mike crossed his eyes and made a goofy face at Gabe's suspicious frown. "It's arts and crafts day."

From behind his drums, Jesse broke his warm up to watch. When Adam nodded a hello, Jesse twirled a drumstick in reply.

"Mike, can you put those right over there?" Adam signaled to an area below the stage and then unloaded the cans. Stepping back out the door, he dropped the magazine into Gabe's hands. "It's in here."

Gabe ran his eyes over the front cover and yelled out the door. "Baby furniture! We're making baby furniture?"

"Uh-huh," Mike answered, turning for another load. "There's something I forgot to tell you, Gabe," he said in falsetto. "I'm pregnant! And you're the father!" Gabe lunged at Mike, but Mike skirted out the door, narrowly escaping injury.

"Page one forty-five," Adam shouted. He removed a bag of hardware from the cab while Mike retrieved the remaining wood. When they returned, Jesse and Gabe were reading over the article, mumbling comments.

"Lights!" Gabe nodded, pushing the door closed behind them. Gabe seldom agreed to anything the first time, maybe for argument's sake, or maybe just because he was Gabe.

"Not just lights. Stage lights. Bright, colorful, portable, and multi-directional." Adam squeezed between them and pointed. "We make

four banks with six lights to a bank. We can pivot each socket and set it at any angle. We can position each bank on the floor, hang them from the ceiling, or set them on tripods. And each light has interchangeable filters to vary the colors and intensity.”

Jesse looked up. “Where do they all lead? There must be a foot-pedal or something.”

“Better,” Adam replied. “They feed into a control panel.” He flipped the page. “The leads feed into these infinite control switches. Each light can work independently or in sequence with one or more of the others. Each bank has its own breaker, too. Here’s a wiring diagram.”

“It would take years to wire in all those switches and sequences,” Gabe said.

A banging knock rattled the door. “Is this STRUM?” came a voice from outside. “The Society for Talented but Radically Underpaid Musicians?” Gabe turned the door handle, and a smiling Calvin lugged in a matrix board teeming with switches, knobs, and buttons. “I have a donation.” He set the panel on the stage and clapped flying dust particles from his palms. “We’ve had this monster cluttering up the office for too long. Someone forgot it a couple years ago and never came back for it. I think all the switches work, or used to. You better check them though.”

Adam introduced Calvin to their new drummer. They shook hands and made small talk about San Francisco and Calvin’s job. Meanwhile, Adam and Gabe collected a variety of tools while Mike studied the article. Buzzing excitement warmed the room as they prepared for construction.

“I’m booking bands for April and May,” Calvin spoke up later, “and I remembered a young and dynamic band that will all be of legal age sometime soon.”

“Everyone is 18 except me,” Mike said, smiling. “I’ll be 18 April 1st. Naturally I’ve been teased all my life that I’m just an April Fool’s Day joke.”

Gabe unraveled a long extension cord for the circular saw. “How can we get booked at Rocky’s?”

“I’ll tell you how other nightclubs work, then I’ll tell you how I work.” Calvin sat in an easy chair. He regularly coached Adam, but was always agreeable to help them all learn the business. “When you’re trying to get booked at other nightclubs and they don’t know you, your first step is getting them to listen. If you’re unknown, this is your biggest obstacle because you still have to establish your credibility.

“Now, you got to get decision-makers to listen to you. Sing over the phone if you have to. But remember, live music is always better, even

though lots of places want a demo CD first. When you're contacting these people, have one spokesperson identify himself as the band's manager. It's more professional and they're more inclined to listen if they think someone likes you enough to represent you."

"How far in advance is Rocky's booked?" asked Gabe.

"I have some bands scheduled a year in advance. But I try to book out at least two to three months for promotional reasons. Now, here's how I work bookings. If a band cancels out, I refer to a reserve list. Usually, before I book anyone new, they've been on that reserve list for a while. And I can get you on that list beginning April first," he told them, and added with a grin, "No April fool's."

"What else can you tell us?" Mike asked. "What's the best way to promote ourselves?"

"Get exposure. Play everywhere, meet people, and follow up on every lead. But the most important part about promotion is being out there, having fresh material, your own musical personality. Music is like merchandise—what sells in the end is a product that is original, polished and creates demand." He climbed to his feet. "Buyers will pay a high premium once you've created demand."

The band played a couple songs for Calvin to hear the sound of the new drummer. Calvin showed his satisfaction through broad grins and head nods. After he left, each assumed a different responsibility on their lighting banks. Jesse measured wood and laid out materials while Mike drilled and cut; Gabe checked the connectors on the panel with a voltmeter and later measured and spliced wires together. Meanwhile, Adam supervised and made a list of additional materials.

"I spoke with Stephen Chan before P.E. on Friday," Adam said in between scribbles. "He offered to run the lighting panel and the mixer for Morp. And at a price we can afford."

"How much?" asked Gabe.

"In trade that we play at his birthday party. He'll be 18 the first week of May."

"Isn't that the weekend before the prom?" Mike asked.

"What if it is?" Gabe asked. "Are you planning on going?"

"Maybe," Mike replied, smirking. "Are you asking me out on a date?"

Gabe raised his fist as though to strike but Mike just howled at his reaction.

They made plans to complete the lighting banks with the additional materials, prime them, and paint them flat black. They were

confident lights would improve the dimension of their performance and give Blue Denim an advantage at the Morp auditions.

"I'll need a few hours off for school work this afternoon," Adam told them during warm up.

"Adam is generously donating his time to tutoring learning-challenged classmates," Mike said. "His first student is Denise Austin." Adam's disappointed face seemed to ask Mike why he had to say that.

"What?" Gabe asked. "Why are you doing that? That chick is just trying to get her hooks in you." Gabe expressed no discretion toward Jesse in his statement.

"She does come on kind of strong sometimes," Adam admitted. "But we're both behind in History and I agreed I'd help her catch up."

"I think there's one thing Denise would rather be doing with you than studying History," Mike said and winked. "And that's *making* history."

"Jesse, she's your cousin." Gabe said. "Tell her to leave Adam alone."

Jesse threw his arms up. "I have no control over her."

"Relax, you guys. I want to do this. After this afternoon, Denise will realize that we have no romantic potential."

"I hope you're right," Jesse said and tightened a drum skin. "I've known Denise a long time and I've never seen her this boy-crazy before."

All eyes focused on Adam. "After today she won't be."

On the Austin's house, peeling, white paint showed the weathered wooden siding underneath. A frozen pumpkin from Halloween was still on the front steps and the wooden handrail wobbled when Adam stepped up. Closing his eyes and inhaling, he knocked on the door. He knew what Denise sought through romance was a need for an honest and sincere friendship. At the right time, he would mention what a supportive friend she had been, and how their friendship had more lasting potential than any short-lived romance ever could. Once she saw this perspective, Adam could write off Denise's flattering but annoying flirtation forever.

Scampering footsteps lead to the door. Determined to make her best impression, Denise had brushed on more eye shadow than usual or necessary. She wore jeans that were too tight and a garnet-colored blouse with the top three buttons loosened. "Hello, Adam. I'm so glad you could make it."

Once inside, her drugstore perfume overwhelmed him and made him sneeze. "Bless you," she said, shutting and bolting the door. "I hope you're not getting a cold. I hate winter colds."

Against the dark paneling, a cat had clawed the Austin's old furniture and a worn, stained carpet filled the floor. A radio sang from the yolk-yellow kitchen and the house smelled of an old, dusty furnace.

"Here, let me take that." She grabbed and pulled on his jacket zipper with her boney fingers, grinning as happily as a little girl playing house. "Why did you bring your books? I thought sharing one book might be, you know—more cozy."

He made a crooked expression, hoping to curtail her any thoughts of follies. He could only spend two hours and planned to spend every minute studying.

In the kitchen, she poured them each a hot cocoa. "I thought maybe we could have banana splits when we take a break." She set the mugs down together and scooted a chair next to him. "Isn't this fun?"

Fun wasn't the first word that came to mind, but he smiled politely. He slurped his cocoa and then drew a puzzled face. "Where are your parents?"

"They're visiting my uncle in Montrose this weekend. They won't be back until late. So we have the house to ourselves!" She smiled brightly. Adam observed her one ear contained a heart earring and the other, a cartoon devil. "I just love studying with someone—it makes the class more interesting, don't you think? I'd always rather study with someone than by myself." She giggled. "And I'd always rather study with you than with anyone else."

Adam disregarded her statement and opened the text. "Let's start here, with what happened to confederate currency during the war."

"Would you like me to fill up your mug?"

"No, thanks. In chapter five—"

"It's no trouble. How about more whipped cream? Or some marshmallows?"

"Can we start? Please?"

"Okay—" she replied, and then added. "Say, would you like some cookies or something with your cocoa?"

Adam spent two frustrating hours redirecting Denise's attention back to the same universe as History. She had mastered changing the subject, showing him her exhaustive Disney movie collection, wishing to discuss her favorite modern romance films, and explaining how she had obtained a collection of no less than 85 Barbie dolls. After each distraction, Adam was firm in shifting the subject back to their History studies.

The hands on the wall clock crawled. He watched the time with the anxiety of an innocently imprisoned man about to make parole. When five o'clock arrived, they had covered only eight pages of the text and he overtly directed his view to his watch. "I'm all out of time, Denise. I have to be going now," he told her. "The guys are waiting for me to get back."

"But I didn't even make banana splits. Wait, it won't take long." She dashed to the counter, opened drawers and cabinets and clanked spoons and bowls.

"No, thanks," he said. "I don't have time."

"But we didn't even finish the chapter. Do you want to come back this evening? I could make us the banana splits then and—"

He collected his notes and shut his book. "We won't finish rehearsal until late."

"Well, how about next Sunday?" She got that whiny plea in her voice again.

"I'm sorry," he said. "We'll be busy every weekend getting ready for Morp."

She pursued him to the front door, setting and baiting traps to study again. She suggested meeting on three different dates, each of which he declined. When he arrived at the door, he planned to stress to her the importance of their friendship, trying somehow to sound sincere. Done correctly, the right words would free him from Denise's fantasies forever. During his final steps, he mentally selected exactly what to say.

He turned to speak when she took his hand and shamelessly asked, "Adam, would you like to see my bedroom?"

As innocent as the words may have been, her eyes were saying something completely different. "Look, I'm already late."

Unabashed, she added, "You won't be sorry."

This certified her intentions—Denise's flaming hormones were burning out of control. Tempting thoughts ignited in his head; he could so easily have had her, and her proposition was admittedly arousing. But if he conceded, he would surely create a living nightmare.

Adam swiftly unbolted the door and the cool air extinguished his fiery thoughts. "Denise, next to music, I value friendship more than anything else in my life—" As if she hadn't heard a word, she slid her arms around his sides. Evading her, he stepped back until he pressed against the door frame. "And your friendship is very important to me," he told her, but her closed eyes and extended lips loomed toward him.

"Friends are—" he tried to complete, but she ignored him and contacted his mouth with a warm, wet French kiss. Although a

chatterbox, Denise was trim and attractive, and he lost his sensibilities for a confused moment until pulling away.

“I understand why you have to go now. But when the time is right,” she whispered, “I’ll be here for you. Oh, and I can’t tell you now,” she said and giggled, “but next week I have a *big surprise* for you.”

10

A hard guitar riff signaled the start of the school's daily news broadcast, sponsored by video production. All eyes directed toward the video monitors in the classrooms and around the school. "Good Morning Boulder Valley High and welcome to the February 20th edition of the Daily Flash. I'm your newscaster, Eddie 'The Cruiser.'"

"Today's headliner: Good news for all female singers—Boulder Valley's own *Blue Denim* is seeking a female vocalist for lead and background vocals." Superimposed over Eddie's left shoulder was the band image the guys used on the cover of their demo CD. "Eligible participants must be knowledgeable about music, be available to rehearse daily, and obviously have a good singing voice. Auditions are this Friday afternoon at four o'clock. Please bring any instruments or sheet music you desire. For more information, contact Adam Jensen or me . . ."

By four o'clock on audition day, a dozen chatty contestants and spectators crammed the inside of Gabe's barn. Most were there to watch and listen, including a reporter from the Boulder Valley High *Spartan Gazette*. Of the two intending to audition, one gripped a tambourine and the other, lyrics scribbled on a notepad. The auditioning girls sat on a small bench opposite the stage as they fidgeted and nervously hummed to themselves.

A card table nearby featured a rainbow of sheet music, and on the office coffee table were paper cups and water. In the office, Gabe's sister and her friends voted on the appearance of each incoming contestant. On stage, Adam and Mike collaborated on a short ditty while Jesse provided timing. Gabe tuned his bass guitar by ear, a scowl depicting his true inner feelings.

"Hello everyone," Adam spoke through the microphone, his shiny black Stratocaster strapped to him. "Thanks for coming and for your

support. We are Blue Denim. On my left is Mike on keyboards. Jesse on drums. And on bass guitar is Gabe—” He stopped as the creaking door hinges signaled another incoming visitor. A smile overwhelming her face, Denise flapped a waving hand.

“Hi, everyone. Hello, Adam.”

Denise obviously wanted to hear how Jesse sounded with the band and to see who was auditioning for the position.

“Remember when I said I had a surprise?” she asked. “Well, here I am. I’m going to be your female vocalist.” Denise wore an out-dated pair of jeans and a black tee-shirt that read: *It’s Okay. I’m With The Band.*

Jesse called attention by clearing his throat. “I sort of mentioned to her that we needed a vocalist before it was announced at school.” He spoke under his breath. “But I didn’t think she would try out!”

Adam should have anticipated Denise’s antics. Her notes weren’t working, her flirts and invitations had bombed; practically seducing him had failed—why not this? “Please have a seat, Denise,” he said and turned away. “We need a female vocalist without other commitments. We meet every afternoon, many evenings, and much of the weekend. We rehearse a lot, we study music together, and we have meetings. We’re dedicated artists and musicians.”

Besides Denise, Adam knew one of the other girls from school, Sonya Jackson. One day he had overheard Sonya in a music class deliver a flawlessly rendered solo. And he anticipated the pleasure of hearing her sing again.

“On the card table you’ll find sheet music and lyrics to many of the songs we know. If you don’t see the song you want to sing, just ask. If you’ve heard us play at parties, you know our style. We play top forty rock, classics, and originals. Our style is unique and upbeat. We keep up with the new songs but focus on originals.”

Again, the barn door opened. Adam blinked even more baffled than by Denise’s entrance—in the doorway stood Rebel’s arrogant singer, Lucy Parker. She gnawed on a mouthful of gum and looked around like she owned the joint. “Hey. I’m here to audition.”

Mike grinned a mischievous smirk. They knew his opinion of Lucy and by his expression, it was apparent Mike was dreaming up what he might say to her.

Although Rebel was Blue Denim’s leading competition, their genres of rock and roll were distinctly different. Blue Denim prided themselves on artistry in lyric and note; Rebel’s music capitalized on

volume and hard chords that lacked imagination and taste. "Sorry Lucy," Adam said. "Our singer can't have other commitments."

"I'd say singing in a crappy competing band is a commitment," said Mike, looking around. "Wouldn't you guys?"

Lucy glared at Mike. "I am a talented vocalist," she said, her Jersey accent as whiny as ever. "I can sing all styles of music. And I'm looking for more action."

Although her intentions seemed obvious, Adam decided to let her stay; he hoped to gain some insight into Rebel's strategy and to determine how carefully Rebel had checked into the detailed Morp requirements.

"We're glad you would consider joining us, Lucy," Adam stated, sounding surprisingly sincere, even to himself. "There's sheet music on the table. Find something and take a seat." She scuffed to the table in tiger-skin tights and leather jacket revealing her pierced belly; after numerous bleachings, her natural hair color was a mystery to all but her and God. "Our immediate goal is to play at Morp and then at this summer's Colorado Battle of the Bands. Until Morp, the person we select will be temporary."

"Don't you have anything good to sing?" Lucy interrupted, shuffling sheets like she was at the cosmetics bargain bin.

Adam ignored her, repelling her attempt for attention. "Please audition in the order that you arrived," Adam said. "State your name, phone number, any instruments you play, and our administrative assistants will take down the information." The young girls in the office giggled and Megan held high a blank paper and blue crayon. "Select one song and we'll play it through the second chorus. Are there any questions?"

"What's our cut?" Lucy asked.

"If you're selected, we will negotiate a fair amount," Adam told her. "Just concentrate on the singing."

"I'm already an established professional," Lucy said. "I've been singing for six years. Agents and producers contact me regularly. If I decide to join you, I won't start for less than 30 percent."

"It wouldn't matter if they didn't pay anything," Denise suddenly blurted. "It's an honor just to sing with them. Blue Denim is the best band around and Adam is the hottest guitarist in this state." Lucy sneered, but Denise beamed at Adam and the others.

Adam tried to smile graciously. The young girls giggled while Lucy popped a bubble at Denise and flopped on the bench. "Are there any other questions?" Adam asked, searching their faces. "Don't worry if you make a mistake; just pick up where you left off."

The first girl promenaded to the microphone wearing white boots with a fringe vest dancing around her. When Lucy wanted to go first, Mike reminded her that everyone had to wait for her turn, even established professionals with six years of experience.

The first contestant was a heavy, artificially blonde girl. She introduced herself as Melody, which sent murmurs and giggles through the on-lookers. The band later learned that Melody's real name was Hillary who wanted a more appropriate sounding name. They restarted her selected song three times before the girl grasped the timing. When she did sing, her throaty voice growled raspy lyrics as a cover up for carrying a tune. She held the microphone too close, causing an amplified gasp with each inhale. Her big finish came when they completed the second chorus and she chirped, expecting another line.

Adam politely thanked her and asked the next contestant, Sonya, to step forward. With light blue eyes and caramel hair, many mistook dainty Sonya for a junior high school student. She told them that she played flute, the tambourine, and had been "born singing."

Sonya smartly selected a lyrical ballad to demonstrate her vocal range. Her steady voice blended the lyrics with the notes. Her resonance and tones were pleasing, her pitch was crystal clear. She blushed during a minor error without calling attention to it. Except for Gabe, the others' eyes reflected the same expressions of approval as did Adam.

Testing her to an impromptu, Adam asked her to sing a faster selection. She responded quickly, swiftly inserted lyrics, and knew when her tambourine was appropriate. Sonya's musical versatility made up for her limited command of stage presence—a skill they could teach her. They had yet to determine if she could commit until Morp, but to Adam, Sonya easily fulfilled their expectations. With only Denise and Lucy left, Sonya had all but secured the position.

"Nicely done, Sonya. Thank you," Adam told her. Sonya nodded, bowed, and smiled. She had just returned to the bench when the hinges creaked again, and a gust blew the door open. Framed in the doorway, with rosy cheeks from the chilly afternoon breeze, stood wide-eyed Angel Irving. "Oh, I'm sorry," she said. "The door got away from me."

For a long while, Adam stood stunned. A flurry of thoughts stormed his head like befuddled musical notes colliding and crashing together. Was Angel Irving, daughter of the city's most sophisticated family, auditioning for a rock band? For their rock band?

Angel slid out of her long wool jacket. "Forgive me for being late. I had a personal emergency I couldn't avoid," she said. "I got here as quickly as I could."

"Are you here to audition?" asked Adam, wondering perhaps if she was a curious spectator.

Angel's face expressed surprise. "Of course."

"There are some song sheets on the table," Adam said, his voice with an unnatural crack. He was suddenly self-conscious of his dry tongue, his palpitating heart, a pimple on his chin. "Would you like to select a song from there?"

"Oh, thank you," she replied. "Do you have the song you played at Brianna Duncan's party? I think it was called 'Friend to the End.'"

Angel had requested a Blue Denim original. Perhaps intentional, but none-the-less, a flattering strategic move. "Yes, we do. It should be on the table. Do you see it?"

She searched and located the sheet and held it up. "Found it. Thank you."

Angel stepped to a seat where Lucy snickered and sighed. "Let's get moving. I don't have time to sit here all day. I want to go next."

"Only one more person before you, Lucy," Adam told her.

"Well, I think I should go next because I have experience. And that should give me *seniority*."

"You can't," Gabe burst, obviously losing his cool. "And it's *seniority*, not seniority." Lucy perched her lips and pouted while shooting sneers at Gabe.

"I'm next!" Denise hopped forward. "Thank you, Adam and Blue Denim. Hi, Jesse! As you know, I'm Denise Austin at 555-8311. I'd like to thank you for this opportunity. I'd like to first of all tell you that I will never let you down. I will do more than what is expected of me. I will constantly improve myself for the benefit of the band. Although I have enjoyed singing for a long time, this is my first attempt at becoming professional . . ."

Lucy gestured as if gagging herself to no one in particular. This caught Angel's attention, and Angel smirked after observing Lucy's tiger-skin tights, her ragged blouse, and purple eye shadow. When she looked away, Lucy sized-up Angel's fresh blue jeans and white blouse—the same colors the band wore during performances. Lucy sniggered to herself, finding something esoterically amusing in Angel's appearance.

" . . . and for my song, I have selected, 'I'll Be Thinking of You.'"

Denise had selected her choice of earrings for the occasion—the letter “D” inside a heart, and a golden musical note. Jesse counted, and the music came alive. After starting off-key, her tone may have been palatable if not for the screechy overtones that caused them to cringe. She threw her arms out, rolled her hips, and consistently called attention to herself. Adam avoided eye contact, but on a few accidental occasions, she took advantage by winking to him.

Mid-way through, Mike chuckled at what must have seemed a game of charades. Observing this, Denise assumed her singing had prompted Mike’s glee. This bloated her with confidence and her performance grew even more exaggerated. She dramatically wailed and danced, this her single moment of fame.

When she finally finished, she released a squeal. “Wow, that was great!” She extended her bust and held a hand to her heart. “I loved it. Do you think I could do another?”

“I’m sorry, Denise,” Adam told her. “There are others waiting to audition.”

“Oh, just one more time? You let Sonya sing twice,” she whined. “Please.”

It was not what he said, for his mouth remained closed, but his eyes whipped her with a cold sting that made her shiver and blush. “Oh, well, gee, uh—thanks a lot.”

“Lucy, it’s your turn,” said Adam.

“We hope that didn’t take too long,” Mike said with a pout. “We know how busy you singing professionals are.”

She stood, glared, and pivoted to her side. She removed her gum and deposited it under the bench. “The song I’m gonna sing today is—”

“Your name and phone number, please,” Mike said.

Lucy rolled her eyes. First she had to wait her turn; then she had to follow the rules, too. She heavily sighed and stated, “My name is Lucy Parker. I lost my phone but you can reach me at my boyfriend’s number. 555-0418.”

“Any instruments?” Mike asked, knowing Lucy didn’t play a note on anything.

“No. Instruments distract me when I’m singing. Now, as I tried to say earlier, I’ve picked—”

“Wait a minute,” Gabe cried. “What was that number again?”

These formalities were too much for her to bear—first waiting in line, then having to follow the rules, then having to repeat her phone number! How much more of this nonsense could she tolerate? Her eyes slashed at Gabe and her fingers displayed each digit: “555-0418.”

"That's Butler's number," Gabe said. "I should know. I've memorized it after countless times of trying to reach him."

"Yeah, that's Brad's number. He's my boyfriend," she stated. "We've been seeing each other for a month. So what?"

Adam had been willing to play her game awhile, but this last piece of information validated what he had surmised from the start. "Lucy, why don't you tell us what you are doing here."

"I already told you." She curled her lip. "I'm looking for more action."

"Lucy," Gabe said, shaking his head, "it's obvious you're here to study your Morp competition."

Silently she held her guilty stare, trying to concoct a new angle. Conceding, she released a high, witchy laugh. "Of course I'm here because of Morp. Could you imagine me really singing for you?" She turned to retrieve her purse. "From what I've heard so far, you don't stand a chance at the audition."

"One of you has to be enrolled in school to qualify," Adam said, reflecting one of the Morp requirements. "Brad hasn't been in school for over a month. None of you attend Boulder Valley anymore."

She turned as though too put out to reply. "Brad wasn't suspended and he hasn't officially quit. He's not officially out of school until the semester ends. He qualifies us."

"Qualify or not," Gabe said, "you don't stand a chance at Morp."

Lucy opened a new piece of gum and dropped the wrapper. "I like your new drummer," she stated, winking at Jesse, "but not as much as your old one." Striding out, Lucy caught Angel's eye and stopped. Lucy stared coldly at Angel who simply smiled in return. This unnerved Lucy and she delivered a rejecting grin and expletive in return.

Lucy disappeared, leaving behind a chatty audience and an open door that Denise jumped up to shut. The realization that dropouts have more time to rehearse sent a riveting jolt through Adam. Fortunately, he concluded, Rebel lacked the discipline to make meaningful use of the time.

Nervousness had evaded him, but only until then. "Quiet down, please." Turning to Angel, he asked, "Angel, are you ready?"

"Yes, I am," she said, rising to her feet. "Hello, my name is Angel Irving. My phone number is 555-0684 and I play a little piano. I have selected your song 'Friend to the End.'"

Adam nodded self-consciously and changed to his electric acoustic. After verifying that the others were ready, Jesse did the count on his drumsticks. Adam strummed the guitar intro and the other

instruments followed. Angel inhaled deeply and her voice connected with the right chord.

Angel exhaled the first soft lines with such clarity that her very breath became the lyrics. Progressing to the chorus, she employed more stylistic liberties: A natural sway, cocking her head, and a confident strut.

In the office, the young girls watched in awe with mouths half-open. Angel molded her words into the melody, fitting them more precisely into the notes than the band ever had. The lyrics came to life and were a perfect fit with her feminine voice. Neither Adam nor the others expected a voice so robust, yet so sensitive. With each magnificent moment, Adam fell more into an emotional tail-spin, loving and hating and more confused with each lyric.

After the second chorus, none of them stopped, except Gabe, but only momentarily. The music's magic propelled them onward. They sailed into the instrumental with Angel swaying to the music. Musical notes descended on them like a cloud, filling the room with soft sounds and warm tones. Angel slipped out the microphone and at the next verse, her voice and the song danced together again. Her eyes touched his—such brilliant, living eyes. Adam wondered if Bobby had ever looked into them long enough to notice their sparkle of such unblemished clarity. And Adam wondered if the band had ever created music so pristine.

Angel released the last chorus—the last note she held long and steady, as clear and sharp as a diamond. As the final sound sadly slipped away, a thundering silence inflated the room. In the afterglow, Angel delivered a low, quick pant through a satisfied smile. Then the quiet evaporated with a burst of applause.

Adam's thoughts zinged—what could he say after such an emotional performance? Had he really heard what he thought or had the chemistry of her charm intoxicated him? No, for the first time in Blue Denim's history, they produced a song to near complete perfection.

"Okay. Thanks, Angel," Adam finally told her.

She seemed baffled, as though wondering if she had gone flat or missed a line along the way. During the performance, they had connected as if surrounded by some supernatural energy. And all that warranted was an *'Okay. Thanks?'*

"We appreciate everyone coming," Adam told them. "We will call you no later than tomorrow if you've been selected." Voices formed a collage of noise as the visitors collected their belongings. Angel retrieved her purse and stepped out, while conversing with Sonya. The *Spartan Gazette* reporter approached Adam, hoping for but denied of an inside scoop.

“Good luck in deciding,” Denise said, last to leave. “I’m sure you will make the best decision and select the most talented *and dedicated* candidate.” She turned toward the door, then back. “Oh, in case you were wondering, I *will* be home this evening.”

Megan and her friends stepped forward and handed Gabe their notes. “We think Angel was the best,” Megan said.

“Yeah, she was great,” said Sarah. “You should hire her.”

“Adam, do you think maybe someday I could be your singer,” little Christina asked, blushing.

“When you’re a little older you can try out,” he said, which made her blush even more and scamper away.

The barn returned to normal after Gabe thanked the girls for helping and then kicked them out. Jesse did not hesitate to voice his opinion first: “I don’t think there’s any question who we should pick.”

“Angel is just what we need,” Mike said and smiled. “She’s got a wonderful voice, is energetic, and has good stage presence. Not to mention the ‘eye candy’ factor.”

“She has my vote,” Jesse said. “Angel definitely had the widest vocal range. And from what I’ve seen, Angel is friends with just about everyone at school. That will help during the Morp auditions.”

Gabe’s face made a crumpled frown. “This whole thing is a stupid idea. I want to go on record that I would rather forfeit Morp than have a girl in the band.”

“Your comment has been registered,” Mike said, licking his finger and drawing in the air. “But you still have to choose.”

“I choose—” Gabe sneered. “I choose not to choose.”

“You can’t not choose,” Mike said, turning serious. “Look, this is only a temporary situation. Besides, we’re broke. Morp pays well and will generate some new gigs.”

“I don’t care,” Gabe replied. “I’m still not going to vote.”

“Okay, we’ll vote for you,” Mike stated and marked another line on the paper. “Three votes for Angel. Adam, your vote will make it unanimous.”

“Angel performed well. But what about Sonya?” he asked, the others looking at him amazed. “She has good vocal spectrum and her voice was clean and lively.”

They all muttered, but Mike phrased their response. “Sonya is a daisy,” he replied, “but Angel is a rose.”

For a long while, thoughts whizzed through Adam’s head like comets. He couldn’t outwardly confess his secret infatuation for Angel, that working with her would further exaggerate emotions he struggled to

suppress. But perhaps daily interaction would present Angel's less glamorous side, and cause his internal struggle to naturally resolve itself. Angel was unquestionably the best vocalist, reaching into three octaves. At last, he saw their faces shining with expectation.

"It's unanimous," he heard himself say. But by the thundering of his heart, he felt he'd made the most terrible mistake of his life.

11

Disregarding the chill outside, and that he hadn't slept well, and that he was hungry, Adam craved most of all an invigorating run. Instead of running from his problems, he met them head-on, and would resolve them by plotting his next course of action.

After dressing and stretching, he stepped outside, committing himself between the cold, starry sky and the silent streets ahead. Patches of hard, icy snow gathered on the northern sides of houses and along shrubbery where the sun's fingertips couldn't reach. The sky would snow one day and shine the next, but the nights wrapped everything in silvery frost.

His hazy awakening thoughts had questioned if Angel's fabulous performance had been a dream. Upon remembering, he felt an immediate excitement, followed by serious alarm. If some fortuneteller had ever predicted that Angel Irving would join Blue Denim, he would have scoffed at such a ludicrous prediction.

Although he had never asked her out, Adam could not keep an infatuated eye from wandering in her direction. During basketball season a year earlier, he video-recorded a game for Coach Robbins. Late third quarter, the Boulder Valley High Spartans were getting clobbered when Adam panned the cheerleaders for amusement. Fury blazed in Robbins' eyes when Adam missed the best play in exchange for close-ups of Angel's cheering, talking and laughing.

He jogged to Baseline Road, avoiding low hanging branches that had supported months of ice and snow. He turned toward the west, moonlight behind the Flatirons shaping a spiky silhouette of the mountain. As a youngster, Adam imagined the trees lining the top ridge were Indians in full headdress peering at Boulder's city lights below.

When he had called Angel to tell her of the band's decision, she released an excited acceptance, followed by a moment of uneasy

quietness. He asked her if anything was wrong, to which she responded, “No, not at all.” But her hesitation made him wonder what the girl had been thinking . . .

A thought disturbed him—what if, after joining the band, something sparked between him and Angel? A punishing gust slapped him for the notion. Then he laughed at himself—his imagination was running wilder than he was. The cordiality he saw in her pearl smiles and shimmering eyes he had seriously misinterpreted.

He couldn’t pretend, as he had earlier wanted, that Angel didn’t exist. As a part of the Blue Denim team, she needed his encouragement, his friendship, his leadership—but he vowed to keep his distance, to not look too long into her fascinating eyes or indulge in foolish fantasies.

His feet rhythmically carried him into Chautauqua Park. He ran passed the ranger station and by the empty guesthouses that filled up during the summer’s Rocky Mountain Classical Music festival. How somber their contrast in late winter to the warmth and life of the summer months. He kept up his momentum; it helped his thinking.

Another topic Adam had saved for consideration during his run was college. When the college materials she ordered had arrived, she positioned them squarely on his desk. To discourage her, he pushed the unopened envelopes aside. Upon noticing this, she unsealed and arranged them like travel brochures inviting him to some exotic vacation. At this he wasted no time dumping them, hoping she would notice and give up her relentless nagging.

When he returned home, he heard silverware clanging and cabinet doors banging in the kitchen. He found his mother busily preparing breakfast, wearing a terry cloth robe she had sewed herself and her fuzzy bunny slippers. “Good morning,” he said, pulling off his sweatshirt.

“Good Morning, Adam,” she replied, pouring coffee and yawning. “Out for a run already this morning?” She stepped to him with her steaming coffee, kissed his damp, rosy cheek, and made a disgusted face. “Whew! Hit the showers!”

Adam sniffed his underarms, finding nothing too offensive.

“I’m making some bacon and eggs. Want some?”

“Three of each,” he yelled over his shoulder.

In his bedroom, he pumped out his routine push-ups and sit-ups and undressed. He showered and sang with the radio, stopping to draw an occasional musical note on the steamy shower door. Afterwards, he stepped out wrapped in a towel.

“About time you woke up, Fluffy” he spoke at the dry aquarium. “Food day. You hungry?” He opened the lid and lifted out the six feet of

curling reptile. Fluffy slithered his tail around Adam's arm and erected his wandering head. Adam recalled his mother cringing in horror the first time Adam dropped a young rat into Fluffy's tank. Naive that boa constrictors consumed live prey, she assumed they ate "snake food"—like every morning Adam would provide fresh water and dried, vitamin-fortified, snake pellets.

"That's cruel," she cried, watching the trembling rodent huddled in the corner, sensing its danger. "He's so scared."

Mike had been visiting and was quick with a jest. "Fluffy's not afraid of a little rodent." Mike laughed hysterically but Adam's mother only snickered and stomped away. Since then, she refused to have anything to do with Fluffy.

The aroma of smoked bacon drifted into his room, sending hunger pangs to Adam's empty stomach. "Adam, breakfast is ready," his mother called.

"I'm going to eat then I'll feed you. Five, ten minutes tops." He returned the reptile, leaving the lid opened as he would soon return, and then dressed and dashed away.

In the kitchen, his mother served his breakfast and asked him to find some classical music on the radio. He rotated the dial until locating a soft melody that pleased her. Taking a section of the paper, she joined him as he read and quietly slurped between bites.

The tranquility of the music complemented the peace of mind that the run had given him. He could tell his mother was watching him, admiring him; this behavior at one time would have annoyed him. Although he enjoyed solitude in the quiet house, he felt a sense of comfort when she was home, and he knew their time together was shrinking daily. Before long, he and Blue Denim would be touring, and it would be months between the times he would see her.

They ate breakfast and said little, enjoying the relaxed, untroubled atmosphere. Suddenly, his mother shifted abruptly. Her eyes grew to twice their normal size and her face lost all color. She inhaled a choking gasp and released a horrifying scream.

12

Under the table, coiled around a bunny slipper, Fluffy raised his startled head and tightened the squeeze on his prey. By far, this was the strangest and most difficult rodent he had ever attempted to overtake.

“Fluffy!” Adam scrambled under the table. “How did you get out? Come on now, let go.” It took him a minute to relax and uncoil the animal’s firm grip.

His mother’s expression of fright was one Adam had never seen. She froze until he removed that scaly creature from her foot; then with trembling fingers, she patted her breast. “Why—why did he do that?”

“He was hungry. And you scared him.”

“I scared *him*! I scared *him*!” She contended. “He attacked me and *I* scared *him*?”

“Shhh! You’ll scare him again,” he whispered, massaging the reptile and curling him over his shoulder. “You were probably bouncing your foot like you always do and Fluffy thought your slipper looked like a decent meal.”

“I thought he ate rats, not slippers.” She folded her arms, her fear turning to frustration. “I don’t think it’s safe to have him in the house. What if one day he decides to eat me? I’ve heard of that, you know. Pet snakes attacking people in their homes.”

Adam couldn’t contain his chuckle. “He isn’t going to eat you. You’re too big. Well, maybe just your foot!” He laughed at the mental image. “Come on, Fluffy. Let’s not scare the girls anymore.”

He re-housed the animal and admonished him, this time fastening the lid securely. After a short trip to the garage, he returned holding a small, white rat by the tail. Adam first pretended to consume the wiggling rodent himself, and then diverted it to Fluffy’s tank.

“Bon appetit.”

Later that morning, Denise phoned Adam to ask who had won the auditions. When he told her, she became, possibly for the first time, suddenly without words. Before saying good-bye, she muttered. "Adam?" He heard her snuffle and inhale. "Never mind." And a heavy sob penetrated his ears before she hung up.

Knowing of Angel's participation in extra-curricular activities, Adam was concerned about Angel's availability. He further wondered if she'd get claustrophobic locked in a drafty barn with four sweaty guys, three pre-teen groupies and a one-eyed cat until Morp. When he raised this concern to her, Angel zealously expressed that she wanted nothing more than to be "locked in with all that music." However, she did request one week to free herself from existing commitments.

By Angel's first day, Adam had spent considerable time mentally preparing himself. He anticipated initial group awkwardness, especially with Gabe, but he committed himself to fostering team spirit, displaying leadership, and developing musical synchronicity. Above all, Adam determined he would be professional and composed at all times.

"I bought a tambourine. If you don't mind, I'd like to play it on some of the songs," she said, shaking the instrument, her confident voice as pleasant in word as in song.

"That's great," Adam said, his mouth losing moisture and his tongue growing thicker. He inhaled deeply and handed her a folder. "Here's the sheet music to many of the songs we know. You'll need to memorize these before Morp."

"I like your confidence, Adam Jensen. You're already planning that we'll be at Morp." She nodded assuredly. "How many songs do you know?"

Mike looked at an imaginary list on the ceiling, counting with his freckled arm. "Not including the ones we haven't finished—sixty-seven."

"Sixty-seven! I had no idea you knew so many!"

"Sixty-seven's nothing," Mike replied. "Some bands know hundreds. And to play a three-hour gig you need at least sixty."

"How often will I be singing?"

"Lead on ballads or those done by artists with female voices," Adam replied, showing a puzzled expression as to his word choice, but Angel just smiled. "When you're not singing lead you'll be singing back-up."

She fingered through the file, commenting, "I like this song. This song is cute. I don't think I know this one. This is one of my favorites . . ." Upon hearing this, Gabe rolled his eyes and shook his head.

After the band warmed up, Adam rubbed his palms together. “Angel, we’re going to begin with familiar songs, until you’re, until you’re—” her attentive eyes captured his focus, and he nearly lost his thought completely “—until you’re comfortable with them.”

“Then we’ll move on to the good stuff,” added Mike. “Originals.”

“I like the originals,” Angel said.

“Morp auditions are in three weeks.” Adam avoided looking at her, scanning the others as he spoke. “To get ready for Morp, we need to add a few new top tens—and to polish our originals. I also want to include more titles by female artists. How does that sound?”

She smiled and nodded.

“Good. Let’s get started.”

“Is this my microphone?” She gestured to the only unattended microphone stand.

Gabe grimaced and mumbled something indistinguishable under his breath. Taken back, Angel looked bewildered, and Adam nailed Gabe with a pointed scowl. Gabe blinked dully then turned away and Mike stepped next to Angel. “Here’s how you adjust it,” he said, injecting a sympathetic tone, perhaps trying to equalize the moment’s intensity.

“The first song is ‘Take a Risk.’ This one here.” Adam pulled out the music sheet, catching her sweet but subtle floral fragrance. “Mike and Jesse are back up on this so join in when you hear their voices.”

“Let’s rock and roll,” Jesse said, sounding the count on his sticks.

Angel so quickly found the rhythm that on the last chorus Mike and Jesse let her sing background solo. Later, Megan and her friends stopped in with a bag of tortilla chips, bopping and munching until they had emptied the bag.

An hour into rehearsal, Adam’s mouth was properly functioning again, calmed by the music and Angel’s attitude. Angel then had her turn at singing lead, her voice adding new flavor to their sound—like honey sweetening tea, like hops balancing ale. They usually ended each song with a short critique to Angel. Mike and Jesse both encouraged her, but Gabe offered only snickers and low growls.

They played several hours, synchronizing notes and lyrics and moving on. After the last melody slipped away, they laid their instruments to rest, showing fatigue in their satisfied faces. They poured water and sat in the office, Angel releasing a tired sigh in an old kitchen chair. Her hair, usually neat and groomed, was uneven and small wisps had broken away. Her forehead and cheekbones were shiny with sweat; but even then, Adam found Angel’s beauty staggering.

"I feel like I've been doing aerobics," Angel said. "That was an intense workout."

"Congratulations," Mike said, "you've survived the easiest day." Angel drew a puzzled expression. "We get tougher as time goes on."

"Well don't you hold out, Michael Slade," she replied. "I can handle as much as you guys can dish out."

Dragging silence followed. They tapped fingernails and cracked knuckles and exchanged clumsy smiles. Gabe kept looking at his weight set, as though it was calling him. The nerve-racking quiet crept several, uneasy minutes until Angel checked her watch.

"Well, I guess I should be going," she said and stood. "I have homework waiting for me. I'll see each of you tomorrow."

As she gathered her purse and coat, they complimented her, all except for a silent Gabe. When the door clicked shut, Gabe exhaled as though he had held his breath since rehearsal started.

"Thank God! I thought today would never end," he stated. "I had more fun getting my wisdom teeth pulled."

"It's not about fun," Adam barked. "It's about making music. It's about our careers. It's about Morp and Battle of the Bands. Without Angel, we have none of it. This is what we all agreed."

"I didn't agree," he said.

Adam rubbed the back of his neck and shook his head in dismay. He knew nobody more irrational or narrow-minded.

Jesse frowned from a thought. "Gabe, no one deserves to be treated the way you treated Angel. Man, how do you live with yourself?"

"If it had been me," Mike chimed in, "I would have walked out."

"I wish she had," Gabe said, ejecting himself and stepping to his bench press. "This is my barn, and I'll treat anybody any way I please."

"There are other barns," Adam retorted, flames licking each word. "And other bass players."

Gabe acted as if he hadn't heard him; he was already extending the barbells. Mike stepped up and threw an arm over Adam's shoulder. "Don't worry. I'll have a talk with him. Tomorrow, he'll be his old charming self again."

Despite Gabe's threat, he refrained from sarcastic remarks and oppressive stares the second day. He played his bass solemnly but remained unnaturally silent. Perhaps Mike had talked some sense into him, but Adam hoped more that Gabe realized his actions toward Angel would only hurt himself and the band.

Repeatedly stopping, evaluating, and restarting was a tedious effort. But some friendly teasing replaced the previous day's stiffness with good humor. Even Gabe cracked a grin after Angel blamed a mistake on Adam's "naughty guitar pick."

Before one of the songs, Angel stepped next to Adam—so close that her shoulder pressed against his chest. "Why do the background vocals for this song start with the first chorus?" she asked, pointing to the sheet music.

He scanned the sheet, his fingers stumbling to the next page. "Do you think we should wait until the second chorus?"

She nodded. "It'll build momentum."

He nodded and gave Angel a thumbs-up. The more frequent these encounters, the faster he overcame his anxieties. And when she asked him for a ride home the next evening, he didn't hesitate. "The car is in the shop," she said. "I hate to trouble you. I should have it back tomorrow."

"No trouble at all," he told her. "So long as you don't mind a cold cab. My heater's out." She smiled and assured him she appreciated a ride, working heater or not.

Their synchronization improved daily, with Angel gradually needing less coaching, even on new songs. Witty, attentive, and objective, Angel added valuable suggestions and insight into almost every song. Adam rejected his earlier worries about Angel as superstitions—more than anything, Angel had become a talented asset, a team player, and a trusted supporter.

That evening, Adam walked Angel to her car. With only the sounds of their footsteps, Adam sensed something troubling her.

"Why so quiet?" he asked and chuckled. "Did you use up all your words singing?"

She smiled, but her tone was serious. "It's just—it's obvious Gabe doesn't like me. I'm not sure what to do. Everything I do seems to bother him. And he never talks to me. Never."

Adam grimaced and beheld her inquiring eyes. "It's not you personally," he said, trying to sound assuring. "He's just stubborn. He never wanted a female vocalist and is making sure nobody forgets it."

They arrived at her automobile and Angel searched her purse for her keys. "Why did you add a female vocalist," she asked, "if everyone didn't agree?"

"We had to," he replied, thinking she should have already known. "We can't play at Morp unless we have a female in the band."

"Oh, I see," she said, shaken by the meaning of his words. She bit her bottom lip and looked at her footprints in the lightly fallen snow. "So what happens after Morp?"

"It depends," he answered. "But for now it's just a temporary position."

"If you didn't want a permanent vocalist, why didn't you say *temporary*?" Her voice lost its usual chime.

His forehead wrinkled wavy lines. "I told everyone at the audition."

She pondered, but only briefly. "Before I arrived?"

He scratched his head, distinctly recalling his disclosing their intentions. He then recollected that she had auditioned last because she had arrived late. Suddenly, he cringed. With the commotion caused by Lucy and Denise and the others, he had failed to inform Angel. "Don't worry. If things work out, we may decide to keep you on."

"Listen, Adam Jensen," she commanded, her face hard and breath hot. "I didn't turn my life upside-down so you and your band could take advantage of me! Do you have any idea what it took for me to commit to Blue Denim?" Adam blinked, disbelieving this impostor had any resemblance to the sweet, kind, and gentle Angel he knew.

"I quit cheerleading. I loved cheerleading! Ms. Williams was flabbergasted. She couldn't believe the school's head cheerleader would skip out on them at the height of basketball season. Cheerleaders are more than friends, we're like sisters. Some will never speak to me again.

"I resigned as treasurer of the Spirit Club. I quit the Senior Prom Organization Committee and Leadership. I told Ms. Downing that I wouldn't be staying late to help tutor French anymore, which I'm sure will ruin my GPA. But the worst part is," she caught her breath, "I haven't even told my mother yet! I'm supposed to show Buttons at a dog show Saturday and Mother doesn't know I can't go. She is going to explode when she finds out that I'm singing in a rock band!"

"Why did you join if it was going to get you in so much trouble?"

"I had to!" A cold wind whirled between them and her eyes turned glassy. "All my life my parents have told me what to do and how to act and who to be. Do you know how that makes me feel?"

"I—"

"Trapped!" She yelled, fighting back tears while a neighbor's front porch light turned on. "My parents have my whole life planned for me. I'm going to go away to school and get a degree in sociology so they can brag to all their phony friends. Then I'm supposed to meet a rich

doctor or lawyer and have 2.4 kids and get a brand new car every two years. Do you know what my mother said when I broke up with Bobby?"

"I didn't know you—"

"She asked me what I did wrong. What *I did wrong*. I caught my boyfriend with my now ex-best friend Brianna and somehow that was my fault!" She brushed her hand across her face, smearing eyeliner into her flaming cheeks. Stomping to the driver's side, she searched again for her keys, darkness and fluid obviously distorting her vision. Adam wished he wasn't there, wished he could disappear—but mostly he wished she'd find those darn keys.

"You, and Gabe, and everybody else better understand one thing," she said, locating her key ring, finally, and pressing the unlock button. "I changed my whole life to be in this band. And Blue Denim is stuck with me!"

She slammed the door and the engine gunned blue exhaust. As Adam stared in wonder, the wheels spun away and the dark avenue engulfed her shrinking taillights. As her words echoed inside his mind, he dropped his eyes and saw where her teardrops had burned tiny holes in the powdery snow.

13

His right turn signal blinked while turning into the McDonald's parking lot. That morning he had found several crinkled dollars in an old pair of jeans—just enough for a couple of burgers, small fries and a free water. He had skipped breakfast and all through Psychology and Creative Writing his stomach churned and his mind craved a fast-food fix. These visits were routine when he had spending money from his supermarket job; now he only rarely enjoyed the tasty treat.

Delicate snowflakes glided down like tiny feathers from a cherub's pillow fight. Passing through the double glass doors, lunch-hour combat exploded with clamorous flurry. Each line trailed back three or four people deep.

"Fries are up, Bill . . . Mommy, Mommy, I want a sundae . . . Yeah, give me a number seven . . . *bleep, bleep, bleep* . . . and would you like anything to drink with that? . . . that'll be five-sixty-seven, sir . . . No, you can't have a sundae . . . I need quarters . . ."

A warm bag in hand, he shuffled back to his truck, munching on fries. He preferred his chilly but music-filled cab to the prefabricated seats, the kitchen noises and the crying babies inside. Music was a more enjoyable lunch companion, even on a cold, vinyl seat mended with duct-tape.

He climbed back inside and selected a CD. The beat quick and the sound rich, he chewed, sipped, and bounced rhythmically on his squeaky seat. With a passing glance in his rear-view mirror, he registered a brown Ford and the silhouette of Lucy Parker. Suddenly, his driver's-side door flew open.

"Look who's here," came Garrett Grimes' face and voice. "Adam Jensen, leader of the rock band, Pink Panties." Garrett chortled at his staggering humor. In a black leather jacket and sunglasses, Brad stepped forward, a cigarette whirling smoke from his lips. Joey and Frank

followed, hands crammed in front pockets, both desperately in need of haircuts and brain cells.

"I bet he's wearing pink panties right now." Brad said and laughed, gathering the chuckling from his dull-witted accomplices. During their last encounter, Adam and Mike had dragged Brad from the barn to Brad's car to sleep off his drunken stupor. They had found and confiscated four cans of spray paint, figuring Brad had planned to destroy the colorful musical mural on the barn's exterior. "I heard you held auditions for a female vocalist. Lucy said there were quite a few girls there. She told me about the offer you made her."

"Yeah, we still haven't recovered from the rejection." Adam's lips curved up at each end. He shook his head and bit into his hamburger, turning up the music a notch.

"I don't mind." Brad inched forward, cigarette now in hand, blowing smoke inside the cab. "I think it's a compliment that you can't find a better singer." He lowered his head and whispered, "You can't find a better girlfriend either, if you know what I mean." He waved to Lucy in the car who wiggled a finger in return.

"We hear Angel Irving has joined the band," Garrett said, his teeth yellow and his breath stinky. "Does this mean Pink Panties intends to audition for Morp?"

Adam chuckled at the absurdity of such a stupid name. "*Blue Denim* has more than intentions," he replied. "And Rebel is lucky that skill isn't a prerequisite to audition."

Brad leaned closer and then struck his hand on the hood. "I'd kick your ass right now," he growled through his crooked bottom teeth, "but I'm saving every blow for Gabe."

Adam inched forward until he felt the heat of Brad's unshaven face on his forehead. "We all carried you as long as we could," he said. "Gabe just lost his grip first."

Brad shouted, "I never wanted to be in your stupid band anyway." He took time to compose himself, embarrassed by his outburst. "All along, I was waiting for something better."

Adam viewed them all. "You call this better?" He chewed the last bite and dabbed his mouth with a napkin. "Look, I have to get back to school. Could you move your car?"

Brad and Garrett grinned at the others. "Yeah, we'll move it," Brad said, "when we get around to it." Adam shrugged, closed the door, and roared his engine to life. He shifted into reverse, causing Brad to stop and re-evaluate.

"I'll ask one more time—will you move your car?" Brad stiffened, confusion scribbling lines in his forehead. Then, under silent peer-pressure, he crossed his arms, and with his eyes he called Adam's bluff.

Adam had requested twice and he would not let Brad send him groveling. He buried the accelerator and the engine thundered. Still in the car, Lucy's eyes ignited with panic. In an instant, Adam popped the clutch, and the tires spun on the slippery asphalt. He propelled backwards, then quickly hit the brakes, stopping a smidgen from Brad's doors.

"Oh, my God! Did you see that?" Lucy screamed, dashing out the far door. "He tried to kill me!" In her melodramatic frenzy, she slipped to the ground. "He tried to kill me!"

Brad set off to Lucy's rescue while the others followed, Grimes leaving last. He glared at Adam and then spat on the window. As he stepped by the truck's bed, he booted a small dent into the back fender, signed by a black heel mark.

Brad helped Lucy to her feet. "Did you see that?" Lucy continued. "I was just sitting here. I didn't even flip him off or nothing. Then all of a sudden, he tried to run me over!"

By this time, Lucy's accusation had gathered a small crowd of observers. Adam pulled forward and with the pressure of an audience, Brad conceded and spun his car to a parking spot. As Adam backed out, he rolled down his window.

"Final warning, Brad," he told him, "If you ever block my truck again, I won't stop." He then glared at Garrett. "And Grimes, brush your teeth!"

As he pulled away, they swore and made obscene gestures and threw slush. Should Brad ever doubt Adam's word, he'd discover that Adam Jensen had yet to break a single promise.

14

Leaning against his truck, Adam listened as small, misty clouds floated from Angel's mouth. He greatly enjoyed watching her lips, her eye movements, her expressions—the symphony of all these in concert. They had left rehearsal fifteen minutes earlier, but already a week of rehearsals had passed since Angel's emotional outburst.

“ . . . When I told them, Daddy didn't say anything, but he usually doesn't. He's the silent type—an intellect and analytical thinker. He views everything like it's a social science experiment. It's Mother who is the emotional time bomb. She just stared at me with a frightfully disapproving expression. I told her I hoped that she would support my decision to join the band. She just told me, 'I wish you would have consulted me first. What will people think?'"

“People will probably admire you,” Adam told her, “for being your own person.”

“I hope so,” she said with a lost smile. “Adam, my mother is important to me. It's hard knowing I've lost her respect.”

“But you've gained something greater—” Their views touched and she waited for what his eyes promised. “Your own self-respect.”

The girl reflected on his words and a reserved but honest smile brightened her face.

That Sunday, his mother drove them both to church. Adam wouldn't be going to rehearsal afterwards; Gabe had an out-of-town family obligation and Mike complained about an essay due Monday. Adam too needed a day to catch up. Their last missed rehearsal had been almost three months earlier—on Christmas Day.

Adam wore his Sunday best—an old but clean pair of denim jeans and a freshly ironed dress shirt. His mother enjoyed dressing up for church, wearing a dress skirt and blazer she had sewn herself. Having

worked for a clothing tailor before joining the airlines, she continued to sew as a hobby.

"... Little did we know we'd be stuck on the runway for three hours," his mother continued. "We couldn't serve drinks and the passengers couldn't even get up to use the bathroom the entire time." She exchanged waving hands on the steering wheel, her inflection full of drama. "But Captain Bruce Douglas handled it like a true professional. He provided an update every ten minutes and his voice calmed everybody down."

"What was the situation?" Adam asked.

"The craziest thing! Someone had wrapped two curling irons together in their carry-on. The TSA inspector had thought it was a bomb and security locked down the airport in case of a large-scale terrorist attack. By the time we finally arrived in Hong Kong 14 hours later, I was beat. I couldn't wait to have a decent meal and take a long, hot bath. Much to my surprise, when I arrived at the hotel, Bruce had called ahead, upgraded my room, and arranged for a bottle of wine and dinner to be waiting."

"This Bruce guy must really like you," Adam said.

She blushed and smiled, admitting to his claim by her silence. Adam also kept quiet while she drove the remainder of the way to church. As he stared forward, his mind wrestled with her last words, troubled by her thinking that any man could ever replace his father.

In the church, the Irving family assumed their designated pew and just before Angel genuflected, her smile caught Adam's eye. During slack times and in between prayers, they faked yawns, made dozing gestures, or puffed out their cheeks under frowns imitating Father O'Brien.

They scooted down the center aisle backed up by Father O'Brien greeting the exiting parishioners, the Irvings several families ahead of them. When Adam noticed the priest distracted by other parishioners, he unobtrusively escorted his mother out to avoid being roped into another uncomfortable discussion over college.

Upon exiting, they observed the Irvings talking with an elderly couple outside the church, Angel's little brother burning off an hour's restlessness by running circles around them. "When are you going to introduce me to your new singer?" his mother asked.

"How about now?" Adam had resolved that Dr. and Mrs. Irving would likely hold him responsible for luring their pristine daughter to the dark and wicked world of rock music. And he had hoped to avoid what he knew would be an inevitable confrontation. However, he calmed his

anxiety with the knowledge that he had helped Angel take one giant step toward her own self-liberty.

From appearances, the Irving family could have stepped out of a designer's display window. Impeccably dressed, they paid great attention to the colors and coordination of their fabrics. Many of their garments came from designer names that Adam wouldn't recognize. Even Angel's little brother, Matthew, exhibited an elite image in a dress shirt and wool blazer sporting a designer crest.

"Good Morning, Angel," Adam said as he and his mother approached. The older couple had just excused themselves and hobbled off.

"Hello, Adam. I see you are also excited to be up bright and early today." Her smile beamed with teasing. He returned a crippled grin and the girl chuckled. "Adam, I'd like you to meet my parents. Mother, Daddy, this is Adam Jensen."

Adam reached forward and Professor Irving accepted his grip. "Good Morning, Doctor Irving."

Her father studied Adam's face. "Hello, Adam."

"Hello, Mrs. Irving." He expected her to accept his hand with three weak fingers, but instead she kept her hands buried in her long, fur coat. She made no effort to smile, her eyes scowling at his faded jeans with the small hole in the right knee.

From behind his father, Matthew leaped out bearing a boyish grin. "I'm five," he told Adam.

"Five!" Adam said, lowering himself to a squat. "And a ball of energy, I can tell."

"I'm going to be a professor just like my daddy," he claimed.

Angel rubbed Matthew's head. "He's at the age where his father is his idol."

"He's a smart boy," Dr. Irving stated, laughing while the others chuckled.

Adam's thoughts reflected back; he had been about Matthew's age when the accident happened. Adam could almost see Matthew growing up playing catch with Dr. Irving in the back yard, taking walks together, having long talks, and going camping. He wanted to tell Matthew how precious a father was, to savor every second he had with him. But instead, he looked into the boy's large brown eyes and said: "You grow up and be just like your daddy, okay?"

"Mrs. Jensen, I don't believe we've met. I am Angel." She stepped forward.

Adam's mother accepted the girl's hand. "Hello Angel. Adam tells me you have a wonderful voice."

"I hope so," Mrs. Irving injected. "Angel has been taking piano and voice lessons since she was six."

"I guess I had some help," Angel said and smiled. "I feel so fortunate to be singing with Adam and Blue Denim."

Adam's mother let go of the girl's hand. "What do you plan on doing after you graduate?"

"Angel is going to Princeton," Mrs. Irving said before the girl could answer. "She has a 4.0 grade point average. I wouldn't have her attend anywhere but an Ivy League school."

"Oh please, Mother."

"I don't know what's wrong with you, Angelica. Every time I express how proud I am of you, you act as though you have been belittled." Angel drew a breath and released it, slowly. She rolled her eyes at Adam and shrugged her shoulders. Why did talk of college always create such discord?

"And what college will you attend, Adam?" Mrs. Irving asked.

"I'm not going to college," Adam stated. "I'm going to pursue my musical career."

Mrs. Irving expelled a condescending laugh. "How are you going to do that without a music degree?"

"That's for people who want careers in symphonies and orchestras," Adam replied. "I'm a singer and song writer. I would go to college if I thought it would help. But to write music, it takes creativity, passion, and determination. I already have all those."

"But Adam hasn't totally ruled-out college yet," his mother inserted. Adam could hardly believe his ears. After directly reflecting why he wouldn't be going to college, his mother interjects the possibility with blatant disregard for his statement.

"Is this the boy that gave you a ride home the other week, Angel?" Mrs. Irving asked.

Angel gently touched Adam's arm. "Yes, Mother. It was very kind of him, wasn't it? Thank you, Adam."

"Oh, we heard your truck all the way from the guard station." Mrs. Irving snickered dryly.

"The muffler has a hole," Adam replied. "It's an old truck but runs great and can carry all of the band's equipment."

"You should get that fixed. It's very obnoxious."

Cordiality dissolved from Adam's face like cola slipping down a clear straw. A lengthy moment of cold quiet passed over them. Mrs.

Irving's eyes dashed to her husband's with an expression that seemed to say: *Can we stop wasting our time with these boorish people?*

Dr. Irving cleared his throat. "If you'll excuse us. We have an engagement to attend."

"Good-bye, Adam," Angel said. "Good-bye, Mrs. Jensen."

"Please, call me Sharon."

"Sharon," Angel replied, smiling. Angel trailed a few steps behind her family. Holding a loose fist to her ear, she called, "Adam, let's talk later."

The two families headed in different directions, two Jensens to the west and four Irvings to the east. "I can't believe that sweet girl came from such a — an arrogant woman," his mother said, then mockingly added, "Angel has a 4.0 grade point average and is going to Princeton."

Adam ignored her comments. He usually tried to bite his tongue to avoid unnecessary conflict with her, but he had to make a point. "When are you going to get it through your head? I'm not going to college. If you want us to have a good relationship, you have to accept that fact."

"Honey, I can't understand why are you so against going to college. You can still play music part-time like you do now. And if it's the expense, I have a plan."

He had so much musical energy compounded inside him, he would explode if he had to direct his vitality to anything else. Music was his passion, his fervor, a preoccupation that distracted him from every other event in his world. "It's not the expense." His voice sounded frustrated until his curiosity was aroused. "And what plan are you talking about?"

She didn't answer, as if she'd let a secret slip out. Her eyes shifted away and back again. "I'm probably saying too much, but Bruce offered to pay your tuition."

"It's not the expense," he restated, frowning. "And what does Bruce have to do with anything anyway?"

Silence closed in on them a long while, his mother caught bargaining his future behind his back. "The Irvings are not the only family who can send their child to college."

At home, Adam studied in his room, but within an hour was sitting cross-legged on his bed with his acoustic guitar, his ear hugging a pencil, strumming and singing to an inattentive Fluffy. As his fingers caressed the strings, the resonance of the rosewood hummed a melody rich, pure and earthy. He occasionally stopped, erased, and scribbled.

Next to him, tipping over like stairs, his textbooks occasionally called his attention until he knocked them over to prevent further distraction.

The inspiring afternoon invited creativity he couldn't force between classes or late at night. The artistic process so captivated him that he lost consciousness of everything except for his mother's sewing machine that had been chattering upstairs for hours. He explored his imagination where musical notes came to life, each with a unique personality and special purpose. At times like these, he was his true being, and pleasure and purpose erupted inside with a mysterious power.

In his creative zone, time became irrelevant; even hunger forgot him. He worked through the morning and well into the afternoon. When the doorbell sounded, his mother called for him to answer the door, and he welcomed the interruption only to stretch his cramped legs.

"Wake up," he said as he tapped on Fluffy's tank. "What kind of watch-snake are you?"

The front door presented a six-foot stranger with a trimmed mustache in a long gray overcoat. In one hand he clutched a small briefcase and in the other, a hat. Adam prepared to reject this guy and whatever junk he was peddling.

"You must be Adam," the stranger said, throwing Adam off-guard.

Adam blinked and nodded, noticing the man's coat bore the same insignia as on his mother's work uniforms.

"I'm Bruce Douglas. Is your mother home?"

15

Hopping down the stairs, his mother's face radiated. She wore an untucked Denver Broncos football sweatshirt while her hair trailed in bounces behind her. Adam watched in confusion and with no control over what was unfolding in front of him.

"Bruce! I didn't know you were going to be in town."

"Neither did I," he said, setting down his briefcase. "They changed my schedule at the last minute and I have a six-hour layover. I hope I'm not interrupting anything."

"Of course not." She slipped an arm around his waist and kissed him. "Bruce, this is my son, Adam."

"Yes, we have already met," he told her. "We're old friends now, aren't we, Adam?"

Adam studied the man's long profile, his lively blue eyes, and distinctive laugh lines highlighting his groomed and gray-peppered mustache. This guy didn't look like a pilot—maybe a politician. Or a newscaster for Channel 7.

"How wonderful! I'm so excited," she cried. "My two favorite men finally meet each other."

Adam just stared, bewildered. He had known of Bruce, but always as a man a thousand miles away, a name without a face, a storybook character; not a living, breathing, walking human being like himself or his mother. Or like his father used to be.

"Let's all go into the kitchen for some hot cider," she suggested, taking Bruce's coat and hat.

She heated a teapot, the sticky smell of sweet apples and cinnamon evaporating and clouding the kitchen windows.

"I have a big house just outside Los Angeles," Bruce told Adam. "I'd like to have you and your mother over for a visit some weekend."

Maybe we could go sailing or fishing. Or just hang around the pool and have a barbecue.”

“Sure,” Adam replied, but his voice contained the liveliness of a balloon that had lost its helium. He felt awkward, out of place—like a stranger in his own home.

“You would love Los Angeles, Adam,” Bruce continued. “There’s always something to do. A party or concert or some event. And there’s nothing like living on the west coast—warm weather, sunny beaches.” He leaned closer, shielding his words. “Not to mention the sexiest girls anywhere.”

Adam couldn’t force any true pleasure in his expression. His thoughts and emotions were all tangled up. Had he had forewarning, he may have prepared himself. But he felt as though someone had dumped a bucket of ice water on him.

“Sharon tells me you play guitar.”

“I have a band, Blue Denim,” he replied. “We play top forty rock, classics, and originals.”

“How do you find the time with school?”

“We make the time,” he told him. “We already have an inventory of over seventy songs. Eight originals.”

“Do you plan to continue playing part-time while you—” his mother’s throat-cutting motion chopped off Bruce’s voice in mid-sentence, then he continued, “While you finish high school?”

“Actually, we play full-time. We just scheduled a new gig and plan to start at nightclubs soon, too.” Sharon delivered a tray of cider and joined them. “We’re auditioning for a big school dance in a couple of weeks.”

“I’d like to hear you play. Maybe we could arrange that the next time I’m in the area.”

This guy in uniform would look as misplaced in their barn as would Adam piloting a jumbo jet. Adam sipped his cider, mindful to any slurping. Bruce elaborately colored his past, from his childhood in the mid-west to his acceptance in the Air Force Officer Program to his tenure with the airlines. His mother gazed at Bruce, mesmerized, a cement smile. Adam wondered how she could go so long without blinking.

Bruce excitedly shared a handful of experiences, but after he had emergency landed with an empty fuel tank on an icy Kansas City runway and saved the day, Adam felt the anxiety of an incarcerated animal. At the next opportune moment, he excused himself.

In his bedroom, he attempted to rekindle his creative flame, but he couldn’t get back on-key and his bed was lumpy and uncomfortable. He

resorted to his studies next, but had no motivation or concentration. So he lied on his bed, staring at the cottage-cheese textured ceiling. His body knew it should be at rehearsal. This strange afternoon wouldn't have happened if they had held practice.

His cell phone rang and he swiftly answered it.

"Hi, Adam," came Angel's voice. "What are you doing?"

Her soft voice comforted him, like a caress, a lullaby. "Nothing. Just thinking. What are you doing?"

"Homework. And helping Mother with charity paper work. I managed to sneak away to call you." In the next breath she asked, "What were you thinking about?"

That's what he liked about Angel, always candid, always genuine. Instead of blabbing away, she showed interest in him first. Denise could take a lesson from her. "Something strange happened." He scratched an itch on his head and crossed a leg over. "My mother's boyfriend just stopped by. He lives in Los Angeles and we've never met."

"He lives in Los Angeles and *just stopped by*?"

"He's a pilot and had a few hours between flights. He and my mom work for the same airline."

"What do you think of him?" she asked. "They say first impressions last a lifetime."

"I'm not sure what I think," he said. "I guess I'm trying to figure it out."

"Well as soon as you figure it, let me know. I've been trying to figure out my mother for years," she said, giggling. "Do you see your father often?"

A bolt riveted through his veins; Angel must have thought his parents were divorced. "No," he replied, avoiding an explanation. For thirteen years, Adam had had to endure the pity in people's voices when he told them about his father. Pity that couldn't bring the man back, pity that only reminded him more.

"Adam, I'm going crazy in this house," her voice sounded higher. "Do you feel like getting a coffee and watching the snow fall?"

He rose to see sugary powder descending out his bedroom window. He couldn't study until he changed his state of mind anyway.

"Sure." He smiled into the phone. "I'll pick you up."

"No, it's my turn. I owe you. Be ready in 20 minutes."

His relationship with Angel was developing into a special friendship and he remembered how he once had been so foolishly infatuated by her. He now knew he could control his emotions, and that a

meaningful friendship and common goal in music protected him from any danger of romance.

As he rose from his bed, a small sparkle on the floor across the room caught his eye. So slight was its shine that he almost hadn't seen it. He stepped over and picked up a pierced earring the shape of a heart containing the letter "A" inside. He studied it a long, curious minute, considering to whom it belonged and how it got into his bedroom. He could only presume it was Angel's—he had probably caught it in his pocket or in a rolled-up sleeve at rehearsal. Or maybe his mother had found it at work and accidentally carried it home. He would ask Angel later, and his mother, too. One of them would have a logical explanation.

When Adam noticed Angel's Mercedes pull up, he dashed to the kitchen holding several textbooks. "I'm going to study," he rambled quickly—the swifter he fibbed, the less severe the lie. Bruce gestured for Adam's hand. "It was a pleasure, Adam. I hope we can see each other again real soon."

Adam accepted the man's hand with some reluctance.

"I'm baking chicken for dinner," his mother called as he paced away.

He opened the front door to catch Angel's hand reaching for the doorbell. "Hi," she said as he slipped outside. "Books?"

"I felt guilty," he confessed. "And they were a good cover-up for getting out of the house." His eyes gathered her in her wool coat, boots, and denim jeans. Even if she wore stained overalls and a ragged shirt, Angel would look stunning.

They plunged into the automobile's pool of warmth and fragrance. Angel started the engine, the CD player's meters illuminating the dash, scrambling to high treble and hearty bass.

"I had to sneak out wearing these jeans. Mother doesn't like me to wear 'house-jeans' in public. She approves only of skirts or nice slacks." The girl laughed. "I have to smuggle them out and change when I wear them to school."

"Really?" he asked in disbelief. "Jeans are all I own."

"You're lucky," she said and pulled into the street. "You'd think a girl in a band named Blue Denim could at least wear them to school."

Adam glanced away and smirked—her comment reminded him of Grimes calling the band *Pink Panties*, and he blushed thinking that's probably what else she was wearing.

"If it's okay with you," Angel said, "I thought we would go to Coffee Pub on the Hill."

A popular area on the university's west end, the "Hill" featured coffee houses, restaurants, small stores and a "previously owned" music instrument shop. A favorite hangout for college students, Coffee Pub featured fresh coffees and pastries complemented by the sounds of acoustic guitar or piano.

He reached into his pocket and revealed the small earring to Angel. "Is this yours?"

He half expected her to say, "My earring!" and she surprised him when she lifted it between her fingers and replied, "I've never seen it. Where did you get it?"

"I found it, in my room," he replied. The girl studied him with an inquisitive expression that, after guessing her thoughts, made his face redden. "No, I haven't had any guests over with the initial of *A*. Or with any other initial for that matter."

This forced a smile to her face. "Maybe it stands for *Adam*."

He laughed. "Yeah, and if I could just find the other one, I'd have a matching pair."

The whiteness of her smile matched her eyes. The pillowy snowflakes zinged passed like millions of stars through the Colorado Galaxy. Decreasing in intensity, each snow-shower was also taking longer breaks.

"I'm glad you wanted to get together," she said, turning a corner. "Most of my old friends don't talk to me since I quit cheerleading. And, well, you know about Brianna and Bobby—"

Adam's silence said more to her than any words could. Angel seemed so spirited and lively at rehearsals that he had forgotten how drastically her life had changed.

"Did you know my mother chairs the Colorado Music Festival Volunteer Committee?" she asked a minute later. "I try to help her from time to time. Have you ever been to the festival?"

"My mother is a classical music fan. Baroque period mostly. She and I have been to the festival several times but not for years now." Adam reflected. "The auditorium is close to our house. On quiet summer nights we can hear the distant sounds of Pachelbel or Vivaldi from our back porch."

"Of all the arts, music is my favorite. All kinds, every kind. I make music a part of everything I do. I can't get enough music."

Between the clash of their lifestyles, their different social and economic compositions, Adam and Angel shared a middle ground. Music, like air and sunlight, was unbiased to whom it touched, free to anyone to appreciate and enjoy.

“Music is my whole existence,” Adam couldn’t help himself from saying. “Playing and writing and singing. It’s who I am, deep inside. It’s hard to describe, but when I’m writing or playing music it feels like—” He tried to capture the right word. “It feels like—” Angel, too, looked into space for the definition.

“Like—magic,” their voices blended. Despite the warmth of the car, a cold tingle tickled his spine. He captured her laughter in his ears and her beauty in his eyes. For once, after so long, someone identified with how he felt.

“And you are a magician with your music, Adam. You radiate when you’re playing—it’s as if you’re high on something. And you make everyone else high, too.”

The feelings of struggle were frequent; seldom were the words of encouragement. Her words were as precious as gems. “Thank you. You just made my day. My month.”

“Now we’re even.” She smiled. “Is there anything else you enjoy doing?”

“I like going to coffee with pretty girls,” he replied.

“Do you do that often?”

He grinned, cleverly. “Only if they’re in blue denim.”

The scent of roasted beans, cinnamon, and chocolate greeted them inside. They stepped along the hardwood floors to take a table against a front window. Surrounded by plants and antiques from the Victorian era, Adam remembered when the quaint coffee house was a bicycle shop.

The coffee list promised freshly roasted varieties from around the world. “I recommend the Cafe Au Lait, or a Cappuccino,” Angel said. “And let’s share a dessert—my treat.”

When the server came, they ordered a Cafe Au Lait, a house coffee, and crumb cake with two forks. Together their eyes wandered out the window, a quaint motion picture of shoppers and students and young lovers. The sounds of the jetting milk steamer and warm chatter mingled with an instrumental piano piece.

“I think Gabe is starting to warm up to me finally,” Angel said. “He’s actually been kind of friendly lately.”

“It was never you,” Adam replied, “just the situation. Gabe redefines the word ‘stubborn.’”

Adam recalled the evening that she had exploded at him. In reflection, he understood her frustration.

“I want you to know something,” Angel told him. “After church this morning, my mother said I was going to college.” She tossed her hair

over one shoulder. “The truth is, I want to go college, but I haven’t decided where or even when. And I’m not going just to please my parents. From now on, the decisions I make are mine to decide.”

He replied with a single nod. He struggled daily with the world’s expectations in conflict with his heart’s truest intent.

“Adam, when I’m singing, I have no fears, no anxieties, no disappointments. I could sing forever. And I want to thank you.” The girl’s eyes were so steady that it made Adam fidget. “You helped me break through a barrier I couldn’t break through alone.”

“Help us through the ‘Morp Audition Barrier’ and we’ll call it even,” he replied, teeth shining. “Everyone has a special calling. For you and me, it’s music. In the band, we have a motto: *Pursue the music with a relentless passion*. Now that you have found your dream, you have to pursue it relentlessly and passionately.”

She contemplated his words. “‘Pursue the music with a relentless passion.’ I like that.”

“Then believe it and live it—always and everywhere.”

The server delivered their order, setting down two ceramic cups and a plate of soft crumb cake. “You didn’t tell me,” Angel said when the woman left. “Are your mother and her boyfriend serious?”

He hesitated, and then sipped his coffee, accidentally slurping. “I guess. As serious as I’ve ever seen her.”

Angel chewed a dainty bite of the dessert and cradled her fingers around her mug. “What’s he like?”

“I really don’t know him. His name is Bruce. He’s friendly, talks a lot, and is tall with dark hair and a mustache.”

“No wonder your mother likes him,” Angel said, smirking and raising her eyebrows.

Adam ignored the comment and gesture. “It’s strange, seeing my mother with him, hugging him, giving him a kiss. I’ve never seen her kiss a man before—except for my father.”

“She doesn’t date very often?”

“Almost never,” he reflected, drawing a music note on the steamy window. “One time, she got invited to a Christmas party. I was twelve and stayed up until she got home. I listened as he walked her to the door. He told her he wanted to see her again.”

“Did they go out anymore?”

He shook his head. “She said she wasn’t interested, said she didn’t see any reason to change anything when she was already happy.” He paused, and with a crooked grin added, “I guess she’s not happy anymore.”

“Maybe she’s realizing how, not unhappy, but how lonely she is.”

He knew he wasn’t around much, even when she was home, and he felt embarrassed that he hadn’t thought of that himself. “I guess you’re right.”

“When did you see your father last?” she asked. “I mean, if you don’t mind me asking. It must be hard not seeing him much.”

He shuddered and looked out the window. He didn’t care to discuss it, but resolved he knew her well enough that he should tell her. “My father—” he paused out of reverence. “My father died when I was five.”

“Oh, I didn’t know,” her soft voice touched his ear. Then came silence, the same silence that followed every time he told anyone his father was dead. “I’m sorry, Adam.”

Somehow, saying that his father had died always isolated him, pointed at him, put him on display in some fatherless freak show.

“It happened a long time ago. I was only five,” he said and realized he had already told her his age.

“I see,” she murmured. “I lost my grandparents a couple of years ago. It’s so hard when loved ones leave your life forever.”

Even with her empathy, Angel couldn’t know the weight of his loss; she had two parents, a brother—an ideal family. What could she know about losing a father? What did anyone know except him?

“Maybe it has taken your mom this long to get over your father.”

His expression could have stopped the world from turning. “It’s not a matter of getting over someone,” he suddenly barked. “Some things you never get over! Not in ten years or a hundred years!”

Silently, she sank back and swallowed hard, forcing her attention outside. As chatter and commotion orbited them, Angel showed her hurt—like a little girl unjustly scolded. Dropping his head back, Adam tightly closed his eyes to gather his thoughts.

“I’m sorry, Angel. I didn’t mean it like that. I just—” He opened his eyes again. “I don’t ever want to forget anything about my father. I cherish my memories of him more than anything. He was an awesomely talented musician. He gave me life and the gift of music. Sometimes when I’m playing, I feel him—I feel his spirit guiding my hands, my fingers, my voice.”

Angel’s face turned from hurt to sympathy—she too had blasted him with words and now understood the feelings from both sides. “I’m sorry, too. I didn’t mean that offensively. I can only imagine how hard it has been for you.” She leaned forward, caressing the tabletop with a

fingertip. “All my life, I’ve had two supportive parents. And as much as I love them, I’ve never felt the intensity that you feel for your father.”

He peered into her eyes, capturing his reflection. She slid her hand on top of his, and he turned his hand over to touch hers. For a brief moment, all anxiety vanished, and a special new friendship connected their different worlds.

16

The following Friday night, a new excitement electrified the air in the barn. The excitement of a new dimension of Blue Denim.

Cords and wires wiggled along the floor like black spaghetti. After Adam tickled a string, his fingers danced a hot riff. Gabe tuned his bass while Mike experimented with a new chord sequence; Jesse in an untucked tee-shirt warmed up doing a drum routine. Sheet music sitting on her lap, Angel hummed, her fingers plugging her ears and her feet tapping the floor.

Stephen Chan, Adam's friend who had agreed to run the mixer and lighting panel, met with them for the first time. Behind granny glasses, he tossed his long bangs from his face and experimented setting the dozens of controls, piloting some fantastic light and sound jet aircraft.

Gabe's sister and her friends chattered in the office, anticipating the new lights to accompany the music in their own concert hall.

"I think Blue Denim is just as good as the songs on the radio. In fact, even better," Sarah said. "And I bet nobody at school knows a band personally like us."

"Chelsea Johnson says her brother's in a band." Megan adjusted her necklace charm. "She said they are the best in the whole city, even better than Blue Denim."

"She's always making up stories." Sarah giggled and added, "Her brother probably can't even play the radio."

Christina didn't hear them, her mind drifting through pre-teenage neverneverland. "Do you think Adam likes me?" she asked, perching her lips as though preparing for her first kiss. "Sometimes he smiles right at me."

Megan stepped between them and whispered, "Gabe said Adam is flirting with disaster—that means, he likes Angel. He said there's

lightning between their eyes and if Adam doesn't watch it, Gabe's going to raise," she giggled, "well, H, E, double toothpicks."

Silently, Christina evaluated Angel's shapely contours, and then reflected on her own yet unripe proportions. Even wildly imaginative, Christina disappointed herself. She frowned, but extended her pubescent bust should Adam glance over.

"How are we doing?" Adam asked. "Is everyone ready?"

They nodded or mumbled positive replies. Stephen stepped forward, adjusted one of the lights, and grinned excitedly. "Let's rock this town."

"Mike and I made up a song sheet." Adam said as Mike handed a copy to each. Stephen scuffed back to his chair scanning the sheet.

"We plan to play these songs in this sequence next Friday at the Morp auditions," said Mike, reviewing the sheet. "That way we play a classic rock song, a current top forty ballad, and a new original rocker."

"I guess I know what I'll be able to play in my sleep by next Friday," said Jesse.

"Sleep?" Mike asked. "Who said anything about sleeping?"

Chuckles surfaced and then Adam gestured a thumbs up to Stephen that they were ready. Stephen turned off the overhead lights and Jesse started the count. "A one-two-three-four—"

As they unleashed the first notes, Stephen beamed the colorful lights. Adam and Angel sang lead while Mike and Jesse harmonized tone and balance in the background. With two banks on the front stage floor and the others above the backdrop, the colors changed with the music. Stephen's eyes alive, he experimented wildly, stopping only to scribble notes on the song sheet.

The band repeated each selection, fine tuning, making subtle modifications. When Angel sang lead on the ballad, she and Adam established a visual rapport lasting several lingering seconds. She smiled, her eyes sparkling with pleasure, but neither noticed Gabe's hard inspection.

When Adam arrived home after rehearsal, he heard classical music. In the kitchen, he startled his mother writing on her stationery. With shocked eyes and hand trembling, she turned the sheet over.

"I didn't hear you come in," she stammered.

He shrugged, having come in the normal way—using the hidden key under the brick to unlock the front door. "I have to ask you something." His hands revealed from his jeans the earring he had found. "Have you seen this before?"

She studied it from different angles. "It's an attractive design. Looks new. Fourteen-karat gold. But I can't say I've seen it before. Where did you get it?"

"I found it. On the floor in my room."

"Whose name begins with 'A' who has visited recently?" She frowned and returned the earring to his palm. "Do you know an Ann? Andrea? Angel! Is it Angel's?"

He shook his head. "I've already asked her. Besides, she's never been over." Adam turned to leave but stopped at the doorway. "Could you have found something like this on the plane and maybe put it in your pocket without thinking?"

"And went into your room, accidentally took it out of my pocket, and without thinking, dropped it on the floor?" she continued the question, Adam squirming at its absurdity. "I'm sure I didn't. Besides, we surrender anything left on the aircraft."

He returned to his room, further contemplating the object. Nothing about it made sense—neither Angel nor his mother had ever seen it. Nobody had even been in the house in weeks, except for Bruce who couldn't have any connection with it. Even if Adam had dragged it in on his sneakers, he would have scratched or bent it. Adam placed the earring on his dresser though he carried it in his mind in wonder.

Sleepy after homework that night, he anticipated the comfort of warm blankets and dark silence. But no sooner had sleep brought his body peace that demons cornered his mind and played that same, endless country ballad. It was the same nightmare he dreaded, that wouldn't stop, that played over and over in his head. The cab of the truck bounced, curves shifting Adam side to side, and then the truck plunged into the darkness of the foothills—rolling, rolling, rolling. He relived the same script, the exact timing, Adam helpless to do anything until his father's death shivered him back to his senses. And for the hours that remained, sleep evaded him.

The following morning, a coffee and a shower later, Adam was at rehearsal scribbling a rockabilly riff. Mrs. Irving had given Angel a ride to rehearsal that morning. Having noticed this, Adam offered her a ride home. "Daddy needed the sedan today," she told him. "And Mother needed her car for errands."

Angel's position in the band had found equilibrium. Her liveliness complemented the band's collective personality; even Gabe, who did everything slowly and systematically, now regarded her fairly. But Adam sensed some reservation from Gabe—a missing feeling—that had existed before Angel had joined.

Adam enjoyed speaking, confiding in, and joking with Angel. Words flowed easily between them, and he increasingly felt comfortable sharing private thoughts with her. They realized a special friendship not complicated by the tangles of romance but enjoyed by respect and honesty—characteristics Adam had never felt in any other female friendship.

They all left the barn together, Gabe turning to clamp the door padlock. “Sam,” he called into the barn. A minute later, Sam marched out, his sharp teeth piercing a squirming mouse. “Found a snack?”

“Agh!” Angel cried and buried her face into Adam’s shoulder. It was so natural a response that Adam didn’t consider it twice. But he failed to notice Gabe’s scornful frown as they strolled in the darkness to his truck.

“How are you feeling?” Angel asked. “You didn’t seem to have that normal Adam Jensen spirit today.”

“My spirit was a player, but my head was a spectator.” He grinned and unlocked her door. “I sometimes have this dream, a nightmare really. Anyway, I only got a few hours of sleep last night.” The exhaust pipe blasted as his engine started and the bed rattled as he pulled away. Adam pressed the radio power switch and tuned into a KFTM commercial.

“ . . . Mark your calendars for noon on June 10th at Red Rocks Amphitheater for the Fifth Annual Colorado Battle of the Bands. The region’s hottest bands will compete for over ten-thousand dollars in cash and prizes. The first prize band will be offered a contract to open for Snowblind in their upcoming tour. Participating bands must pick up an entry form at KFTM studios. Tickets go on sale April 15 or stay tuned for your chance to win. It’s nine-oh-eight, I’m J. Drake. KFTM weather, decreasing clouds, highs tomorrow in the low fifties, lows in the thirties . . .”

“There’s nothing stopping me from going to the Battle of the Bands,” Angel buried her hands between her knees, “whether we’re playing or not.”

“We’ll be playing,” Adam told her. “I can already see the people. I can already hear our music. And I hear your voice, too. Close your eyes and try it.”

She did as he requested, smiling in response. “Last year I wanted to go,” she said. “But I had to go on a family vacation to Egypt.”

“Nothing could have stopped me from going. I’ve been every year. These days, the show sells out in a few hours. It’s the biggest local music event of the summer.”

Angel huddled up in her coat. "When are you going to get your heater fixed?"

He turned to her, his eyes landing and staying on her a long while. Wordlessly, his expression answered her better than any spoken word.

"Oh," she said, embarrassed at her assumption. In Angel's world, money automatically provided comfort. But in Adam's world, he exchanged comfort for things of greater importance—and the music playing in his cab provided more warmth than a heater ever could.

"The manager at Rocky's is a good friend of mine," he said, downshifting to a red light. "Want to see who's playing tonight?"

"I'd love to," she said. Then with reservation, "But isn't Rocky's a 21 nightclub? My mother would die if she ever caught me in a bar."

"We won't be in the bar, but we'll have the best seats in the house."

She questioned him with a frown.

"You'll see."

He reached into his pocket for his cell phone but remembered that in his sleepy morning state he had forgotten it at home. Upon asking to borrow Angel's, she informed him her battery was dead. So he pulled into a service station and stopped next to a phone booth. They both climbed out and Adam dug into his pocket for change. When he found only lint, Angel handed him some coins and he dialed Rocky's.

"Calvin, it's me. Who's playing tonight? Star Riders? Oh yeah, I read about them. Are they good?" Angel smiled as his eyes blinked toward her. "Okay. I want to bring Angel over. About ten minutes? Great."

He replaced the receiver and Angel squeezed by. "Now I have to let Mother know I'll be late. Wish me luck." She dropped in the coins and dialed, the scent of her perfume escaping through her coat. Adam stood still, gathering her expressions, her body language, the sheen of her hair. He couldn't stop his mind from wandering, couldn't stop the old feelings of infatuation from starting a slow boil. He absorbed her soft, confident words, her passionate eyes, and the way she blew a loose hair from her face . . .

When Angel hung up, she caught him so unexpectedly that his body jolted and his throat released a soft whimper. "What?" she asked.

"Nothing," he lied, shaking himself back into reality.

"With Mother I've learned how to use just the right level of elusiveness to get my way. If I'd have said we were going to a bar to hear a band named 'Star Riders,' she'd have ordered me home. But, she was

fine with me staying late to ‘study music.’ Of course, I purposely didn’t specify who or where.”

Adam parked around the corner from Rocky’s. They stepped into the dark alley, Angel grasping Adam’s arm as they dodged small puddles. The nightclub’s music rumbled a powerful, deep bass and punchy beat. He helped her over the chain-link fence and they waited, rocking to the rhythm. Within several minutes, the back door opened and Calvin signaled them to scurry over.

“Well, well. Look at what the wind blew in.” Calvin stated in usual fashion. “I’ve got to learn to keep this back door closed!”

“And locked,” Angel said and giggled. Calvin raised his eyebrows toward Adam.

“Calvin, this is—”

“Angel,” she said, “Angel Irving. Blue Denim’s new lead and back up singer.” Calvin stretched forward a large ebony hand to her ivory palm.

“I like her. She’s perky,” he told Adam. “What’s a perky little thing like you doing with a dork like this?” Calvin asked, swinging an arm to catch Adam’s gut unexpectedly. “Oh, that didn’t hurt, did it? Don’t tell me that hurt. I know that little punch couldn’t have hurt.”

“Not at all,” Adam choked out.

Calvin rolled two office chairs over to them. “Have a seat. I have a couple things to do then I’ll chill with you both later.”

They slipped off their coats and Angel inspected the room, her eyes meandering and fingers exploring. The seven-member band started a new song and a crowd populated the dance floor.

“Two-way mirror,” Angel stated, tapping a fingernail on the glass. Lights burst on stage meeting head on with a flare of drums and guitars. “I’m glad we came here. I wasn’t in the mood to study Chemistry or French. I told Mother I’ve been keeping up with my studies. But the truth is, I am slipping way behind. It’s the first time I haven’t given one-hundred percent to my school work.”

“You don’t need to do everything one-hundred percent,” he advised.

They watched Debbie and Monica deliver drinks as fast as Neil and Tom could mix them. Angel leaned on the oak sill watching the band and tapping a heel; she reached over and touched Adam’s hand. “Thanks for bringing me here.”

He smiled, his eyes noticing her dainty fingers, her manicured nails and a ring on her ring finger. “Is that your class ring?”

She removed the gold band embedded with an amethyst stone. He observed the school Spartan crest, the graduation year, and the initials *AKI* engraved inside.

"The 'K' stands for?"

"My mother's name, Katherine. I guess it's better than my father's name—Robert." She laughed. "You don't have one?"

"A middle name?" He asked, playfully. "Of course, it's my father's name—Richard."

"No," she giggled. "A class ring!"

He shook his head. "You know how much those cost? I wanted new humbucking pickups for my guitar instead. I figured I probably wouldn't wear it after high school anyway."

"High school has made many memories for me," she said. "I hope this ring helps me hold on to them."

"High school has made many memories for me, too," Adam replied. "I hope my songs help me hold on to them." They watched the dancing audience, Adam hypnotized, as though already churning some of those memories into songs.

"How long have you known Calvin?"

He hesitated but responded before the lapse was noticeable. "A long time," he said. "Ever since my dad died."

Adam remained still, choosing not to think about how he had met Calvin. "Each time I see him, I usually throw a few punches that he blocks before he starts returning them." He chuckled and shook his head, observing Calvin laughing with a patron. "He's just a big kid. He still likes skateboarding and shooting people with squirt guns and playing football in the street." Adam caught his breath, turning to see Angel's attentive, admiring eyes. "Every year he gives all the girls he knows valentines. You know, the little ones you give away in the first grade."

They shared a chuckle, and then redirected their attention to the band. Adam moved up for a better view.

"What instruments did your father play?" she later asked.

"Acoustic and steel guitar. And harmonica, too. His band, Six-Pack—six guys were in their band—had a top forty hit called "The Moon's On Fire" and a record contract that never got finished." Adam lowered his tone. "I'll never forget the way he played. I have his single and some recordings that my mother made when I was young. He fascinated me with his guitar. I used to fall asleep to his gentle strumming and soft, clear voice." His eyes touched hers. "The magic of his guitar stayed in my heart."

"What kind of music did they play?"

“Country Rock. Their sounds were rootsy but laced with rock—bold and energetic with solid riffs. My mom said he planned to go straight to the top, and may have if he hadn’t gotten married.”

“And when did baby Adam come into the picture?”

“My mom wanted a baby right away. I guess I slowed things down some. But my mom said he wouldn’t have traded me for anything.” Adam reflected. “He was so sure of himself. He always knew he would make it. And I have no doubt he would have.”

Adam felt her eyes on him but he resisted looking back, savoring the precious memories romancing his mind. He saw his father—assertively he executed each guitar note; his blue eyes bright and his smooth voice flowing. His fingers moved flawlessly as though an engineer had designed each movement. Young Adam always dressed in a miniature version of the same attire—boots, jeans, cowboy hat. With a glowing smile, his father beamed proudly at his young son; Adam wanted to be just like him . . .

He felt Angel’s distant voice tugging him from his daydream.

“Do you mind if I ask how your father died?”

He had told few people what Angel already knew. But her bright eyes invited him to share his secret. “Auto accident,” he stated, electing not to elaborate more. “Strange part is, one day I had a daddy, the next day I didn’t. You never know what’s around the corner of each new day.”

No more words passed for a long time. They both sat struck by the emotion, almost out of reverence for the man that filled both their minds. Then Angel leaned closer to him. “Adam, I’ve never known anyone like you. You take nothing for granted. Like your father, your feelings, your talents. You live every second with depth and passion.”

The band simmered, the sound and stage glow extinguishing together. The bar lights highlighted half of her face and her eyes became two candles. “And I’ve never known anyone,” he said, “who has changed so much in her life so quickly.”

“I had to change,” she pointed her view to the ceiling. “I couldn’t stand another day the way things were. People think upper-class families don’t have problems because we have money. But the truth is, money gives us more problems.” Her eyes fell on him. “I don’t want money to ever make me any different. Or I’d rather have no money at all.”

Although he remained silent, Adam considered how her family’s money did make her different. Luxury cars, class rings, and Egyptian vacations were automatic to her; she had been never deprived of a fast food lunch or automobile heater. He didn’t respect her less for this, but it reminded him that they were from different worlds.

“How’s your mom?” Angel asked.

“Okay, I guess. She’s always humming and dancing—like a school girl in puppy love,” he said. “They talk for hours on the phone. Fortunately our phone plan has unlimited minutes.”

“Bobby and I used to talk on the phone a lot, too. It used to drive my mother crazy.” Angel sighed and smiled. “It’s what I missed most at first, Bobby a phone call away. Once he called from his car to say how much he missed me, even when he was still in our driveway.”

Adam stayed silent, letting Angel open up, feeling she needed a quiet friend to hear her work out some of the pain still inside.

“Bobby could be kind and considerate, nothing like what you see at school. When I was alone with him, he was another person. Once he even wrote me a poem. I must have read it over and over a thousand times. Would you like to hear it?”

Adam nodded, seeing how much she wanted to tell him.

“It isn’t very good—it doesn’t even have a name. But it goes like this: My whole world is spinning, and I don’t have the time, To ask ‘How are you doing?’ and ‘Are you feeling fine?’ Sometimes I forget what’s important, but then I realize, I can look forever into your indigo eyes.”

A thin layer of fluid over her eyes made them sparkle. She smiled and blinked away memories that seemed to be rushing toward her. “I guess I’d be lying if I said I don’t miss those things. But I couldn’t go on seeing him after what he did to me. I so believed in our future together. I think I was a challenge to him. And when he finally got what he wanted, he was on to his next challenge.”

Surprised by her honest admission, Adam remained quiet, leaving an open window if she felt the need to talk more. Instead, she wiped the water from her eyes and turned to him.

“But I have other things in my life now. Better things.”

The band ended their song and the audience applauded as a slow song began. The dance floor paired together with swaying bodies.

“Would you like to dance?” Angel asked him. Her view shifted from eye to eye. “We have our own private dance floor. No drunks. No hot, sweaty bodies.”

He shuddered, but then discarded the anxiety. *Relax*, he told himself, *nothing is going to happen. She’s a close friend—sort of the sister you never had.* He accepted her into his arms and they eased closer. He tried to pretend he was dancing with his mother, but the feeling vanished when she rested her head delicately on his shoulder. He could feel and hear his heartbeat.

Through this apparently harmless embrace, his conscience confronted him. *You shouldn't be doing this. Angel is an attractive, sexy woman. You don't know what this could lead to.*

"What's wrong?" Angel asked. "You seem so—tense."

"Sorry. It's just been a long time since I last danced," he said and tried to loosen up. He rebuffed his conscience. What harm could come from two friends dancing? Hadn't this Angelphobia gone far enough?

Angel seemed smaller now, but fit his frame well. With eyes shut, they together moved with the music.

You know Angel likes you, so quit playing naive, his conscience confronted him again. *What will you do at the end of the song? A slow song is a set up for a kiss. Are you going to kiss her?*

Of course he wouldn't, although he enjoyed a small sample of the thought. A year ago, holding Angel, dancing with Angel, would have been a dream come true. But things had changed, he had changed, Angel had changed. And just as he beat challenges before, he could conquer any obstacle or temptation in his way.

The stage lights faded and the last note sailed serenely into the past. Adam felt a thirst and soft darkness drift around them like a warm mist. He wanted to keep moving with Angel, to keep the song alive.

When the song finished, he couldn't let go of her. She looked up, a smile in her full lips, her eyes aglow. As if he was watching a movie, he saw himself moving closer, closer to her face.

And the world went black when his lips met her moist mouth.

17

Shortly after Angel started a ballad at rehearsal the next day, Adam's mother stopped in. She hadn't seen or heard them play in months and Adam suspected her visit had something to do with the box she carried.

She sat on their office couch, her foot tapping, and her head nodding. At the end, she set the box aside and applauded.

"That was an exceptional job. Angel, your voice is wonderful. You really round out these rough, masculine voices." Angel returned a gracious smile. "Look, I will be out of town a few days and unfortunately, I'll miss your auditions for Mork."

"Morp," Adam corrected her. "It's prom, spelled backwards."

"Yes, of course," she said as if she was brushing something off her shoulder. "Anyway, Bruce had a fabulous thought. I can only take partial credit because it was actually all his idea." She handed the box with the flaps folded over to Adam. Opening the top, curious fingers felt a soft material. He reached in further and removed a piece of denim clothing. When he held it up, the folds fell out and he displayed a tailored denim jacket. Brass buttons brought the front halves together. Embroidered in script on the left breast was the name "Mike Slade" and on the back in bold white letters, "Blue Denim."

"Cool!" Mike snatched the jacket, admiring everything down to the detailed stitches. Adam pulled out another with Gabe's name, and one for Jesse and himself. A smaller, more feminine design with lace came out last.

"Mrs. Jensen, it's—" Angel began.

"Please, never call me Mrs. Jensen. It makes me feel old. Call me Sharon."

"It's beautiful, Sharon," Angel said and slipped it on.

"I called your parents and got your sizes. Let me know if they need any altering."

Mike, Gabe, and Jesse all expressed their appreciation to her, Mike giving her a hug.

"I'm sorry, I can't stay longer," Adam's mother told them, "but my flight leaves in—oh, my God!" She stated, noticing the time on her wrist. "Good bye everyone. Good luck at Mork."

Nobody noticed when the excitement disappeared from Adam's face. He hadn't heard a word after she said, "Never call me Mrs. Jensen . . ." Adam was proud of his father's name, honored to own a piece of his father's legacy. To his mother, the name apparently had no special meaning; to Adam, Jensen would have significance for all eternity.

After she left, the others flaunted their garments as though in a fashion show or throwing them into the crowd at a rock concert. But Adam just watched with dull expression. The voice of his conscience told him to accept the gift graciously, but his mind questioned her true intentions. Had the jackets been out of thoughtfulness? Or had she used them for some ulterior motive?

Singles and small groups spurted into the auditorium, slowly at first, then steadily. The different cliques and clubs organized in not unusual clusters: Jocks, Cheerleaders, Band, Color Guard, Cowboys, Nerds, Punks, Goths, and Freaks. Although last period assemblies usually drew low attendance, nobody would forfeit a free Morp appetizer.

As Blue Denim set up, they each scrambled to their particular tasks—setting up equipment, power and sound checks, tuning instruments. Mike positioned a monitor, and Gabe repositioned it, then Mike positioned it again. Betsy Williams, teacher and student activities director, told Blue Denim that they would be auditioning second. At their request, Betsy agreed to have the overhead lights cut so the band could use their new stage lights.

The teachers sat together, but missing from the group was Mrs. Griffin who apparently had no interest in hearing the bands—even if Morp was the school's highest attended student event.

Not far away, Rebel shuffled in a variety of leather, skin-tight pants, and boots. Garrett Grimes and Lucy Parker dressed inconspicuously to display the tattoos on Garrett's arms and the tramp stamp on the small of Lucy's lower back. Brad had grown his hair and had gotten a frizzy perm; he had small body-pierced hoops in one eyebrow and a nostril.

When Adam glanced over, Rebel fired hollow-pointed glares. He wouldn't let their charade intimidate him; he was confident Blue Denim

was more prepared, knew their audience better, and had a superior musical offering.

Stephen Chan stepped up, sipping a soda, changing a lighting bank angle. Satisfied with its placement, he threw an arm around Adam. "Dude, this is going to be great!" he said, not attempting to smother his grin. "And hey, check it out. I have a surprise for you."

Adam cocked his eyebrows up.

He grinned wider and looked over his glasses. "You'll see."

Angel uncoiled, positioned, and tested each microphone. The girl was quietly trying to settle her nerves when Adam came up behind her; her shiny hair reminded him of some exotic flower in bloom.

"*Music flows*," he whispered to her.

She turned to see him. "Music flows?"

"*Music flows*. To eliminate pre-show jitters, I repeatedly think, *Music Flows*. I visualize singing and playing and the music flowing out automatically. It's like I'm the instrument and God is playing me."

She blinked at the wisdom of his words. "*Music flows. Music flows*," she replied, eyes closed. And although she showed relief in her smile, she held out her trembling hand. "I didn't think I would be this nervous. Do you still get the butterflies?"

"Before every show," he replied. "But after the first song, I'm so in the groove that I almost forget where I am. But Gabe, he gets so nervous the night before each show that he hardly sleeps. Look at him." When they caught his attention he looked back at them with confusion and bloodshot eyes. They then laughed and he scowled and turned away in disgust.

From the floor below, Denise's voice wedged between them. "Hello, Adam," she said in a strange, dark tone. "How have you been? We haven't talked in a long time." Her one ear contained a gold rose earring and the other ear, a four-leaf clover.

The fact was, since the audition, Denise had completely avoided him—no more notes on his windshield, no more screeching greetings in the halls, no more gawking eyes in History. Maybe she had finally outgrown her schoolgirl crush on him.

"Hello, Angel." Denise said. Before Angel could reply, Denise turned away from her. "Adam, I just wanted to let you know that I have no hard feelings about, you know, being rejected as your singer." She frowned toward Angel. "And I won't let that fact influence my decision when I vote today."

Adam had no time for her distractions. And he knew consoling her would be a time-consuming conversation that he neither desired nor could afford.

"In case you've been trying to get a hold of me, I've been out a lot lately. Actually, I have found another band that I'm singing with."

"Really?" Adam asked, his voice a combination of surprise and confusion. He knew every local band and hadn't heard of any looking for a female vocalist.

"So the best time to catch me when you want to study together again is at school, or in the late evening," she said. "Like, after midnight."

Hope that Denise had matured evaporated; she had not given up, only resorted to a more desperate strategy. He still had to tape down cords, connect his foot switches and amp, and test his guitars. Adam noticed Mike's keyboard plug loose. "Mike, your plug's out." He checked his watch and stepped away to tighten a flickering light bulb. Angel also returned to her job, leaving Denise alone.

Denise unzipped her purse, dug for a pen and said, "I better give you my numbers again."

When she finished, Denise called Adam. Distracted, he did not reply and she called again. Finally, leaving the paper on the stage floor, she called out, "Here are my numbers, Adam. If you call before six tonight, I might be home."

"That girl never gives up." Angel said to Adam after Denise left. She picked up the paper and handed it to him. "I saw how she trapped you into studying with her that day in the hall."

Adam scowled as he glanced over Denise's phone numbers. "I'd like to be her friend, but she wants to make it something more." He observed the backside of the paper—an old jewelry store receipt—and he shoved it into a pocket.

"Twice I overheard Denise telling friends that you have a musical note tattoo on your chest." Angel said, and then curiously added, "Is it true? Do you? And if so, how would she know such a thing?"

"It's not a secret," Adam replied, molding a frown. "Every guy in P.E. has seen it in the locker room. Besides, I have no romantic interest in Denise. And never will."

A crafty smile lighted her face and she poked a frisky finger into his belly. "Better not." He stopped to read her eyes. The evening at Rocky's, they had danced and in the end shared a sweet kiss. Although he had mentally debated it, he concluded that he and Angel had both needed a passionate embrace as a diversion from life's demanding quests and

challenges. And until then, he refused to acknowledge that anything more serious was happening between them.

Shortly before start time, Rebel invaded Blue Denim territory. Brad's arm swung over Lucy's shoulder as she annoyingly popped her bubble gum.

"Well, would you look at this set up," Garrett said. "Lights. Sound equipment. Too bad you don't know what to do with it."

"Don't they look cute in their jeans and little jackets?" Lucy laughed.

"Yeah, just like life-size dolls," Brad added, pointing. "Are you Barbie and you Ken?"

Gabe suspended his activity. "Butler! Unless you can play drums with my fist down your throat, you and your crackhead friends better beat it."

"Somebody must not be getting any," Grimes said under his breath, Joey and Frank chuckling.

"We just came over to wish you luck," said Brad.

"Yeah, you're going to need it," Lucy added.

Gabe's teeth gritted and his arms made clubbed fists. Months of weight training had defined a distinct physique of solid flesh in his arms and under his tight tee-shirt. Before responding, Adam leaned against Gabe and whispered, "Forget them. Save your energy for the performance—it's our real chance to get even."

Gabe heeded the advice, first staring so sharply that it made Brad wince. Rebel's leader stepped over to Adam, leaving the others several paces behind him.

"Jensen, I have a little business proposition for you."

"Not interested," Adam said, turning and walking away.

Grimes kept in step as if he hadn't heard a word. "The way I see it, we can both turn this gig into an opportunity. Let's call it, a strategic alliance. All you have to do is tell the audience you forfeit in support of Rebel, and we'll split the profits from Morp. You don't even have to play."

Adam shook his head in shock and continued walking.

"Better think about it," Grimes said. "Because if you don't forfeit the audition," he stepped closer, lowering his voice, "Morp will be the last gig you play."

Grimes then turned and he and Rebel scuffed away, mocking the blue denim jackets among themselves. Adam watched them leave, deliberating the seriousness of Garrett's words, and what he meant by

them. He'd never known Rebel to be violent, but then there was nobody he less trusted.

18

A few minutes before starting time, Mr. Sanders, Carl Knudson, and Betsy Williams stepped to Blue Denim's side of the stage. In his early forties, Vice Principal Knudson wore a frown like a deputy's badge. His smug face inferred the assembly a distraction keeping students from valuable class time. In contrast, Mr. Sanders was the most highly regarded and respected Principal in Boulder Valley history.

"Good afternoon, Blue Denim," Mr. Sanders said. "I've been a big supporter since we first held Morp seven years ago. For some of the students, it's the highlight of the year—some look more forward to Morp than the senior prom."

"You may each play fifteen minutes or three songs," Betsy said. She was a short, young teacher with mousy eyes and a warm smile who headed the Spirit Club and Cheerleaders. If she was holding a grudge against Angel for quitting cheerleading, she didn't show it. "As Angel requested, I'll have the overhead lights cut when it's your turn. Are you ready to start?"

Adam signaled the inquiry to Stephen and received a thumbs-up. "We're ready," he told Betsy. Garrett Grimes' threat still weighed heavily on his mind and he considered reporting what Grimes had said to Mr. Sanders. But, he resolved, he couldn't prove Garrett intended to carry out the threat—or even what he had specifically threatened to do.

After visiting the opposing stage, Mr. Sanders and the others returned to an announcement booth to accompany emcee, Eddie "The Cruiser".

Mr. Sanders flipped a table microphone switch. "Would you please be seated?" A murmuring "Shhh" swarmed through the students until all voices subsided. "Welcome to today's auditions. Today, you, Boulder Valley High, will select which band will play at Morp." The auditorium offered zealous cheers and his echoing words made the

microphone shrill with feedback. "Here to tell you more about Morp this year is Ms. Williams."

"Thank you, Mr. Sanders," she said. "For those who may not know, Morp is our distinguished Sadie Hawkins fund raiser held a month before the prom. Just as in past years, Morp will feature the school's best band and this year, the winner will receive a payment of \$750 for playing. The theme for Morp this year is 'Freedom.' Today, we have the freedom to choose our favorite band: Will it be Rebel? Or will it be Blue Denim?" The students cheered and several toilet paper rolls streamed through the air like comets. On stage, each Rebel member inconspicuously consumed a drink from a community flask.

"I'd like to thank Mr. Sanders and the school administration for their continued sponsorship of this event. And here to introduce the bands is our one and only Master of Ceremonies—Eddie 'the Cruiser.'"

"Thank you, Betsy," came Eddie's voice. "Today we have two very different but very excellent bands. The tough job will be deciding which one you want to hear at this year's Morp. Following both auditions, you will determine the winner by an audience response vote. You may vote for both, but must vote louder for the one you like most. Now, what I need to know is: Are you ready to rock and roll?" The student body thundered the auditorium. "Won't you please welcome, Boulder Valley High's shock rockers: Rebel!"

The first Rebel note hit the air like a crashing lightning bolt. The audience responded with enthusiastic applause. Lucy hopped to the microphone, bopped her head, swallowed her gum, and screamed:

*Your love is like a pair of pliers
You've got me in your grip and you won't let go
You and your friends are all big liars
I'm going to get away at the picture show . . .*

Brad pelted a shotgun spray of drums and cymbals while Garrett twisted contorted expressions with each string. Scattered students danced while others bounced on their seats. In the middle section, center-of-the-universe Bobby Wilmar dramatized an epileptic attack for the jocks.

*My life is like a movie that is so surreal
And I never know what you'll do to me next
You'll never know the way you make me feel
I'm lost in a horror movie multi-plex . . .*

The same four guitar chords repetitively wound round and round while Brad's drums added a hasty pulse. Adam considered how the invigorating beat disappointed, due to deficiency of artistic depth, its shallowness of musical diversity.

*Later on I'm gonna catch the matinee
To watch my life unfold on the silver screen
I'm thinking about going there later today
And walking out when you make the scene . . .*

*My life is like a movie that is so surreal
And I never know what you'll do to me next
You'll never know the way you make me feel
I'm lost in a horror movie multi-plex.*

The first song ended with the grace of a car crash. Afterwards, the audience's screaming response stunned Adam. He had a terrifying thought: Maybe while Blue Denim caught up from Brad's defection, Rebel had secretly grasped an understanding of modern music. Maybe Rebel's popularity had skyrocketed!

"Thanks," Grimes said like it was a dirty word. "In case by some freak accident you don't know us, we're Rebel!" He glared toward Blue Denim while his band members chuckled and snorted. "I wanna introduce the band. Today, on bass guitar, is Joey Zapotto! On rhythm guitar and backup vocals, Freaky Frank Jarrell! On skins and tins, lightning arms and ex-Blue Denim drummer, Brad Butler." Each member acknowledged the audience by relaying a brief instrumental noise—Brad, a flash of all drums and cymbals. "Lead vocals and the goddess of shock rock, Lucy Parker. And me, I am bad boy Garrett Grimes. Together, we're Rebel!"

With the same style and beat as the first song, the band slammed into a new original called, "Love and Leather." The song lunged into high gear with circling repetition and a blaring Lucy. Garrett ripped crashing chords from his axe, his eyes with a tribal wildness. Lucy and Garrett randomly scurried around like untamed animals confined in an invisible cage. And in the end, the audience responded with even more zeal as to the first.

When Rebel entered their final song, Blue Denim got into position. Angel closed her eyes, and Adam could see her quietly repeating her new mantra: *music flows*. Adrenaline swam through his blood—they would soon perform for their largest and most important audience. Their every effort had been for this Morp audition; every rehearsal, every

missed party and social event, from finding a new drummer to adding a female vocalist. Every excited, strenuous, exhausting hour they had invested in the next 15 minutes.

Rebel finished with a mighty climax to the sound of audience cheering and stomping feet. “We are Rebel,” Grimes exploded into the microphone. “We’ll see you at Morp!”

Eddie waited much of a minute before the commotion simmered. But to Adam, the applause was deafening and endless. “Our next band is also a Boulder Valley High original,” Eddie stated. “You’ve heard them at parties this past year and over the school audio system during lunch. Please welcome, the most comfortable look in rock fashion—Blue Denim!”

Adam zinged the first lead guitar riff into the air, and Mike followed with vigorous keyboards. Gabe entered with swaggering bass while Jesse rolled drums and Angel rattled her tambourine.

Adam stepped to the microphone. His lungs filled deeply and Stephen blasted a parade of bursting colors.

*Everybody’s got to have a dream
Sometimes bought site unseen
It may seem a million miles away
Or even further with each passing day . . .*

Behind Adam, a pale red light emerged Mike, his notes partnering with the guitar licks and racing them to the chorus. Suddenly, a bright spotlight illuminated from the back balcony, and Adam realized Stephen’s surprise.

*You can’t win if you don’t take a risk,
You won’t succeed if you don’t take a chance
Yesterday had dreams you missed
That can’t be blamed on circumstance . . .*

Gabe thumped howling chords through taut strings. His face was still and his eyes solemn—playing music was serious business. In front, Angel delivered a harmonic backup, balancing and flavoring Adam’s lyrics.

*Don’t listen to what the fools say
Their roads all lead to tragedy
So look beyond the obvious*

And design a winning strategy . . .

Adam felt the magic sweep through him, felt himself changing, becoming the music. His heart clocked the beat, his fingers transformed into notes and his mouth into lyrics. He felt the music beaming through him and into every ear.

*You can't win if you don't take a risk,
You won't succeed if you don't take a chance
Yesterday had dreams you missed
That can't be blamed on circumstance . . .*

During the instrumental, Angel's becoming eyes solicited his attention. He felt the invisible language of the melody connecting them. He was surely in heaven, showering in the ultimate emotion of music.

*Everybody's got to have a dream
Sometimes bought site unseen
It won't seem a million miles away
If you get closer with each passing day . . .*

The band played the final chorus. The fuzz box emitted dissolving lead guitar notes and the ending sounds descended like a feather. The lights and music triggered to black silence, and timeless anticipation separated quietness from rapid applause.

The stage shone with smiles; even Gabe cracked a sideways smirk. With his ears ringing, Adam was too music-inebriated to compare the cheers to those received by Rebel. To ensure a win, Blue Denim had to do better!

He pulled off his guitar and strapped into his electric acoustic. A sauntering keyboard and sweet acoustic strumming introduced Angel's ballad. The students hushed as the bass, drums and keyboards joined in. Angel grew out of the spotlight beam, and she withdrew from deep inside herself.

*The only way to mend a broken heart
Is with an antidote of pain and time
It's hard to make a brand new start
When you're left at the scene of the crime . . .*

Adam's guitar whispered sadly, and piano notes sounded like tear drops falling. In the tranquil glow, every eye followed Angel's lips as she poured out herself.

*But I'm willing to try to love once more
Willing to search for an open door
To give one last person one last chance
A one in a million, lasting romance . . .*

In the shadows, Bobby Wilmar staged a mocking performance for his friends. Rubbing his eyes, he clutched his heart and mouthed crying impersonations. Adam hoped Angel couldn't see his callous actions through the lights.

*When clouds are gray and full of doubt
And teardrops turn to showers
There could be a distant rainbow
Where teardrops nurture flowers . . .*

The drumbeat clapped steadily as the song sailed toward the soft, final verse. A small spotlight highlighted a glistening in Angel's eyes, but she swiftly blinked the moisture away.

*But I'm willing to try to love once more
Willing to search for an open door
To give one last person one last chance
A one in a million, lasting romance . . .*

A teardrop fell from her cheek as her voice dissolved. Mingled with snuffles and sobs, unrestrained cheers tumbled toward them. Angel brushed the water from her eyes and bowed.

"Thank you," Adam said after he too applauded Angel. "It is our honor to be playing for you today. Now I'd like to introduce you to the band. On my right is the sultan of the synthesizer, the king of the keyboards, let's hear it for Mr. Mike Slade!" Whistling, cheers, and clapping arose as Mike delivered a tasty sound treat. "On my left—the guru of the guitar, the boss of the bass, everybody give it up for Mr. Gabe Lovelock!" Gabe plucked a soulful ditty to the audience's enthusiastic response. "In the back, the doctor of the drums, the surgeon of the sticks, won't you shout it out for: Jesse Jimenez . . . To my right—the princess of percussion, the vixen of vocals, a round of applause for Ms. Angel

Irving.” The applause intensified as Angel grinned and waved. Adam was about to simply state ‘And I’m Adam Jensen’ when Angel stepped in front of him.

“And everyone—the lead man on lead guitar, the master of the Stratocaster, he’s Blue Denim’s one and only—Mr. Adam Jensen!”

Adam beamed from the accolade he received on and off the stage. He shared this moment of renown by absorbing the faces of each of them. With only a momentary pause, he returned to the microphone. “Thank you. We’ve saved the best for last. Here’s our latest original: ‘Colorado Days, Colorado Nights.’”

The drumsticks clocked the count and a bass drum hooked the instruments together. Adam’s fingers scrambled along his strings and he panned the dark audience. This time, most of all, the band had to implant a lasting impression.

*I need a cool mountain breeze
And a hillside full of blue spruce trees
An afternoon of warm sunshine
The sweet scent of wild columbine*

Mike’s hands danced on the keys while Gabe plugged the bass. Unable to contain her excitement, Angel hopped side to side, her tambourine a fluttering, musical butterfly. The lyrics surfed the melody.

*There’s only one Colorado
With Rocky Mountain sunshine and starlight
Where I can play my song
Play it loud and play it strong
Colorado Days, Colorado Nights*

Rebel snickered, scowled, and pointed fingers. But to Adam, entranced in the melody, Rebel was a million miles away. Here, now, was the glorious music.

*To heaven I am closer by a mile
And my face can’t contain its smile
Where the Artist spared no color
Painting sunsets like no other*

Drums delivered birth to a wailing lead guitar; Angel’s tambourine jangled rhythmically and Mike pounded wildly, his fingers

recoiling as though each key sparked a shock of delight. Positioning for a guitar war, Gabe and Adam pointed weapons and blasted electronic bullets in some fantastic rock arcade.

*When my time has come to say goodnight
Bury me with the Flatirons in my sight
In the Rocky Mountain sunshine and starlight
Colorado Days and Colorado Nights
Yeah, Colorado Days . . .
Colorado Nights!*

At the end, Adam propelled himself into the air, his fingers launching the last note. And when the final sound exploded, the lights went black.

The normal auditorium lights returned—their dream became a memory and the present became reality. With roaring spectators, Blue Denim waved and bowed, a smile composing each perspiring face. Adam held his guitar high in the air. “Boulder Valley High, Feel the Music! We are Blue Denim.”

Eddie positioned a small electronic box on the table in front of him. “This decibel meter accurately measures sound to within one decibel. You may vote for both bands, but must vote louder for the one you like most. Now, your vote please,” Eddie called, “for Rebel!” The students submitted a stifling applause. Surprise, even panic, penetrated each Blue Denim face—*No! This couldn’t be happening!* Rebel couldn’t be receiving such favorable praise. Blue Denim searched each others’ eyes—were they all hearing the same potent acclamation?

Eddie viewed the decibel meter’s reading. With raised eyebrows, he verified the number with Mr. Sanders, and Ms. Williams logged the reading. On the other side, Rebel congratulated each other as if they had already won.

“And now, your vote for Blue Denim.”

An eternity passed within the moment between Eddie’s request and the audience reaction.

Then, the auditorium thundered . . . vibrated . . . roared! They ignited a firestorm of cheer and acclamation. Blue Denim jumped in elation, they shook hands and hugged and slapped backs. Slowly at first, but growing with intensity, the audience chanted: Blue Denim, Blue Denim, Blue Denim . . .

Within the vibrating commotion, Eddie announced the results, but the exhilarated population drowned his words. Adam surveyed the

chanting crowd; he put his arm around Angel and with zealous pride, he victoriously threw his fist into the air.

19

After rehearsal the following evening, the others spent a clock-watched fifteen minutes waiting for Adam to return from walking Angel to her car. The instant he stepped back inside, six eyes nailed him—Gabe’s the sharpest.

“Isn’t Angel capable of seeing herself to her car?”

Adam studied each hard face. Was this a court marshal by his closest peers?

“We saw you and Angel holding hands,” Mike said in a voice that almost didn’t sound like his.

Without words, Adam massaged his tired eyes. He and Angel had not discussed what was happening between them, but were now guilty of the innocent act of handholding. Their friendship was a special and unique one, neither knowing if it would lead nowhere or on some fantastic voyage. They each still had their priorities: Adam’s dedication to his music; Angel’s discovery of herself, of her singing, and maybe finding out if all relationships were as bitter as her first taste with Bobby.

“We all had an agreement about dating,” Gabe said, “and about relationships. In fact, you were the one who insisted there wouldn’t be any.”

Adam took a long time to frame the words in his mind. “I know what you’re thinking—”

Gabe asked him: “Have you kissed her?”

His only defense was not to answer the question. “It’s not what you think. I would never risk anything that could change our ability to make music.”

“Then tell us if you’ve kissed her.” Mike echoed Gabe’s question, deep frown lines etched in his forehead.

“Music is what I live for! I’m not going to risk everything I’ve worked so hard to accomplish. I quit my job, I quit sports—”

“So did we,” Gabe interrupted, “and we’re not fooling around with our female vocalist.”

“I’m not fooling around with Angel,” he said. ‘Fooling around’ was both selfish and intentional—he and Angel were neither taking advantage of the other nor had they planned its outcome.

“What about after Morp?” Gabe asked. “Are we going to return to the original Blue Denim?”

He swallowed hard; he should have seen that left hook coming. “We have to consider what’s best for the band. Angel is the key that got us into Morp.” He switched from eye to eye. “She helps round out our sound. And look at the suggestions and improvements we have made to almost every song thanks to her. Don’t let your emotions make business decisions.”

“Look Adam, just tell us the truth,” Jesse said. “Have you kissed her or not?”

“That’s none of your business,” he replied to all of them. But regardless of what he said, Adam’s eyes could not hide the naked truth.

This all but guaranteed an explosion from Gabe. “You have kissed her,” he shouted, pointing an admonishing finger. “And who knows what else. I told you a female in the band was bad news from the beginning. If you and Angel don’t stop right now,” he stepped forward, his finger landing on Adam’s chest, “you can count me out of this band.”

“Me, too,” added Mike.

“Yeah,” Jesse said, “And me, too.”

A gray heaven shadowed the early morning dawn like a ghost. Adam cut the engine half a block from Angel’s house and coasted to her driveway. He stashed the keys in a hole in the seat and in running clothes, he strutted toward the elaborate home with the three-car garage and grand pillar entryway. As he approached, the front door opened.

“Is it cold out there?” Angel asked, sticking her nose outside, a headband doubling as ear warmers. “Is it too late to back out?”

“Yes,” Adam answered to both questions. “Are you ready?”

“I don’t know how you talked me into this.” Buttons, Angel’s toy poodle, muzzled her fuzzy face into the door opening and started yapping. “Buttons! Quiet! Come on in, Adam.”

Inside, he marveled at the elegant, white stone fireplace, at the ornate tile and imported rugs over hardwood floors. Classic statues, paintings, and antiques accented the room. In the adjacent great room stood a magnificent grand piano. Across the room, a Wurlitzer jukebox colored the dark corner with effervescent lights.

Angel wore a lavender running suit with matching shoes. Staying close to her heels, the dog peeked between and around her legs, voicing defensive growls. Out of Angel's view, Adam crossed his eyes and scowled at the animal in jest. Buttons sprung ahead, barking and darting toward Adam's feet.

"Oh, Buttons," Angel said. "Adam won't hurt you." Adam put on his friendliest expression as Angel retrieved and cradled the dog. "I better put you away before you wake up the whole house."

They bent to stretch their sleepy muscles. Angel stretched long splits, extending her arms to her toes with her chin touching the floor. Feeling his thigh and calf muscles tightening, Adam had nowhere near the flexibility of this former cheerleader.

Outside they jogged down Palmer Court to Golf Club Drive. Although the days were warming, the mornings retained a chilly bite.

"How long have you been running?" Angel asked.

"About four years." His face separated the steam. "I love running. My best time over a five-mile course is twenty-eight minutes, thirty seconds. Someday I hope to beat it."

"I'd be happy if I could just run five miles."

Adam knew he had to speak to her about the guys' confrontation from the previous evening. His foremost obligation was to the band and besides, he and Angel had not yet treaded so deeply that they could not reverse their course. Going forward, they had to maintain a *friends-only* policy.

They progressed a silent block to a view of the lake before speaking again. "I talked with Mother last night," Angel said. "We haven't had a good mother-daughter talk in a long time. She actually seemed excited when I told her we had won the audition. I feel like the pieces of my new life are finally starting to fall in place. Life is like that, you know, a big puzzle—a bunch of little pieces that make up one big picture. And the hardest part is figuring out how they all fit together."

"Does your puzzle have a thousand pieces?"

She grinned and strutted a pace ahead. "A *hundred*-thousand pieces."

Their legs pushed hard uphill passed bare trees with empty nests. Arriving on Lake Valley Drive, they decreased their speed and traced the outline of the putting greens. Unconsciously, Adam throttled ahead until Angel protested with heavy gasps.

They took in the morning charm of slow sloping hills, pointy evergreens, and distant color splashed across the horizon. Running brought out Adam's thoughts and he hummed a free-flowing melody.

What song is that?" Angel asked. "I don't recognize it."

"It's one I'm working on." He slowed to allow her to catch up. "Sometimes I think about it when I'm running."

"What's it called?"

"It doesn't have a name yet."

"What's it about?"

"Lot's of things." Adam's face glowed with a smile. "Dreams and life and love. It's a dedication to the music." He turned and ran backwards in front of Angel. "I'm still putting all the pieces together, like a big puzzle."

"Does your puzzle have a thousand pieces?"

He raised his eyebrows. "A million pieces."

The morning light of dawn had crept upon them. Their course sped them past Spyglass and onto the long fairways of Pebble Beach Drive. They huffed several brisk blocks to just the sounds of their footsteps and breathing. As the earth and heavens lighted up more, Adam could smell spring in the air's sweet, encouraging perfume. Overhead, the deep blue sky broke through the clouds like a gift peeking through a ripping corner of a wrapped present.

Palmer Court and the Irving's house were returning to them, and Adam recalled his earlier notion. "Today's Mike's birthday. His family is having a birthday dinner for him," he told her, his breathing irregular. "So we're quitting rehearsal early this evening."

"I got him a card," she said. "Are we going to do anything?"

"Jesse is going to bake him a cake from all of us that looks like a keyboard." He wiped his sweaty forehead with his sleeve. "Why don't we get together after rehearsal? I have to discuss something with you."

"You can come over for dinner," Angel offered.

He closed his eyes and saw an instant scene of awkwardness. "Thank you, but I wouldn't rather not." He considered alternatives. "If you want, why don't you come over? It's nothing fancy but I make great spaghetti?"

"Spaghetti is my favorite," she replied, then frowned. "I didn't know you could cook."

"Next to frozen pizzas, spaghetti is my specialty."

"You've got a date." Her eyebrows rose and she nodded. "Race you to the driveway," she said and darted ahead. He caught her pace but then let her win at the finish where her screams turned to laughter. Before opening the door, she turned to him. Looks, feelings, and thoughts passed between their eyes: Adam thought of the band, and of the guys lined up in front of him like a firing squad.

“Promise me something?” he asked and she nodded. “Nothing about dinner tonight to the guys, okay?”

She touched one hand to the side of his face and without a spoken reply, kissed his crimson cheek.

The spaghetti sauce splattered small burgundy freckles on the stovetop. In his mother’s dainty denim and lace apron, Adam hummed and stirred the sauce to a beat from the kitchen radio. He pulled a steaming wooden spoonful from the bubbling mixture, blew the wispy swirls, and tasted.

He nodded approvingly and continued humming. As he peeked at the warming garlic bread in the oven, the doorbell chimed his guest’s arrival. Stepping to the door, Adam inspected himself and shook his hair into place.

Angel stepped inside, a purse over her shoulder, her hands securing a dark bottle of wine. Her fragrance whispered of honeydew and oak.

“It smells great in here,” she said, handing him the bottle and unbuttoning her coat. “I thought *you* were cooking.”

He gazed gently into her indigo eyes set in pearls. He then dropped his view to the wine label. “Cab-er-net Sauv—”

“Cabernet, it’s French. The ‘t’ is silent—*Cabernet Sauvignon*.” She slid from her coat. “My father’s cellar is overflowing. So, I decided to help him.” The pot on the stove pulled her forward as Adam trailed behind, attempting to pronounce the name himself. Giving up, he followed her to where a cloud sailed from the pot.

“Did you make this?” she asked. “Or are you hiding an empty jar of sauce somewhere.” He stirred and delivered a mushroom to her opening mouth. “Mmmm. And I thought your greatest talent was playing music.”

“It is, but I’m secretly a world famous gourmet.” He grinned and mocked: “*Gourmet*, it’s French. The ‘t’ is silent.”

The girl laughed, tilting her head, her hair falling back and her eyes closed. He excused himself to cook the noodles while Angel searched for wine glasses and a corkscrew. The maroon-plum pigment flowed into each glass like a tiny waterfall as she gleamed with bright eyes.

“This is the first time a man has ever cooked for me.”

He dried his hands on his apron and accepted the half-full glass she offered. “Then we must toast.”

"May I?" She asked and he nodded. "Go thy way, eat thy bread with joy, and drink thy wine with a merry heart, for God now accepteth thy works," Angel said, holding her glass forward. "Ecclesiastics, 9:7."

They touched glasses and he followed her example of swirling, inspecting, and smelling before savoring a slow, dry sip. He hadn't tasted many wines, and this was less fruity than the sweet white varieties his mother served with company.

"How much does your father pay for a bottle like this?" Surmising, the glass found his lips again. He had seen wine in the supermarket, many bottles selling for fifteen or twenty dollars.

"When he buys it by the case," Angel figured in her head, "about ninety dollars." And Adam gasped, gagging on a dollar's worth.

He finished his preparation, declining her repeated offers to assist. When he brought the salad to the table, Angel had placed his family's candelabra in the center, sparkling yellow flames dancing at the top of each candle.

"I hope you don't mind," she said, admiring the centerpiece. "I love candles. They create such an ambiance."

He had taken great care to exclude any atmosphere as to set the tone for the serious discussion he planned to follow. But he didn't want to minimize her contribution, and the candles did give the table a certain grace.

He removed the apron and each took a seat. "This looks wonderful," Angel told him. "I am inclined to make another toast," she said. Just as she raised her glass, the phone rang.

"Excuse me," he said, reaching for the phone. "Hello? Yes." Dark, heavy sigh. "Hello Denise. Having dinner. Spaghetti. Yeah, me, too." He paused, wrinkling a small frown while Angel chuckled. "I can't give you the recipe right now. No, we're not rehearsing tonight but I already have plans." Angel sipped her wine and Adam made a gesture that he would only be a short minute. But as he listened, he studied the set table with wine and candlelight and dinner waiting. If he allowed Denise to ramble, the food would get cold, the candles burn out, and Angel would be long gone. He would have to tell Denise something that would stop her dead in her spoken tracks. "I have to go now, Denise. I'm sitting down to dinner with Angel."

He heard a soft, whimpering "oh" just before the line went dead. He hung up and moved back to the toasting position. "Pardon the interruption."

Angel expressed surprise at his frankness with Denise. She raised her glass again, an amusing thought surfacing. “That I may never call when you are sitting down to dinner. Cheers.”

During the meal, the music and warm candle glow surrounded them. Seeing her like this reminded him of the fascination he felt the first time he saw Angel. Her hair shimmered like silk; her eyes glowed with spirit and delight.

Only several bites into the meal, her eyes called him from across the table. A long moment of intrigue passed as their unblinking views embraced. Slowly, they left their seats, as if some greater force commanded them away from their dinners. They inched forward until they came together and the candlelight cast on the wall a single silhouette. Adam could neither deny nor fight this feeling. Angel and whatever destiny lay ahead were part of some irreversible blueprint that he could not change.

They shared a lengthy, passionate kiss, and when they separated, Angel cascaded her fingers through his hair and drew a line over his eyebrow. Then her finger stopped.

“How did you get this scar?”

He reached for his wine from the table, offered her the first sip, and then followed. “It happened during my father’s accident.” He let her peer into this cavern of his past. “A piece of the windshield cut my forehead.” He brushed her cheek and chin with his palm and she remained silent. “Every time I look in the mirror, it reminds me of him.”

Later, after eating, with another small splash of wine each, they reclined to the living room. Adam selected the music and they nestled into a dimly lighted corner of the sofa.

“Did you know that I wanted to ask you out a long time ago?”

She sipped. “You did? When?”

“Soon after you came to Boulder Valley. I almost didn’t have the nerve.”

“As I recall,” she told him, “I don’t remember you *ever getting* the nerve.”

He let her hair fall between his fingers. “I was waiting around a corner from one of your classes. You and Brianna were talking about some guy you liked, who you thought was about to ask you out.”

“Some guy? What guy?”

“You didn’t say who.” He recalled the eavesdropping that had sent him away deflated. “I think he was a football player—you didn’t know if you should go out with him—and Brianna thought he was cute even though he wasn’t the football team’s captain.”

She giggled a tiny chuckle, and then released an outburst of laughter. "He wasn't even on the football team." She laughed again and then contained herself. "Adam, I was afraid my parents wouldn't approve because he wasn't from some rich, aristocratic family. He was just a sweet guy with a sincere smile who drove around a noisy, old pickup truck."

His eyes and mouth froze, and with a mechanical gesture, he turned to her. "Me?"

Angel's laughter resurfaced and he joined her. They sighed, sipped, and snuggled. He had never felt closer to anyone, as though their thoughts were the same, as though his heart beat with hers.

"This morning you said you wanted to discuss something," Angel asked. "I think I know what it is."

Adam nodded and inhaled, holding his breath a moment. "It's the guys. They saw us holding hands. They think something is happening between us. "

"I know," she said, looking away. "I know."

"I don't blame them for their concern. Neither of us knows where this will lead." Destiny had indeed brought them together, but neither could know if fate would someday rip them apart. And that impending fear he could not dismiss. "We don't know what tomorrow holds. We risk destroying the music that is finally in harmony, finally so exact that each song we make together is an artistic wonder."

"Adam, I've never known anyone like you. I know I won't ever again," she said, her hand caressing the hair on his arm. "You are the best thing that has ever happened to me. I don't want to lose what you and I have together. But I also don't want to lose what we have as Blue Denim."

"There are no guarantees. What we have is as fascinating as it is frightening." He contemplated quietly while musical notes slow danced in their ears. "But Angel, knowing the consequences, how can we keep doing this?"

She turned to face him, weaving her fingers in his. With a warm whisper on his cheek, the woman he loved as much as he feared, said, "Adam, knowing the consequences, how can we *not* keep doing this?"

20

When Adam and Angel met, they met secretly. While rehearsing, they eliminated actions the others might have interpreted as affection. Adam offered no response to them, and they did not approach him. Even Mike seemed to distance himself from knowing the reality of Adam's resolution. Adam no longer walked Angel to her car; he avoided eye contact and even when it seemed natural, he cast his eyes away to impede sparks from flying between them.

They devised a signal in the word "spaghetti" that indicated if one wanted to meet later. They would say: "You spaghetti brain," or "Have you had the spaghetti at Antonio's Italian Restaurant? It's wonderful." This became a game, who could logically include the word "spaghetti" in the most unrelated of conversations. However, neither was as bold as to say, "I love spaghetti." For their relationship expressed no hurry reaching any final destination; they sailed on a hidden course in which only a secret wind set their direction.

The band intensified their rehearsal schedule, playing most evenings until their amp curfew. To use time wisely, they eliminated unnecessary chatter, remaining focused on the music.

Early one evening, when they had regrouped following a dinner break, each was catching a second wind when Adam's cell phone went off. He normally just checked the caller ID and let it roll to voice mail. But this time, observing the caller ID, he was quick to answer it.

"Hey, what's up?"

The others could only hear half the conversation that followed. "Go ahead, I'm listening . . . yeah . . . maybe . . . how much? I guess, but you owe me! Okay, later."

"What's going on?" Angel asked.

“Pack your things. We’ve got a gig,” said Adam. “The scheduled band came down with the flu and we’re first on the reserve list.” He jumped, shouting: “We’re playing at Rocky’s!”

Two years, four drummers, 14 parties and a female vocalist later, Blue Denim had landed a nightclub gig. Winning the Morp auditions had been an important milestone, but a nightclub gig challenged them to please a more mature audience who had no bias for school spirit or personal association.

Stephen, their lighting engineer, met them at Rocky’s where they unloaded, set up, and tested lights and equipment before the nine o’clock show time. Confident of their equipment and stage organization, they spent the remaining few minutes preparing in a small dressing room.

Gabe shined his bass and Jesse ironed wrinkled shirts with Mike supervising. In the corner, Adam did hand and finger stretches while Angel touched up her make-up. Monica, one of the servers, delivered a tray of sodas—compliments of the bartenders Neil and Tom.

At nine o’clock, fidgety fingers and nervous knees escorted them to the stage. The room was only a quarter-full yet it didn’t relieve their anxiety. Adam soaked in the unfamiliar, evaluating faces. From the stage, Rocky’s became a frightfully different place than from the office. Following a brief introduction from Calvin, Jesse performed the count on his sticks, and the sound of Blue Denim ignited into music.

Their initial formula consisted of several tempered classic songs, later working into current hits and originals. A growing feeling of panic grasped each heart as they played their third song in front of an empty dance floor. But a song later, a courageous couple started dancing, followed by several more. As more patrons trickled in, the dance floor increased in twist and turns and tangos.

During the first set, the music swam through swinging shadows, beckoning dancers like a pied piper. By the second set, Adam hopped off stage with his guitar to join the partying crowd. He encouraged individuals on the dance floor to play air guitar or sing along. The outcome was so successful that he did it again during their final set.

Each hour passed at the speed of rock sound; the evening in the end becoming a blur of concert and colors, of bops and boogies.

The Colorado Battle of the Bands Committee required an audition CD from which the judges would select the twelve best bands. With their proceeds from the Rocky’s show, several more party gigs and a bar mitzvah, they reserved a block at Primrose Recording Studio. With the

discount that Stephen arranged, and installments from a few recent parties, the band would pay off their debt.

One Saturday morning, they met early at the studio. They had a two-hour recording block to pound out a handful of original songs. Adam was jumpy, his eyes alive, and the three cups of coffee had his adrenaline flowing. While the others were fresh and awake, Gabe's red, veiny eyes were evidence of his previous night's struggle to fall asleep.

Stephen assisted the sound engineer from behind the framed glass, his words soaking into the padded walls. Throughout the session, Stephen repeatedly requested, "Let's repeat that last part" or "Try the chorus one more time" or "Stop and start over." To mix and redub a final version, he had to have sufficient material. He informed them that he would be a week or so cutting and splicing together "a guaranteed masterpiece."

After the initial studio costs, Adam tallied his life savings—the humble sum of 16 dollars and change. But enough for a few splashes of gas and some groceries. He and Angel fueled his truck, and then stopped at Flatiron Market.

"Didn't you say you used to work here?" Angel asked.

He nodded and grasped her hand as they stepped to the front doors. "I still know most of the employees. Even after I quit, François, the owner, never took away my discount privileges. I've been trying to think of some way to show him my gratitude."

Adam grabbed a cart and greeted some of the cashiers and baggers. He and Angel then breezed through the towering aisles, Angel suggesting brands and Adam comparing prices and deciding adversely. François' booming voice found them between the breakfast cereals and the coffees.

"François! How's business?" The man pattered over, his shiny scalp coming only to Adam's chin. He had a thick, curled mustache and a white apron he fastened under his chubby tummy.

"Adam, so good to see you," he replied, his French accent as distinctive as the day he left the old country. He acknowledged Angel with a nod and then turned back to Adam. "Business is not so good. Right now, I feel the large food chains are taking away from me all of my customers."

"How long have things been slow?"

"For so, so long. Usually, yes, we may have a slow week, but nothing like this." Worry lines etched valleys in the man's red and weathered face. "I fear I have lost many of my customers to the new supermarket opened just four blocks away."

“Why don’t you have a big promotion?” Angel suggested. “You could have a ‘Flatiron Market Customer Appreciation Week.’ Have balloons and appetizer samples and put many popular items on sale.” François cocked one eye, balancing between curiosity and suspicion. “The one thing that will bring those customers back is the genuine care and customer service that they won’t find at the large chains.”

François maintained the same expression for a long while, his eyes shifting now and again, and then he turned to Adam. “Where did you find such a princess?” He grabbed Angel by the cheeks and had to extend on his tiptoes to kiss her forehead. “Yes, that is a wonderful idea.”

Angel beamed that he had accepted her idea with such enthusiasm.

“François, this is Angel Irving. Angel sings vocals for the band.”

“Tres heureux de faire votre connaissance,” Angel said.

His face radiated hearing the language that he loved. “Parlez-vous français?”

“Oui,” Angel replied. “Bien que je sois vraiment débutant.”

“Oh, mais vous le parlez avec tant d’aisance,” said François while Adam watched this dialog, perplexed. “Je pensais que vous étiez né à Paris.”

“Merci. Je n’y suis allé qu’en touriste,” Angel said.

“Ah, oui,” François said, as though recapturing fond memories.

“And for your promotion,” Angel said, shifting to English, “I bet Adam would perform a free concert in the parking lot one Saturday afternoon.”

The man’s eyes ignited with the thought. “Would you do that?” he asked. “I couldn’t pay you much.”

“Of course I would do that,” Adam replied. “And the expression on your face is payment enough.”

“When do we do it?” François asked. “I want to put flyers in the customer’s bags. And I will include it in the newspaper advertising. Oh, I’ll need to call distributors for sampler ladies. And I’ll have to stock up extra.”

“We could do it the weekend before Morp.” Adam looked at Angel. “Let’s do it in a couple of weeks, François. That will also give us enough time to put up posters at school and around neighborhood.”

The man marched off, almost skipping at his renewed hope. “I’ve never seen him so elated,” Adam told Angel. “And what did he say to you in French?”

“He asked me to go to Paris with him.”

“He what?”

The girl laughed and hit his shoulder. “He said I spoke French as if I was born in Paris, and I told him I had only visited.”

Adam shook his head, expressing a wry grin that she had duped him.

“He’s a sweet man, but not my type.”

“And what’s your type?” he asked.

She embraced him and responded with an answer that was wet and rousing.

21

The parking lot overflowed during the Flatiron Market Customer Appreciation Week Concert. François reported sales were up over 60 percent and Blue Denim distributed over 100 business cards. In a Daily Camera article, they quoted Adam as saying, “This is the first time I’ve worked at Flatiron Market and didn’t have to bus carts.” The article also included a photograph and phone number how readers could contact Blue Denim.

That following Monday, Adam swam through the oncoming stream of students, his focus on page 252 of his History text. Lagging two chapters behind, he under-budgeted travel time between classes to catch up. Hopefully, Mrs. Griffin wouldn’t surprise them with a pop essay.

When the tardy bell sounded, Adam slipped passed Mrs. Griffin just as she shut the door. She stared as he tunneled to his seat. Approaching his desk, the room turned silent, even before Mrs. Griffin had ordered. He felt an odd aura in the room, and then noticed each student’s focus on him.

Coming to this chair, Adam understood what had gained him their attention; on his desktop slept a quiet, red rose and a pink envelope with his name in script.

He settled into his chair, ignoring the needling eyes that poked at him like fingers. Mrs. Griffin’s shoes clicked to the white board. Feeling a pervasive pressure from across the room, he glanced over to find Denise’s penetrating stare. Her eyes were unblinking and bloodshot; her make-up couldn’t conceal her ghostly, pale face.

“Please open your books to chapter 28, page 278,” Mrs. Griffin said. Scooting the rose aside, Adam concealed the envelope under his text. “We know until this point, the south was weakening, due to

persistent northern military strength and the blockade of food and supplies . . .”

He folded and stuck the envelope in his jeans pocket. But the combination of Mrs. Griffin’s boring lecture and his own curiosity soon had him discreetly opening it under the desk. He slid out three stationery sheets, words written in blood-red ink on both sides.

Sunday, April 23

Dearest Adam,

I can’t believe I’m writing this. I’ve never done this before, but this has never happened to me before, either. There are so many things I have to say, so many feelings trapped in my head! I know you’ll understand. I know you will, because I feel like I know you better than anyone.

I know this is bold for a girl to do, but we can’t go on hiding these feelings from each other any longer. Oh, Adam, I love you! I love you so much I can’t even begin to express myself! My emotions overwhelm me in their magnitude—I know the only thing I need in life is to love you and make you happy and for us to be together. Everything else doesn’t matter.

I understand why you picked Angel for the singing position. And I also realize why you didn’t select me—deep down, you knew of the consequences involved in mixing a business and love relationship. And for fear of ruining what you already anticipated for our future, you chose Angel. But still, I can’t help but be jealous—sometimes to the point that I hate her!

Deep down, I know you love me. And it seems silly, but sometimes you act like you don’t like me. I know that’s not true of course, I know that’s not what you’re really feeling. But it scares me.

As Mrs. Griffin rambled on, Denise shifted her eyes toward Adam as if hoping for a smile or a glance.

Oh, Adam, sometimes I just wait and wait for the phone to ring. Why don’t you call? Are you afraid I’ll turn you down? I won’t. I never would. How I wish you could understand that! I’ve called dozens of times with no answer and if your mother answered, I hung up. I drive passed Gabe’s house every night and see your truck parked out front. I think that maybe you rehearse too much. Sometimes I’ve even snuck (sneaked?) to the back and watched you through the window. Up to an

hour, once. I know how dedicated you are. Is that why you don't call? Because you don't have the time? Adam, it's time that you come forward, that you face your innermost feelings. If we want this relationship to work, we have to try. We have to make time. We have to communicate more.

You're going to be such a success, I can tell already. I want to help you on your road to fame — I'll do anything: Help you with your songs, go to rehearsals with you — maybe even go on the road with you someday when you start touring. I would love to travel.

But, getting back to these feelings that I sometimes feel about you not loving me. I've hardly eaten anything in weeks. I'm just not hungry and can't think about food. At nights, I don't sleep; I lay awake, staring at the darkness or sometimes I turn my lamp on and look at your picture. Oh, I guess I didn't tell you. One day I took a photo of you at school and had it enlarged and framed. Sometimes, when I'm awake or looking at your picture, I pretend that you're here and I imagine what we would say and talk about and I can almost hear your voice. You would tell me how you love me and then you put your arms around me, pull me very close to your chest, and hold me tightly. I swear, I can feel you! And then you lean toward me and kiss me, playfully at first, then strong and passionately.

For a fleeting second, he considered maybe this was a prank. However, when he caught her stare, every suspicion of a late April Fool's Day joke vanished. Her eyes locked on him like a steel trap. *Could this really be happening? Was he going crazy?* No, this was too bizarre, even for a crazy man.

I've never been in love before, not like this, but I know this is real love. I can feel it with every inch of my body and every drop of blood in my heart. Love is so wonderful, so overwhelming! Thank you for giving me this feeling, Adam! I don't know what I would do without you, you are everything to my life, everything — my first thought in the morning and my last thought at night.

I'm so glad I wrote this letter. It's making me feel better, it really is. I was thinking about not giving it to you, but you know, I think deep down you already know all of these feelings and feel them yourself.

Let's talk after class, okay? This is something we can't put off any longer. Adam, I love you. I love you so much! I don't know how I can say it to make you understand.

Love always,

Denise

"Is there something you would like to share with the rest of the class, Mr. Jensen?" the teacher asked. Adam's eyes widened to white circles, and he shook his head. "It seems to be quite important if you are spending valuable class time on it. Why don't you stand up and read your new song aloud."

A new song? Adam felt compassion for each shivering rat he had tossed into Fluffy's tank, one so frightened that it died of a heart attack. "I'm not writing a new song," he replied.

"If it's not a song, what is on those sheets of paper you just put in that envelope?"

A nightmare, he thought, but instead replied: "Nothing."

"Well, give it to me and I will read it to the class for you." As her heels pecked forward, he shifted, accidentally knocking the rose to the floor. When Mrs. Griffin lowered her open palm, he saw her hand's dry creases, and he stuffed the envelope into his back pocket.

"I can't," he told her.

"Gather your books, Adam," she ordered. "Your warnings have run out. We're going to see Mr. Sanders and I'm going to insist that you are banned from playing at Morp."

Not play at Morp! This couldn't be happening. Adam froze, grasping for ideas, praying for a miracle.

"To your feet now, Mr. Jensen!" Mrs. Griffin exploded. With no miracle coming to his salvation, he climbed from his desk. He abandoned the rose; in its glory, the rose ironically symbolized this outrageously hideous predicament. He wanted to separate himself from it as far as he could. Scuffing down the classroom aisle, he shook his head in frustration, his eyes catching Denise mouthing the words: *I'm sorry, I'm sorry*. He wasn't sure if he should despise Denise or pity her.

The squeak of his sneakers echoed down the deserted hallway. He recalled his second grade, Mrs. Fitzgerald, dragging him by the ear to the principal's office for shooting spit-wads. But times had changed since being sentenced to writing *I will not shoot spit-wads* one hundred times.

"Alice, I want to see Mr. Sanders immediately," Mrs. Griffin demanded of his administrative assistant.

"Mr. Sanders has committee meetings on Mondays," she replied. "But Mr. Knudson is in."

"Tell him I must see him now. A student's excessive class disruptions require his immediate attention."

Alice brought the phone to her ear. "Mr. Knudson, Mrs. Griffin, and one of her students are here to see you. She says it's important." She replaced the phone. "He will see you."

The teacher firmly pushed Adam through the door. "Come in. Have a seat," Mr. Knudson said, his voice artificially deep. Certificates and pictures decorated the paneling of the large office. His oversized mahogany desk had a view of the football field and a bold nameplate displayed:

CARL F. KNUDSON III

Vice Principal and Student Attendance Administrator

"What seems to be the problem here?" he asked with a frown that looked rehearsed.

Mrs. Griffin drew a deep breath. "Adam Jensen has repeatedly caused distractions during class time," she said, her teeth snapping with each word. "He delays progress by not keeping up with his studies, and refuses to cooperate, even though I have warned him. As a lesson to him, and as an example to all the other students, I insist he be banned from playing at Morp."

Carl Knudson tried to intimidate Adam with a cold stare. "Do you feel you are exempt from following policy?"

Adam knew of no formal policy prohibiting doodling or reading notes during class time. Further, he was not alone in these diversions.

"I always have to stop and reprimand you. I've warned you before, Adam. Class is no time to be writing songs."

"I wasn't writing a song," he said, and turned to Mr. Knudson. "I was reading a note that someone left for me on my desk."

"May I see the note?" Mr. Knudson asked.

"I can't." The brightness coming through the window caught Adam's eye. "It's personal."

Knudson blinked dryly. "Thank you, Gladys. I'll take care of things from here."

The woman hesitated before opening the door. "I recommend Adam be made an example for other students."

The door clicked shut. Mr. Knudson stood from his chair and stepped to the window to adjust the blinds. "Adam, Mrs. Griffin is one of our oldest and most conservative teachers, but she has been known to over-react on some occasions. Do you know what I mean?"

Adam nodded.

"I've been Vice Principal and Student Attendance Administrator for four years, and there isn't much I haven't dealt with in that time." He left the window and returned to his desk. "When Mr. Sanders is out, I am responsible for everything that happens in this school. Now, I am a reasonable man and I pride myself on being fair in all situations. But to judge this fairly, I need to see the note."

Adam shifted in his seat. His mind kept saying: *This can't be happening . . . this can't be happening . . .* "If it was anything else, a song or something, I would show it to you," Adam said. "But this—I can't."

"Adam, give me the note," the man demanded, leaning over the desk, his voice pronouncing each word.

Adam considered and reconsidered. "What's on the note is none of your business."

"Everything that happens in this school is my business!" the man fired back. "Either give me that note or I will suspend you for insubordination. With suspension, you will neither play at Morp nor graduate."

Adam pressed his palms to his eyes. He could not shake himself from this nightmare. Not graduating over such a triviality was ludicrous and playing at Morp was critical to the band's success. But he was out of options.

Adam stood, pulled the envelope from his back pocket, and stared at it in contemplation. He slowly slid it across the desk; Knudson's eyes twitched, maybe anticipating what secret awaited inside. At the last moment, Adam pulled the envelope back, reconsidering. He opened the flap, pulled out the sheets and unfolded them. "You said you are a fair man, but you know the sentence does not fit the crime. If you want to read my letter, put the pieces back together." With that, Adam ripped the sheets down the middle, and again and again.

Carl F. Knudson III shifted his view between Adam's face and the sheets becoming thinner and thinner. "You have made a serious mistake, son."

Adam nailed a sharp stare at the Vice Principal. "Don't you ever call me 'son.'"

Knudson opened a drawer, removed a form with the header "Suspension Order" and clicked his pen. He scribbled and checked boxes, and started to sign his name when the door opened.

"Carl, what's this about Mrs. Griffin wanting to stop Adam Jensen from playing at Morp?" Mr. Sanders stepped inside shuffling some papers, surprised to find Adam still inside.

“Adam Jensen has been disrupting her class and refuses to cooperate with me. I’m using my authority to ensure this never happens again. Not only will he not play at Morp, but I’m suspending him.”

Mr. Sanders scratched his bald head and stared inquisitively at the shredded pile of papers on Knudson’s desk. “What kind of interruptions? What do you mean not cooperating?”

“He’s passing notes in class and Mrs. Griffin says he’s behind in class which is slowing everyone else down. And, he refused to show me the note passed to him in class today.”

“What?” Mr. Sanders stated, looking bewildered. “You can’t suspend a student for that. Kids always pass notes. I remember doing it myself. How else do you expect them to sit through an hour of History?”

“But—”

“Don’t you know suspending Adam Jensen would prevent him from playing at Morp? We can’t do that—the students look forward to Morp every year. They’d riot!”

“But—”

“No buts,” the Principal said, taking the Suspension Order from Knudson’s hands. “Adam, you can go. I’ll speak to Mrs. Griffin. But you best catch up if you’re behind in History. And Carl,” he said, looking at the shredded pile of paper, “clean up your desk.”

22

“Oh my God, Adam, Oh . . . God!” Denise scrambled up to Adam from where she was waiting for him outside the office. “I am so sorry. I hope you didn’t get into trouble. Are you going to play at Morp?”

His face hot with fury, Adam marched silently to American Lit.

“Adam,” she called, her footsteps chasing him. “You forgot your rose.” He continued forward, breathing steadily to maintain control. “I don’t blame you for being mad,” she said, reaching for his arm. “I didn’t mean for you to get into trouble.”

He stopped and stared at a long strip of fluorescent lights railing the ceiling. “Denise, I have only one thing to say to you and you better listen.” Her eyes volleyed from his one to the other. “We do not have a relationship. End of story.”

“Adam, you don’t understand. I love you.” She went to touch her palm on his cheek but he batted it away. Several girls passed by, giggling. “I have always loved you. I can’t begin to tell you how much I love you.”

“Denise, you don’t know who I am.”

“I don’t want anyone else, Adam. You’re the one.” She then changed her tone to one more forceful. “And I don’t think you’re being honest with yourself.”

He wanted to scream, to shake her: *Wake up! You’re dreaming! You’re crazy!* Frustration turned to flame in his reddening face. “Denise, I do not love you. Right now, I can hardly stand you!”

“No, no. I know that’s not true. You’re just saying that because you’re afraid that I might hurt you. But Adam, I wouldn’t. I couldn’t.” Her eyes pleaded as they filled with water. “Adam, tell me the truth.” She swallowed hard and tears rained. “Is there someone else? Is it Angel?”

The tardy bell blew in harmony with the ringing in his ears. “Denise, you’ve gone too far with this fantasy.”

“It’s Angel, isn’t it? I knew it!” Denise cried. “But Adam, she doesn’t love you as much as I love you.”

“Angel has nothing to do with this. The fact is, I don’t love you. I’ve never loved you. And I will never love you.” He abruptly turned, having to get as far away from Denise as fast as he could.

“It’s not true!” Her scream followed him and echoed through the empty hallway. “You’re lying. You do love me, I know you do. And I won’t let you go.”

Class doors opened and students and teachers peeked out curious faces. “I love you,” she screamed again. “I love you Adam Jensen! And I don’t care if the whole world knows!” She dropped the rose and sank to the floor, blubbering, moaning. “And I know that you love me, too . . .”

Adam didn’t see his mother for several weeks. Every few days she phoned, sometimes from on the road, other times from Bruce’s house in Los Angeles. But his own business left him little time to talk. With Morp the upcoming weekend, when Adam wasn’t at practice or breaking hearts, he and Angel met in secret, whenever and wherever.

At rehearsal mid-week, Stephen presented a professionally finished promo CD. “A CD that will go platinum,” he surmised, a camera dangling from his neck. During rehearsal, he snapped off several dozen photos: Action shots, still poses, clowning around photos—images for their promo kits. Later, they gathered a list of agents, clubs, and local radio stations. Budgeting their future profits from parties and Morp, they ordered several dozen copies.

The night before Morp, Adam struggled to sleep. When he finally drifted into dreaming, his mind reran the nightmare he dreaded above all nightmares—the subconscious recreation of his father’s death.

He got up and splashed his face with cold water to bring him back to his senses. Sleep came this time, but only for a short period. On his nightstand, his clock displayed 2:17. As if propelled by some invisible force, he catapulted to a sitting position. Had he heard something? Had someone called his name or screamed?

He searched his bedroom’s lonely darkness but saw and heard nothing. When he laid back down, his house phone startled him and sent his heartbeat blasting. He reached to pick it up. “Hello?”

“Adam? Adam?”

“Angel? Are you crying?” Turning on his light, the desk lamp showered brightness on him. “Angel, what’s wrong?”

23

As Adam's noisy truck chugged to the Irving's driveway, he saw a shadow flicker along the living room curtains. In his race to get there, anger and his compassion for Angel had tied for first place. Angel met him at the door, dark circles shadowing her eyes, her hair in tangles.

"I got here as soon as I could."

She nodded, the porch light showing red branching veins in her eyes. The family surrounded the kitchen table, stringy wisps circling above hot cocoa mugs. Angel's parents watched Adam's entry as Matthew looked up wearing a chocolate milk mustache.

Adam slid into an empty seat next to Angel. She blew her nose and stuffed the tissue into her burgundy robe.

"What happened?" Adam asked.

Angel drew a deep breath, then another. "At about two o'clock, my cell phone rang." Her voice was soft, timid. "I never answer calls with blocked caller ID but I guess I was sleepy. I said 'hello,' but didn't hear anything. I said 'hello' again and was just about to hang up when I heard a woman's voice."

"Mother," Matthew tugged on her sleeve. "Can I have another cookie?"

"Shhh!"

"Who is this?" I asked. Then the voice sort of growled my name 'Angel!'"

"Mother, can I have another cookie, *please*?" Matthew asked.

"Oh, all right. But just one!"

Matthew slipped away. He rebounded with an Oreo in his right hand and another concealed in his left, pointing his guilty eyes toward his mother. He separated the ends of the one, eye-toothed the middle and dunked the sides.

"Then she laughed," Angel continued. "A witchy, frightening laugh. 'Who is this?' I asked. Then I heard more laughing, male this time, and a man's voice came on the line. 'You have beautiful hair, Angel. In fact, too beautiful. That's why we're going to cut it off.'" A tear escaped and she forced others from coming.

"Was it Garrett Grimes?" Adam asked. He blanketed Angel with his arm, unsure if the dismay on Mrs. Irving's face was the result of his actions or Angel's terror.

She blinked and her chin bobbed twice. "Then they started calling me names, swearing at me, called me a rich bit—."

"Angel!" Mrs. Irving scolded her before she finished. Meanwhile, Matthew was oblivious to everything but his cookie.

"Is Garrett Grimes one of these Rebels?" Angel's father directed to Adam. "Who is Rebel?"

"Garrett's their lead guitarist," Adam replied, "and Rebel is a band of dropouts who play shock rock. I guess you can say we've been rivals a long time. Our previous drummer, Brad Butler, quit Blue Denim to join them."

"Why are you dragging my daughter into the middle of your turf war?" Mrs. Irving fired. "Why don't all of you just leave us alone?"

"Let's let Adam finish," Dr. Irving told his wife. She pressed her lips together, her eyes dark and stormy. "Continue, Adam."

"Brad had been skipping rehearsals or coming half-bombed. One day, Gabe and Brad got into it, and Brad quit, saying we had treated him unfairly, threatening to get back at us."

"Are they violent?" Professor Irving asked while Mrs. Irving bitterly frowned. Adam had considered the question himself; he half expected to arrive at rehearsal one day to find their instruments stolen or the barn in flames. Garrett Grimes' last threat had had Adam on edge since the Morp auditions. Still, Adam didn't want to worry Angel's parents.

"I've never seen them violent," he replied.

"What?" Angel cried out, startling Matthew as he secretly nibbled on his second cookie. "What about when they cornered you at McDonalds?"

"What's this?" asked Mrs. Irving.

"It was a bluff," he replied, hoping his demeanor would soften the accusation. "They were just acting tough."

"Acting tough?" Angel's eyes shifted at him. "They were going to beat you up. You almost had to smash their car so they wouldn't hurt you."

“You what?” Angel’s mother shuddered, holding a hand to her temple.

“It wasn’t like that—”

“And Lucy was in the car, screaming at the top of her lungs that you were trying to kill her.”

Maybe while explaining the incident, he had embellished the details more than he realized. He turned to Angel’s parents. “I had to get back to school and asked them to move their car. I had no intention of hitting them.”

Mrs. Irving stepped away and faced the kitchen bay window. By appearance, she seemed to look outside, but Adam caught her eyes watching their reflection. Then she sniffled and blew her nose.

“Did they say anything else, Angel?” Her father lifted and tipped his mug.

“Lucy started swearing at me. That’s when I hung up again.”

“This sort of thing never happened before you joined that band, Angel.” Mrs. Irving turned and spurted. “Now you are putting yourself and this family in immediate danger!”

“Mother, I can’t help it if—”

The woman turned to Adam with a stare as sharp as a blade. “*You* are responsible for this!” Her slapping words left his ears stinging. “Because of you, my family has to live in fear.”

Adam started to reply, but a second thought clamped his tongue. A long, sizzling silence electrified them. And like *déjà vu*, Adam had seen and felt the situation before, maybe the first time he looked into the eyes of Katherine Irving.

“It’s time we all went back to bed,” Professor Irving said. “We’ll discuss this more tomorrow when we are fresh. Are you okay now, Baby?”

“Yes, Daddy. Just let me walk Adam to the door.”

The girl kissed her father’s cheek. He then motioned for his wife and son to come along, whispers and mumbles ushering them up the staircase.

Angel escorted Adam to the door, her slippers scuffing against the floor. Adam’s head buzzed with emotional drain and he craved the cool covers of his bed.

“Thanks for coming over, Adam,” Angel said. Her pinkie reached for his fingers and she leaned into his chest. “I’m sorry about my mother. She’s just worried.”

“Well don’t you worry. If anyone even wants to touch your hair, they’ll have to come through me first, and then Mike, and Jesse, and Gabe,” he said. “Now get some sleep. We have a big day ahead of us.”

“Adam,” she whispered, “don’t I get a kiss?”

As he pulled her close, his anger and frustration melted to comfort and excitement. To hold Angel each time was to have a million dreams come true together.

During his drive home, he re-evaluated the conversation, with Mrs. Irving’s accusation that he was responsible for the problem. With sufficient needling, Angel’s mother might convince the girl that Adam was a dreamer who invited Rebel troubles. She could insist that Angel’s interest in him was a passing phase. Could this princess honestly hold an interest in a boy with neither a father nor siblings, who drove a dilapidated truck, whose only ambition was to play guitar?

This thinking posed a completely new insecurity to Adam. How much of a real relationship had he given Angel? In the flowers he never brought? In the dinners he hadn’t taken her? In the entertainment that cost money he didn’t have?

He must be a dreamer, he considered. Love had blazed into his heart for the first time, but with it came confusion and self-doubt. As he retired back to his bed, he could not shake this revelation. He remembered Angel’s words, that what they had was as fascinating as it was frightening. And he hadn’t paid enough attention to the frightening part.

At rehearsal the next day, Angel arrived full of energy and optimism. “Is your mother going to let you perform tonight?” Adam asked her.

“She asked me not to. But I told her it was not only my obligation, but by desire. You can’t win if you don’t take a risk.”

“You won’t succeed if you don’t take a chance.”

The girl giggled. “Besides, I’m not going to let some shock rock punks control my destiny.”

During rehearsal, Blue Denim revised their song list and practiced each set to satisfaction. They were proud to have finished their new original debut, High School Dance—the song that would kick off the first set.

The activities that followed left no time for Adam and Angel to talk. A passing tickle or hidden wink from Angel helped Adam instill his confidence again. Later he would discuss with her their relationship, her mother, and his feelings. He needed to know that she saw the same person that, until the previous evening, Adam saw in himself.

That afternoon they set up their equipment in the school gymnasium. The theme for Morp was “Freedom.” While performing sound and lighting checks, the Spirit Club finished decorating stars and stripes and a banner that read: “Freedom’s Colors are Red, White and Blue Denim.” In appreciation, Blue Denim played an “appetizer” for the energetic volunteers.

With no time to spare, Adam hurried home to shower before the show. When he unlocked the front door, he neither heard nor felt the deadbolt click as he rotated the key. His mother wasn’t home so he concluded he must have forgotten to lock the deadbolt earlier. He hid the key underneath its brick and dashed inside, considering the upcoming show.

“Hi, Fluffy,” he said, removing his shirt and emptying his pockets onto his dresser. As he glanced away, a thought called back his attention. Curiously, he had noticed the small earring he found was missing from his dresser. He scratched his head and searched around, thinking he might have knocked it to the floor. But noticing the time, he gave up and hastened to the bathroom.

In the shower, he practiced lyrics and vocal exercises. But midway through, he thought he heard a noise—the sound of a bump or a bang over the shower spray. Nerves, he thought. He was jumpy, and his anticipation of the show and the concern of Garrett Grimes’ gang showing up had him on edge.

After drying himself off, he sprayed his torso with deodorant and wrapped a towel around his waist. In his room, a dowsing eeriness fell around him that sent a shiver through his body. There was an unnatural quietness about his room, and a gripping strangeness seemed to shine from behind his closet’s louver doors.

Slow, uneasy feet carried him forward. His shadow shrunk along the closet door until his hand reached for the wooden knob, the air cool between his clammy fingers. Swiftly, he yanked the door open, and a yelp escaped from his frightened throat.

“Hello, Adam,” Denise Austin said, her voice dark and distant.

The bedroom light revealed her pale, white complexion. She looked thin, her cheekbones obtruding—a malnourished raccoon with dull, shadowy eyes.

“Denise, what are you doing here? How did you get in my house?”

“I have to talk to you,” she stated. “It’s important.”

“You scared the hell out of me! What’s the matter with you?”

"I've had a long time to think about things," she spoke flatly. In one ear, she wore an earring, a heart with the initial "D" inside. In the other ear appeared the earring missing from his dresser. He realized each earring represented a different initial—Denise's first initial and his own. "There is no doubt in my mind that I'm in love with you, Adam."

In that instant, he recalled the sounds he had heard numerous times outside his bedroom window. If she had been spying on him, she would have seen where he hid the front door key, seen him undress, and seen his tattoo. "How many times have you spied on me? How many times have you been in my house?"

"Let's go away, Adam, just you and me. My uncle in Montrose has a spare cabin we can stay in. You can write your music there and we can live together," she said, stepping toward him. "Tell me you'll come with me."

"Denise, I want you out of my house now!"

She raised her eyebrows. "I had a dream about you." She drew closer, unbuttoning the first button of her blouse, the second. "A dream so passionate, so real, I know it has already happened. Make love to me, Adam. Make love to me and you'll realize your true feelings."

"I already know my true feelings," he said. "I know because," he paused, realizing the fact for the first time, "I'm in love with Angel."

A tear fattened one eye, then the other before she batted them away. "Hold me, just for a little while," she said, reaching her arms out. At this, he jerked away, but Denise had made up her mind and she approached him from the back, sliding her arms around his bare sides and up his chest.

"Stop it!" Adam spun and sat Denise on his bed. His hands pressed hard against her shoulders. "Stop it!"

"Adam!" She cried, her eyes wide in shock and pain. "You're hurting me!"

He saw his arm muscles hard and the veins protruding from his skin. He released her and reached for a shirt from his closet. When he turned to ask her to leave, the room was empty, and he heard the front door slam.

He finished dressing and sat on his bed to tie his shoes. When he stood, the sudden clamor of crashing glass filled his room like an explosion. Sharp and jagged window pieces scattered everywhere while the brick causing the damage flew over the spot where he had just been sitting.

"I hate you, Adam Jensen!" Denise screamed from outside. "I hate you! Do you hear me? I hate you!"

24

Voices echoed off the dimly lit walls and the rise of laughter was a fuse for the coming excitement. Only minutes before show time, there was no hint of Rebel.

To complement the theme, the guys wore white dress shirts, blue denim jeans, and red sneakers. However, each added their own flare to his or her attire: Adam, a red tie with colorful notes adrift; Mike, a piano key tie; Gabe, a rainbow trout tie, and Jesse, a flowery 1960's tie. Angel in a leather skirt and red boots wore a white camisole under her denim jacket.

As Adam stared quietly into the crowd, Angel stepped beside him. "Music flows," she said to him.

His eyes softly touched hers. "Yes," he replied, "*Music flows.*"

"To eliminate pre-show jitters, I repeatedly think, *Music Flows*. I see myself singing and the music flowing out." She giggled. "You should try it."

He nodded. "That's good advice." With Angel, they visualized the audience. He saw the lights and the dancing people and heard their music—rich, motivating, their voices singing in harmony and balance. Somehow, the scene in his mind reminded him of his father.

From behind, Eddie "The Cruiser" greeted them wearing an obnoxious three-piece suit with blue stars and red and white stripes. He told Angel and Adam that he was "Uncle Sam Junior" as he tipped his top hat of the same design.

"Eddie, just looking at you makes me want to party," Mike said, stopping and throwing his arm around Eddie's shoulder. Uncle Sam Junior then pretended to play his complementing cardboard guitar.

Jesse laughed when he saw Eddie, and even Gabe got a rise out of the costume. "You be careful or they're likely to heist you up the flag pole," Jesse said to Eddie who, in stunned surprise, admitted that he had not considered the possibility of such a prank. After verifying the band

was ready, they took the twilight stage and Eddie marched to the microphone.

“Hello, Boulder Valley High!” Eddie boomed through the microphone. Cheers and whistles sparked from the shadows. “Welcome to Morp! I am your emcee, Eddie ‘The Cruiser’. Before I introduce tonight’s band—” Mike began to play the Star-Spangled Banner on the keyboard in the background, “Remember tonight’s theme. That’s right: Freedom! Freedom to be ourselves. Freedom to live in this great nation. And, the freedom to listen to the music that we love to hear. Tonight, that be rock and roll! And now, won’t you please welcome, Boulder Valley High’s home-grown: Blue Denim!”

A guitar riff swept the crowd; the audience cheered. Another followed; the spectators howled. In a blaze of color and sound, the music started as if had never stopped, as though it had reappeared from nowhere. In an instant, the students, the band, the chaperones knew this was no ordinary dance—this was undeniably a festival of life and celebration and unbridled music.

For their first song, Adam strutted to the microphone, the lights bright in his squinting eyes. He absorbed the sensation, the audience encouraging him, his best friends and Angel around him, the music rich, pure, and true. And Adam Jensen reaffirmed his purpose in life.

*Tell your folks you’re going to be late
While we take an evening to celebrate
There’s no time to study ‘cause we got to go
To the high school dance, to the rock and roll show*

*Let’s go down to the high school dance
I’m looking for fun and a little romance
Hurry up, don’t be late, I want to go
To the high school dance, to the rock and roll show*

*It’s an instant party if you just add music
Where we can dance anyway we choose it
Put away the pencils, get rid of the books
Bring your dancing shoes and your good looks*

(Angel Speaking)

“This ain’t no ordinary dance” (Drumbeat)
“This one’s a kick in the pants” (Drumbeat)
“I’m giving you one last chance” (Drumbeat)
“To take me down at the high school dance”

*No loud bells rushing us off to class
No boring tests to say if we fail or pass
No grumpy teachers telling us what to do
No hall monitor blowing the whistle on you*

*Let’s go down to the high school dance
I’m looking for fun and a little romance
Hurry up, don’t be late, I want to go
To the high school dance, to the rock and roll show*

*To the high school dance
To the Boulder Valley High School da-ance—
To the rock and roll show*

Thanking the applauding crowd and repositioning, they started their next song. Adam’s heart pounded of passion, of meaning. His music made people jump and twist and shout—no painter, no sculptor, no author reaped greater satisfaction in response to their artistry.

For three hours they were mythical gods whirling melodic lightning bolts in an outrageous carnival of sound. The students were constant in their dance, in their enthusiasm, in their exhilaration. The hours Blue Denim had anticipated for months passed in a lucid dream. And following three sets and two encores, each weary Blue Denim face radiated satisfaction.

Fatigued, they still had to pack their equipment. Early musicians wore many hats including singer, songwriter, performer, and even roady and janitor.

“I’ll back the truck up to the side door,” Adam said as they finished packing. “Angel, I’ll need someone to direct me in if you don’t mind.”

“Sure,” she said, following him through the door.

The air tingled their flaming skin. Adam’s arm slid over Angel’s shoulder as they stepped slowly along the school’s west side. Around the

corner, Adam pulled Angel close as the smooth bricks cooled his fiery back.

"The music flowed," he told her. "And you were the music."

A smile emerged and she closed her tired eyes. "We *all* were the music."

In the cool April evening they searched each other's eyes. "I love you," he said, the words coming naturally for the first time in his life. Excited by his proclamation, he repeated, "Angel, I love you."

"Adam, I . . ."

"No, don't," he quieted her. "Don't say it just because I did."

"You already know I love you," she said. "We've told each other a hundred times with our eyes and a thousand times in our hearts." She cuddled more into him. "Oh, I love you so much."

"Angel, I wish I could give you more." Her hair cascaded through his fingers. "I wish I could take you to elegant restaurants and surprise you with gifts and take you on long Sunday afternoon strolls."

The girl laughed at the sky. "Don't be silly, Adam Jensen. I've already had those things—they aren't important to me. You give me the things I've never had: Honesty. Excitement. Liberty."

The slow adventure they had started months earlier had inched every day to a new height. His lips wandered across her cheek to her neck. As she lifted her head up, he responded to her wordless pleas, skimming behind an ear and back to her lips again. For a long while, they held each other, and then started again toward the truck. Angel closed her eyes as he navigated for the two of them.

As they approached his truck, they heard another automobile idling in the dark back corner. Instant realization and concern drained the color from Adam's face.

"Listen, I need you to go back to the school," he told her, his face hard and his tone serious. "Tell the guys to come immediately and then you *stay inside*. We have Rebel trouble."

She scouted the area to locate Adam's concern. She did not challenge his request but kissed him. "Adam, be careful."

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Anticipating the others soon, Adam planted slow, deliberate steps. He recalled the years of Garrett Grimes' antagonizing and lies, of Brad's defecting, of Lucy's stunt at the female auditions, and of Rebel's threat at McDonalds. Even Garrett stealing Adam's guitar ranked second to their terrorizing phone threat to Angel. With that incident, Rebel had crossed the line from competitive rivalry to combative warfare.

Clapping feet arrived not too hastily as the guys caught up to Adam. "Rebel is hosting a celebration party," Adam told them.

"Morp and a Rebel fight in the same evening." Gabe marched with clenched fists. "It must be my lucky night."

Mike sighed. "I'm too tired to fight. Let's tell them we'll beat them up tomorrow."

"I just got my strength back," Jesse said, extending his chest forward.

Up ahead, dual headlights illuminated like eyes that only pretended to be sleeping. The rickety automobile crept toward them. Thank God Angel wasn't there, Adam thought. Thank God she was safe from the blows and the brawling.

But blows and brawling were the least expectation; pipes, chains, and baseball bats were more likely. If Rebel meant business, they'd resort to these, or even blades and bullets.

The car and its stench of burnt oil drifted to a stop behind Adam's truck. Shock rock blasted from inside and the headlights cast tall shadows as Adam and the others approached.

Scurrying footsteps galloped from behind Blue Denim and Angel plunged into the milky spotlight. Her checks were red and she drew air in quick gasps.

"What are you doing here?" Adam shouted as Rebel opened car doors. "I told you to stay inside!"

"I couldn't just leave everyone out here," she replied. "I thought you might need help."

"That was good thinking." Garrett Grimes stepped in front of a headlamp. "Pink Panties is going to need all the help they can get." Silhouettes of four other wobbling figures staggered closer as thick obscenities and laughter charged toward Blue Denim.

"We meet in a parking lot again," Brad observed, then snorted and spat some phlegm. He sucked on his cigarette and winded out a gray stream. "Hey, Angel. Gotten any interesting phone calls lately?"

The girl jolted at Adam's side.

"What kind of sissy prank was that?" Gabe asked. "Threatening a girl in the middle of the night?" When Adam had told the others about the phone call, Gabe had been ready to start an all-out manhunt. Gabe inched closer to Brad, ready to whip into a rapid-firing machine at any moment. "Why didn't you tough guys call me instead?"

"We didn't mean anything by it. Look, we came here tonight to apologize. Can we just forget about it?" Grimes asked. He held out his hand but then suddenly grabbed Angel's forearm and yanked her away. Adam sprang forward but stopped. From a back pocket, Garrett had clutched a pair of sewing shears and poked the sparkling blades at Angel's neck. Angel's eyes grew wide and she delivered a terrified, breathless scream.

Brad chortled heartily. Gabe would have pounced on Brad if not for Mike restraining him. Gabe had a short fuse, maybe shorter than the distance between the blades and Angel's neck. "You son-of-a—" Gabe cursed.

"Angel's lucky your friend stopped you," Lucy told Gabe.

"I gave you a chance, Jensen," Grimes added, his eyes wild. "You blew it. And now it's payback time for landing me in juvie hall."

"If you have some problem with me or Gabe, that's fine," Adam stated. "But Angel has nothing to do with this. Let her go."

Splattering liquid hitting the pavement was their rhythm guitarist, Frank, relieving himself. Rebel acted as if they'd never known anything more amusing, and they applauded with howling and laughter.

"Shut up!" Brad suddenly snapped; only Lucy chuckled one more time. "So what! You played at a high school dance. Battle of the Bands is where it's happening, and you'll never set foot on the Red Rocks stage."

"That's the same thing Grimes told us about Morp," Gabe said.

Brad squinted at Gabe and his jaw tightened. "Do it, Garrett."

"Yeah, do it Garrett!" Lucy screamed with freakish pleasure.

Angel squirmed but the prodding instrument at her neck restrained her. Fire flamed in Adam's eyes, but Gabe was first to respond: "You touch one hair and I'll—"

"You'll what?" Garrett asked.

"You don't want to know, Grimes," Adam said. "One last chance. Let Angel go."

Grimes wrapped an arm across Angel's neck. With an evil grin, he separated the shears and made a deep clip into her hair. At this, Angel wiggled and bit deep into Grimes forearm. He shouted and lost his grip as the shears clanked to the ground. As Angel twisted away, Adam and Gabe flashed forward like a double bolt of lightning—Gabe grabbing Brad and Adam slamming Grimes into the coarse asphalt.

Mike and Jesse exchanged glances and barreled forward. As Lucy fled, Angel grabbed her bleached hair. Lucy clawed Angel's hands, but Angel whirled the girl around and said, "That wasn't nice," before slapping her. Lucy freed herself and darted away to escape further injury.

Gabe crashed a fist into Brad's mouth. Brad tumbled against his car's hood and raised his astounded head. Madness stormed in his face and he lunged a solid blow to Gabe's abdomen. Gabe winced, but months of weight training had created a vest of muscle and in return he hammered repeated blows until Brad fell and stayed on the ground.

Scattered grunts and sounds of fists on flesh and knuckles striking skulls shattered the night's stillness. Red and blue beacons flashed through distant streets and angled toward them.

Joey knocked Jesse, sending him into a spiraling daze. Joey then latched onto Mike, pulled him against the truck, and Frank threw punches into Mike's gut. Regaining his senses, Jesse ripped Frank away and leveled him in a succession of slugs.

Mike delivered an uppercut and a left to Joey's belly. Joey doubled-over and Mike blew his knuckles as if they were a pistol. Joey then rammed forward, intending to head-butt Mike into the truck. As Joey barreled ahead, Gabe pulled Mike out of the way, and Rebel's bass guitarist plowed a dent into the truck's back fender.

Garrett and Adam battled from the asphalt, rolling and wrestling and striking. Justice propelling him, Adam relentlessly went after Garrett with cracking blows. Back on their feet, Garrett hopped onto Adam's truck bed and kicked Adam in the face. In a daze, Adam stumbled, but as Garrett attempted a second kick, Adam grabbed his foot and pulled him to the ground. When Grimes rose, Adam nailed his temple with such force that Grimes slammed into the ground.

The world stopped as an explosion detonated in each ear. Eye searched eye until they all stopped on Brad, his weaving arm pointing a revolver. Blood flowed from both nostrils and his red teeth bore a gap in the top. He again aimed the pistol toward Gabe who leaped forward and knocked the gun away.

Flashing lights and sirens hovered closer to surround them. "Is that the police?" Adam asked, dizzy from Grimes' last boot.

"I called them," Angel replied, "as I was coming back to help."

Meanwhile, Lucy recognized the police approaching and scrambled into the Brad's driver's seat. "Start car! Start!" She yelled, the depleted battery weakly turning the whining engine over. "Start you stupid car!"

Garrett and Brad staggered into the back seat while Frank crawled toward them. Moaning, Joey held his head and threw up booze and blood.

The whirling beacons shone brighter and a squad car screeched to a stop behind Brad's stalled car. Several others followed, and then came a firetruck and ambulance.

"Is everyone okay?" Adam asked, checking each of them. Jesse patted a tender eye; Gabe was blotting some bloody knuckles with tee-shirt.

Mike limped forward holding his side, an arm on Gabe's shoulder. "I knew I shouldn't have had that cafeteria burrito for lunch," he said. He inspected the hand from his side and cursed with the worst language that Mike ever used. "Darn!"

"What's wrong?" Adam asked.

Mike showed them a handful of blood and revealed his red-stained side. "My mom hates it when I get bullet holes in my dress shirts." Mike's eyes then rolled to the back of his head and his knees buckled.

The medics hoisted Mike onto a stretcher. They claimed Mike probably fainted from shock and from the blood loss evident on his shirt, jeans and inside a shoe. Worry painted every face as the ambulance carried their motionless friend into the night.

With each minute, someone new entered the scene. Different officers repeatedly questioned each band member. Angel reflected that she had called the police, insisting that Rebel had provoked the confrontation. Gabe presented the pistol and scissors to an officer as Angel showed her chopped hair and explained the threat she had received to another officer. Adam spoke only when asked; his pounding head consumed with concern for his best friend.

When the officers finished taking their statements, they handcuffed and arrested each drunken Rebel member. A police photographer shot photos of the scene while another measured and made notations. When the commotion simmered, the squad cars started to leave, one dispatching a tow truck for Brad's car. Blue Denim would retrieve their equipment the next morning; they wanted to be at Mike's side, to pray he would wake up.

Gabe knew where Mike kept his car's hide-a-key. He and Jesse drove away in Mike's car with a plan to meet Adam and Angel at the hospital. As they stepped to his truck, Adam noticed a splattered stain on the door. The blood from Mike's wound had dried to a dark purple in the dim light.

"What are you going to tell your parents?" Adam asked and rotated the key.

"I don't know." She fought back emotions erupting inside as she touched the remaining fragment of severed hair on her head. "I just don't know."

Near the brink of exhaustion, Angel and Adam climbed warily into his truck. Adam started the engine but not until he looked into his rearview mirror did he remember Brad's car blocking him in. Recalling his promise at the McDonald's parking lot, Adam shifted into reverse, braced Angel, and popped the clutch. The truck propelled backwards and plunged into Brad's car, pushing it several feet. Pulling away, they heard crumbling glass falling and saw a long dent embedded in both doors.

"That's for blocking me in," he said. As Adam considered Mike's condition, worry flamed to anger and a tear trailed down his cheek. The truck propelled a wide circle in reverse around Brad's car, slamming a matching dent into the other side. "And that's for Mike."

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When they arrived at the hospital, the admittance clerk advised them that Mike was conscious and in room 211-B. “However,” she said, blinking over her plastic-rim glasses, “only immediate family is allowed in after visiting hours.”

“That is a good rule to have,” Angel said, picking up the pen and signing the name, *Angel Slade*. “Keeps out those pesky friends who are always causing trouble.”

Adam and Gabe followed, inscribing *Adam Slade* and *Gabe Slade*. With each turn, the clerk confusingly searched each face. She found neither a differentiation in age nor any family resemblance. She appeared even more baffled why each had some injury—Adam’s cheek swelling, Gabe’s knuckles bloody, and Jesse’s right eye puffy and blue.

After Jesse smiled, took the pen, and signed *Jesse Slate*, the woman spoke up. “Hold on,” she said, examining the sheet. “There seems to be a problem.” Jesse cringed; he had noticed but didn’t correct the spelling error for fear of pointing out his misprint. “You must also enter the time.”

They huddled around the counter again, each scribbling the time. The woman supervised with a *you-have-to-get-up-pretty-early-in-the-morning-to-pull-one-over-on-old-Mrs.-Hubbard* expression.

When they found his room, Mike was shirtless, an I.V. in his left arm, and a long white bandage patching his abdomen. Weary but awake, Mike still had the energy to flirt with an older nurse. “These are the guys that won’t let me marry you,” he said hoarsely to her, gesturing at his friends in the doorway.

“Is he delirious or always like this?” The woman asked them all.

“Yes,” Adam responded as they stepped inside, “Always delirious.” The nurse chuckled but insisted they only stay briefly as Mike needed his rest.

"You don't know how good it is to see you," Adam said. "You had us scared to death." Adam had had mental visions of Mike lying lifeless. The silence of relief fell upon them. For a quiet moment, they seemed to reflect on the friendship that each had taken for granted.

"I asked the doctor if I'd be able to play the piano after the operation," Mike said, his voice weak. "She said they weren't going to operate. The bullet went in, grazed a rib, and came right out. I thought if I put the slug under my pillow the tooth fairy would visit."

"I think that only works for teeth." Angel chuckled and reached for his hand. "We're just glad you're all right, Michael Slade."

"Have your folks been by?" Adam asked.

"They just left," Mike replied. "My mom said she never liked that shirt anyway."

Gabe shifted nervously, thoughts and words trapped inside of him. When it seemed he couldn't delay any longer, he cleared his throat. "I'm not any good at saying this kind of stuff," Gabe said to Mike. "But, you know—thanks."

Mike's eyes didn't move from his view of Gabe. "Forget it." The puzzled looks from the others altered between Mike and Gabe; those two may have been speaking a foreign language for all they understood. Finally, Gabe turned to address them, anticipation on each of their faces.

"When Mike saw Butler's gun, he pushed me out of the way. He took the bullet."

Wordless mouths opened and eyes widened under high eyebrows. Never one to let a joke pass, Mike added: "Pushed you out of the way? When I saw Brad's swaying pistol, I tried to push you in front of me." With that, Mike howled a laugh and grabbed his side in anguish.

The courts indicted Brad with a bond he had no means to cover. Following bookings for public drunkenness and assault and battery, all except Lucy posted bail, and the courts scheduled sentencing in July. The police eventually released Lucy without charge, accepting her claim that the others had forced her to participate.

Angel cut her hair to match the length stolen by Rebel. Adam found her new style mature and intriguing. Mike substituted pills with positive attitude and good humor. Within a week he returned to practice. In less than two weeks he was back full time, exhibiting an uncanny optimism that even exceeded his earlier zeal. Adam delighted him by presenting him with the bullet slug he had found wedged inside the truck's door.

While Mike had been out, Angel astonished them with her aptitude for the keyboard. During the auditions, she had alleged to play “a little piano,” but they discovered this fact an understatement. When Mike returned, the others jokingly insisted that he need not rush, that he take a year off to recover. In his good-natured way, Mike thanked Angel for filling in and then escorted her off his keyboards.

During the weeks following Morp, Adam floated on a natural high, inebriated by music and life and love. The band shared lunches in the sunshine, their intentions of studying superseded by spring fever and senioritis. Morp success and the potential for Battle of the Bands had sparked each with new hope.

Boulder Valley High’s *Spartan Gazette* cited Morp with the highest attendance in history. The review praised Blue Denim for their: “. . . blended notes, honest lyrics, and harmonic voices creating musical synergy . . .” The band booked another party, increasing their normal fee by twenty percent.

One evening while relaxing in their office, they opened the barn door and windows. As the gentle May evening drifted inside, their chatter mingled with the radio music. Adam had a surprise envelope sticking out of his back pocket. Anticipating the good news it contained, he remarked that the evening was one “you couldn’t buy with a million dollars.”

“If I had a million dollars, I’d buy something better than a warm evening,” Gabe responded.

“What could you buy that tops this?” Adam asked, kicking a leg over the couch arm and sipping his bottled water.

The question caught Gabe off guard, but not for long. “I’d pay off my folks’ bills,” his eyes sparkled. “And then I’d buy my dream guitar, a Warwick Infinity Bass, and build a recording studio in my basement.”

“Not me,” said Jesse. “I’d leave the recording to the pro’s. I’d buy another Golden Lab, just like Nugget. And this time, I’d never let her go.”

“Your turn, Mike,” Adam said. “What are you going to do with your first million?”

Mike scratched his head and rubbed his chin. “Well, I’d love a high-end Kurzweil keyboard. But mostly, I’m just glad to have my life, my music and my friends. Of course, with that much money, I’d probably buy a new dress shirt without bullet holes in it. Maybe two.”

Still smiling from the previous chuckle, Angel asked: “What about you, Adam? Nice weather is free. What would you really buy?”

Adam closed his eyes, contemplating. "I'd pay off my mom's house. Then I'd cut our own CD and go on tour promoting it."

Following Adam's statement, quietness fell on them, as though each had the same dream of sharing the glorious music—using music to touch others, to plant memories, or just allow people to escape from their troubles for a while. Only Angel hadn't yet offered an answer. When Mike spoke he had humor in his tone. "Angel, what would you do if you *didn't* have a million dollars?"

Chuckles rippled through them. Quick to reply, she answered: "I'd spend my days, my evenings, my weekends, with a sweaty bunch of fanatic musicians in an old barn." She smiled at each of them. "This couldn't be bought at any price."

They continued relishing their summer plans after graduation. Adam anticipated the long, summer days for writing and playing music, for running and spending time with Angel. With her college plans indefinite, Adam resolved he had three months of Boulder sunshine and music to help her answer the calling in her heart.

Just before leaving, Adam presented the envelope he had been saving to Mike.

"What's this?" Mike asked, observing it. "It's from the Colorado Battle of the Bands Committee!"

"It came today." Adam smiled at each excited face. "I've been too excited to open it."

In an instant, Mike ripped into the envelope. His head moved side to side, and then he grimaced and shook his head. "'Upon review of your application, we must regretfully inform you,'" Mike said, his gloom shifting to a grin, "'that the panel has selected you to play at this summer's Colorado Battle of the Bands!'"

Gabe snagged the letter, reading it with Jesse over his shoulder. Filled with elation, they screamed, jumped, and slammed high-fives. For five minutes they mimicked being on stage at the Red Rocks Amphitheater, performing for their grandest audience ever.

One evening the following week, Adam drove Angel home and walked her to her front door. "If you want to go the prom," he said, "I'll take you." He knew he couldn't afford it, but he sensed Angel's longing to go and he felt obligated to offer.

Her view varied from one eye to the other. "No. It's okay. It's just a silly dance."

He had expected her to respond enthusiastically, and her quiet refusal surprised him. Reconsidering, Adam suspected why she had

declined. He suddenly felt cheap—cheap for having offered instead of asked, cheap for not having put aside a few dollars for a tuxedo and dinner. Angel probably regarded senior prom as the highlight of her high school years and Mr. Cheapskate didn't have the decency to treat the occasion with a sense of priority.

"Let me say that over," he said. "Angel, will you be my guest to the senior prom?"

The girl quietly reconsidered. In her eyes, Adam could see her desire to go, but she cast her view away. "I know it would be too difficult for you. I couldn't."

"Really, Angel, I want to. I insist. I'll find a way."

"I know!" She grasped his hand with her fingers. "Make it my treat. After all you've done for me, I owe you."

Silently, he slid his hand away. His mouth bent to the side and he shook his head. He now felt even cheaper. "This is my responsibility."

"Adam, you can't even afford a new muffler for your clunky old truck. It's no problem for me to pay."

Although he knew she meant no malice, he felt hurt anyway. He felt a great distance slip between the few feet separating them. Right next to him, Angel seemed a million miles away.

"I have to go," he told her. Scuffing his feet to the truck, he felt like a blundering numbskull who hadn't the competence to manage a simple prom invitation. And as he drove away, Angel and her house disappeared in the lingering cloud of smoke his truck left behind.

Claiming she was close to failing two of her classes, Angel told Adam she couldn't spend lunches with them for a while. She also couldn't attend rehearsals half the time and when she was there, she seemed detached and distracted. His optimistic smiles and comments went without measurable response, and the once lively fire in her eyes had all but disappeared.

He resolved she needed time and mental space to catch up. He too sprinted through his daily schedule, juggling History and Psychology and Creative Writing and the final chapters of *The Grapes of Wrath* all while preparing for Battle of the Bands.

The weekend before the prom, Blue Denim played Stephen Chan's birthday party. That evening, Angel showed more liveliness than she had in weeks. But in her display, Adam sensed only exaggerated enthusiasm and animated spirit. Afterwards, he gave her a ride home, an awkward journey devoid of its usual conversation and laughter. As his

truck chugged to her driveway, a disheartening air filled the cab; the anticipation of despair just before it happens.

He cut the engine as Angel stared down, her once long, flowing hair now barely veiling only part of her face. Adam reached for her shoulder, hoping to kindle a hidden ember within. But his hand went cold upon the touch, and he abruptly withdrew.

"Angel, you've always been honest with me," he said. "Tell me what's wrong."

She blew air through her cheeks and turned to him. "My mother found out about Rebel's ambush after Morp."

"How? When?"

"Well, she thought I'd gone mad the next morning when I suddenly cut my hair myself. I made up a story that I was looking for a more tattered image on stage. Of course, I hacked it so badly that I had to have it fixed professionally." Angel combed her fingers through her short locks, as though grieving for an amputated appendage. "She heard about it from a friend who works at the court house and was really angry that I tried to conceal it from her."

"What did she say?"

"I came home the other evening and found her crying. I can take her discipline, her strong words." She drew a deep breath. "But I can't take her crying. She's very scared for me."

He wanted to encourage her, but reassuring words did not surface. So he stared at the Irving's massive home, at their manicured lawn, in silent helplessness.

Angel sniffed, and then rubbed back the water forming in her eyes. "Adam," she said, her stare so deep and dark that she looked like a stranger. "I have to quit the band. Tonight was my last show."

For his reaction, she may have slapped him in the face. He shook his head, trying to rattle his brain back into place. "You what? You can't! We need you. I need you."

The girl did not respond, each word she did not say a lance in his heart.

"What about Battle of the Bands?" he asked. "What about the summer?"

"I told my mother this would be my last show. I've already enrolled in the summer intercession at Princeton. I'll be leaving after graduation."

He unexpectedly felt trapped in some surreal nightmare. Angel held the key to his greatest passion, his deepest emotions, and his farthest dreams. But in two short minutes, she had snuffed out their summer, their

Battle of the Bands, their love and their future. Was there anything left in his once wonderful life to take away?

“But that’s not all.” She choked back a sob, tears filling her glassy eyes. “Bobby came over the other night. He said he had something important to talk to me about. He asked me to go the prom with him.”

“He what?” Adam grabbed his forehead. “After what he did to you? After all his lies and deceit? Is he insane?”

She bit her lips and tears spilled down her peach cheeks. “I told him I would.”

Her words ripped his heart from his chest. This was no nightmare, this was hell; a person wakes up from a nightmare —this was eternal. “I wanted to take you to the prom. I just, I just didn’t ask right. Angel, don’t lower yourself to be with one so undeserving.”

In her eyes a dam burst, and she scrambled out the passenger’s door. Her expression became as dark as a midnight storm and she seized a quivering breath. “Bobby has leukemia,” she cried. “He’s in stage three and has six months to live. Bobby is going to die.”

27

“I knew this would happen,” Gabe said, the next afternoon when Adam told them that Angel had quit. “I knew a female vocalist was a bad idea from the beginning.”

For once, Mike didn’t have a witty comeback. Jesse cursed softly under his breath, and then cursed louder. Hard, irregular pulses pounded Adam’s heart, each with a heavy thud that exploded in his temples. His senses were dull and distant, except for the twisted knot in his gut.

“Well, I’ll tell you one thing—I’m glad this happened,” Gabe added. “Now we’re the original Blue Denim and the way we should have stayed.”

Adam rubbed his eyes, further irritating the bloodshot veins and the puffy bags underneath. He could usually overlook Gabe’s pessimistic tongue, but he had neither the energy nor the goodwill to hear such disparaging remarks. He unbuckled his guitar strap, the heavy instrument bumping the floor, the strings vibrating a groaning twang. He lifted his denim jacket from an office chair and dragged it toward the door.

“Where do you think you’re going?” Gabe shouted.

Adam shuffled further toward the door.

“Adam, wait!” Mike called out. “Battle of the Bands is coming up. We have to practice.”

“There may not be a Battle of the Bands for us,” he responded at the ground. “We may not be a band anymore.”

“Hey!” Gabe’s voice shot him in the back. “What about your motto? *Pursue the music with a relentless passion.*” Adam stopped as the words penetrated his ears, but then he disappeared through the door.

Without Angel, his dreams had drifted out of reach. Without Angel, their music had lost a vital ingredient: a flower without fragrance, music without a melody.

Maybe Angel never had his same passion for the music. Maybe her actions were only a desperate desire to run from her problems. Maybe their worlds were more different than he ever realized. Maybe he had so naively fallen in love that this was his eternal punishment. So many maybes . . .

The lump in Adam's stomach left no room for hunger. When he experienced a dizzy spell, he forced down some juice or a piece of bread. He avoided Angel in the school halls, for the sight of her further shattered his broken heart. Each evening he fell asleep to memories and images of Angel, and every morning he awoke cursing that his fate had not been a bad dream.

He visited Calvin one afternoon, seeking advice and comfort. Calvin could always show a perspective Adam didn't see. But for once, his magic didn't work. Calvin's optimism and encouragement were just meaningless, cliché words that only further depressed Adam.

With such low spirits, Adam's appearance deteriorated. He wore his most dismal, colorless clothing, and his face sprouted bristly patches. He rejected music, not playing the radio or his favorite CDs or MP3s. Music was too beautiful for this world, too glorious to waste on the cold and barren abyss in his heart. Inside, he was empty, lost, and powerless.

Knowing about Bobby Wilmar's condition, Adam thought he would be dragging himself to school or not coming at all. To his surprise, Adam witnessed little change in Bobby's character—his voice still bellowed to friends down the halls and he constantly drew attention to himself. However, Bobby was slowing down; he had dropped P.E., and no longer tossed footballs on the school lawn during lunch when he was there at all.

Several dreary days after the prom, Adam's distant observation pulled Bobby's eyes up in the school hallway. Angel knew, and Bobby's family knew, and maybe Bobby's closest friends knew, but nobody else knew the fate awaiting Boulder Valley High's most popular athlete. Bobby then dropped his tired eyes, as though Adam had reminded him of his inevitable doom. The kid who always had everything was losing the most precious thing of all.

Adam sunk to the bottom of his hopeless universe during finals week. He questioned if life once so abundant with color and harmony had ever really happened. His blazing spirit had dwindled to a tiny, dying flicker that barely powered him through each punishing minute.

On Wednesday, Mike caught up with Adam in the halls. "Did you hear about Grimes and Rebel? It was in the papers last night. The

police busted them for stealing equipment from Alpine Music. This time, Lucy didn't get away."

He shook his head. He wouldn't have noticed if the planet had disappeared.

"You probably haven't noticed, but Angel trudges through the halls as miserable as you. Maybe you should talk to her. Maybe it'll help you both close this chapter in your lives and move on."

Adam shook his head. He couldn't bear to fix his eyes on Angel's face again; to inhale her fragrance; to have her voice touch his ears. To experience Angel again would be to inject a lethal dose of poison into his crippled heart.

An awkward moment hung without words. Mike looked down, then up. "Gabe and Jesse keep asking when you're coming back."

So weary, sometimes his next heartbeat surprised him. "I don't know. Maybe never."

"There's a celebration at Gabe's house after graduation on Sunday. His dad is working again so his folks are buying the food and drinks. It'll be fun and give us all a chance to talk."

Thoughts frowned his forehead. "Okay. Maybe," he said, to terminate the conversation quickly. In his bleak and numb existence, Adam had nothing worth celebrating.

Mike slapped him on the back. "Great! See you Sunday."

Friday had saved Adam's darkest final: History. Pencils gnawed on answer sheets as Mrs. Griffin lurked like a graying buzzard between each row, spying over shoulders—if she caught anyone cheating, they would pay dearly.

Denise's seat remained as empty as the day she failed to return. Several times, Mrs. Griffin had inquired if anyone knew what had happened to her. Nobody dared to speculate aloud; apparently, Denise had kept her intentions to move away with Adam a secret. And besides Adam, only her cousin Jesse knew that she had moved to her uncle's place in Montrose.

Adam answered the test questions he knew, guessed at those that stumped him, and completed essays concisely. When he finished, he delivered the sheet and his History text to Mrs. Griffin. She initialed his checkout list, an indication he had handed in all books and assignments.

"Mr. Jensen?" Mrs. Griffin called and he lifted his eyes to her. "What is the most important thing you've learned in History?"

He hadn't studied for that question. Dates, places, and names darted through his mind, but he failed to capture the most epic moment.

“If you remember nothing else about History, remember this—” She looked directly into Adam’s eyes. “History predicts the future; learn from its success, and don’t make its mistakes.”

She remained still, letting her words sink in. How the words affected him, Adam wasn’t sure. But he concluded this an old woman’s way of offering reconciliation for their differences. He captured and held her words like some foreign trinket; perhaps someday they might provide surprise meaning. Adam then nodded and left.

He meandered down the hall for final check out. Chattering and laughter bounced through the halls; excitement hurried students who had just completed their last final. He had expected to feel explosive elation. Instead, he felt only pointless emptiness.

At the attendance office, Adam handed his checkout card to the admissions clerk. She then retrieved his file and compared the information. “Congratulations, Mr. Jensen. You’re free to go.”

Exiting through the front doors, the Colorado sunshine showered him with bright warmth. Adam realized that, for the first time, he had nowhere to go and nothing to do. It was a foreign feeling, a feeling like he didn’t belong anywhere.

Weeks of emotional strain had taken more energy than he had to give. At home, he stripped down to his tee-shirt and shorts and crawled into bed. There he embraced sleep, hiding for hours in his subconscious, hiding from his life without meaning, without music, without Angel.

He awoke in the early evening. He showered and wearing only blue jeans, stepped into the kitchen for a drink of water. From the back porch, he heard his mother’s laughter, and saw her seated with Bruce’s arm around her. She laid her head on the man’s shoulder, the barbecue grill releasing a streamer of scent and smoke.

Although his sleep had been dreamless, it had refreshed his mind, and he welcomed having his mother home again. In the past month, he had only seen her a few times and usually in passing. Sometimes she left him a note on the refrigerator or stuffed a twenty-dollar bill into his jeans or in a textbook. But she spent most of the time in California with this man whom Adam still considered a stranger.

Adam opened the glass sliding door to the porch, noticing his mother and Bruce each with a glass of champagne. “Adam, I’m glad you’re up. How did finals go?”

He shrugged and then nodded. Her eyes dropped and stayed on his bare chest.

“What’s that on your chest?”

He glanced down but found nothing peculiar. He then realized she was referring to his tattoo. "A musical note," he told them. "A monument, next to my heart, of my dedication to the music."

She wrinkled a puzzled face and then looked at Bruce. "Well, I guess I should be glad it isn't a whole symphony."

Bruce extended his long arm. "Hello, Adam." Adam accepted his handshake. "I hope you can join us for steaks. And congratulations on your last day of high school. Tonight, we have several things to celebrate."

Adam noticed the dining room table where the fine china and good silver glistened under the dim chandelier. Long-stemmed roses poked ruby-colored heads out of a tall vase. The candelabra with burgundy candles awaited lighting and champagne chilled in a silver bucket.

"Are you ready for a glass of champagne?" Bruce asked, rising.

He almost declined but then reconsidered—he had just finished school forever! So Adam accepted his offer.

Bruce filled a waiting glass and stepped back outside. Adam watched as the bubbles created a swirling scale of music notes in the shimmering crystal flute.

His mother gestured a toast by holding up her glass. "To our upcoming high school graduate!" She said and they all clinked glasses. While Bruce barbecued, Adam explained what had happened between him and Angel and consequently with the band. They asked sincere questions and listened intently. But in their compassion, Adam felt them distracted by other thoughts.

At dinner, Adam participated in conversation while Bruce carried on about many hilarious situations. Their gaiety rubbed off on him, assisted by his first real meal in weeks and by Bruce refilling Adam's glass. Imprisoned so long in the solitary confinement of his mind, the exchange to Adam was a breath of fresh air.

Following dessert, when bellies were content and the conversation had mellowed to fewer and softer words, they retreated to the living room for coffee. Adam sank into the easy chair while Bruce and his mother sat together on the sofa. His mother's eyes twitched with nervous excitement and she couldn't contain her wide grin from resurfacing.

"Adam," she said, setting down her mug and wrapping Bruce's fingers in hers. "Bruce and I have something to tell you." She smiled at the man. "Bruce has asked me to marry him. And I have accepted."

The news came as no shock, but hearing and digesting the words suddenly made the possibility real. Seconds later, he blinked back to his senses. "Well, I don't know what to say . . . Congratulations."

“Oh, I’m so happy.” His mother’s eyes shown glossy tears. She gestured for Adam to come next to her, and she pulled him close, hugging them both.

Sniffles later, she dried her face and traded tears for smiles. “We’re getting married in August, Adam,” Bruce said. “After our honeymoon in Hawaii, we’ll be living in Los Angeles.”

“Oh, Adam, you’ll love it there,” his mother added. “It’s always warm. Bruce has a wonderful house only a mile from the university. You won’t even have to drive.”

He scratched his head. Surely she had not said what his ears heard—he must have sucked down more bubbly than he realized. “You said you’re moving to Los Angeles after your honeymoon. Then, what did you say after that?”

“You’ll love Los Angeles. You’ll love living there. You’ll love the university. We have everything taken care of. After our honeymoon—”

“Living there? You mean, me? Going to college?” He chuckled. The champagne wasn’t playing tricks on his head, they were. “You’re cracking me up.”

“We can’t just leave you here,” his mother stated. “You’re coming with us. We’re going to be a family.”

“We have all the finances figured out.” Bruce lowered his eyebrows in what he must have thought was a fatherly manner. “U.C.L.A. has an excellent music program. An old friend of mine owes me a favor and can get you in—”

“I don’t want to *study* music.” He stood and backed away. “I want to *play* music.”

“Take a semester off if you want,” his mother offered, “or play music part time. After you get your degree, if you still want to play music, then it’s okay with us. You know, music is bigger in Los Angeles than in Colorado, with all of those recording studios and concert halls. You’ll have more opportunities.”

“What about my band here? Remember? Blue Denim? Does Los Angeles have them, too? Or do I abandon the only brothers I’ve ever had?” The comment shocked even him, recognizing he hadn’t treated them much like brothers in recent weeks. Anger heated his tipsy brain; anger for their assumptions, anger for disappointing his closest friends. “For years you have thought my music was just a hobby. It’s not a hobby! Music is my life!”

The room melted to blurry, wet colors. He bolted to his room, snagged his jacket, and grabbed his father’s guitar. When he rushed

outside, the night breeze slapped his fiery face and a headache rumbled. He hurried to his truck and thundered into the lonely night.

28

A slow, sweet country ballad lulled through the radio. The truck's tires hummed over hills and passed farmhouses, lights slicing the early morning darkness. Behind, distant automobile headlamps vibrated in the rear-view mirror.

The young boy rested quietly, snuggling his father's warm side. His mouth half open, he breathed through small nostrils and exhaled between baby teeth. At the restaurant earlier, a loose incisor had wiggled out, and he anticipated a visit from the tooth fairy.

The boy stirred, trying to change his cramped position while the seat belt locked him in place. His mother reached over to pet his golden hair; she smiled as he stopped wiggling and resumed his rhythmic breathing.

The old truck creaked and wobbled and rambled. He had fallen asleep to the radio dial, the comfort of the heater's warm air, and the scent of his father's deodorant and distant perspiration.

His father had played at shows five out of the past seven evenings and each time Adam had pleaded to go with him. Bars and nightclubs were a bad example for a five-year-old and Adam would probably fall asleep backstage before the first set had ended. But when tears swelled in his son's innocent eyes, his father reconsidered. He couldn't give Adam the same regretful answer. He suggested that they all go, leave early and grab some supper before heading for the Lone Star Lodge in Estes Park.

The truck cruised passed a Colorado Highway 36 sign followed by a deer crossing sign. Oncoming lights blinked over a shallow grade, dimming from high to low beams. Adam stirred again, muttering in sleepy slumber. He tried to twist out of the seat belt, clutched his father's waist, and whimpered. From the dashboard light, the boy's father traded puzzled expressions with his wife.

"What's wrong, dear?" his mother asked, checking Adam's forehead but detecting no abnormal temperature.

Growing headlight beams tunneled closer down the grade. The youngster whined again, this time shriller, butting his head into his father's ribs, a small "no . . ." escaping from his little lips.

"What's wrong little buddy?" his daddy asked, comforting him with his arm. He hugged the man's hand with tender fingers and moaned. "Are you having a bad dream? It's okay, Daddy's here. We'll be home soon."

"No . . . no . . ." Adam groaned, trying to embrace his father's giant frame.

"Shhh . . ." The man hushed softly, his face lighting up more, the oncoming car speeding nearer.

The flash of brown and white fur bounded into the lane of the oncoming car. A deer, terrified by the headlights, froze in the vehicle's beams. The startled driver swerved and cut deep over the centerline, the wheels screaming passed the petrified animal.

"Oh, my God . . ." Adam's father gasped, riding the shoulder as narrowly as he could.

Gravel and dirt grabbed the truck's tires and pulled it over the steep embankment. The truck toppled and the cab slammed into the ground, rolling over and over, scattering rocks and dust, finally crashing to a stop on flat tires.

When Adam awoke, he touched his forehead, finding dark and warm liquid on his fingertips. A young black man ran to the truck and looked inside. "You're bleeding. Here, hold this on your forehead," he told the boy and handed him a handkerchief. "My name's Calvin. Now don't move. I'm going to call an ambulance. I'll be right back."

His mother was unconscious, but he heard her faint breathing. His father was limp and the boy began to cry. His father raised a weak hand and touched the boy's quivering lips. "Adam, Adam, are you hurt?"

"Daddy, I'm scared," Adam said. "I'm scared."

"You have to brave, okay? Now, stop crying. Tell me you'll be brave."

The boy sobbed once more before answering. "Okay, Daddy. Okay."

"Adam, sing me that song that I wrote for you." The man winced and his words flowed so quietly that Adam could barely hear them. "The one about four-year-old cowboys. I'd like to hear you sing it for me."

Adam sniffed and his high, young voice began in song. He laid his head on his father's shoulder and sang the song through to the end. When he finished, he lifted his head to see his father still.

"No, Daddy. Wake up! Wake up! Daddy, no . . ."

"No!" Adam screamed, slamming himself up. His lungs convulsed with quivering gasps, and the cool darkness bathed him in gray. Panicked, he forgot where he was, and then recognized his cab by the crescent moon through the windshield. He buttoned his denim jacket and opened the driver's door, carrying his guitar over his shoulder.

His dark shadow crossed a faded sign against a fence displaying "St. Theresa's Cemetery." He tugged on the black iron gate but the rusty padlock would not budge. So he hoisted himself and his guitar up and over.

The moonlight over the Flatirons sprayed a milky mist across the scattered gravestones. The old cemetery was untidy with overgrown bushes and patches of natural grasses. His mother picked St. Theresa's, claiming his father would prefer to have nature as his gardener.

The headstones rested randomly, dating back to the 1890's. Some had settled at various angles, while a century of fiery summers and heaving frosts had cracked or broken others. Jars and vases supported faded silk or long-dead blossoms. Rustling through dry leaves, he startled a field mouse that skittered into the night.

He strolled through the serenity, knowing the direction, the moon his flashlight. The old graveyard had few visitors, now more popular with high school kids dancing on graves and busting beer bottles against the marble headstones. But tonight, alone among a thousand skeletons, Adam came to put the pieces of his puzzle back together.

Slow steps lingered to the humble headstone, its shiny finish bearing the etched name, "Richard Timothy Jensen." Adam picked up a present he'd left a decade earlier; the shiny yellow Matchbox racer was now coarse and left brown rust in Adam's hand.

"Hello, Dad." His voice sounded hoarse, the word "Dad" foreign from his lips. "I guess it's been awhile." He scratched his head and kicked a small rock. "I remember when Six-Pack played at the county fair. You introduced me as the world's youngest country singer. Then you set me on a stool and we sang your song 'Four-Year-Old Cowboys.'" Adam laughed dryly, relishing the cherished memory. "I'll never forget singing with you, a thousand smiling spectators cheering and applauding. I think that was the first time I made my promise to the music."

Adam sank to his knees. He breathed in the gentle spring night and swallowed hard. Naturally, as thoughts introduced memories, he vividly recalled being a young boy. As a country rock singer, his father had dressed the country part; Adam idolized him, dressed like him, and wanted to be just like him. Adam's fingers caressed the guitar strings, and words turned to lyrics.

*Four Year Old Cowboys never play house
They're too busy with horses and guns
They're out ridin' and ropin', and even steer-wrestlin'
And drivin' the cattle runs*

*Four Year Old Cowboys sleep late in the morn'
They don't have to go off to school
They take care of Mommy
And teddy bear named Tommy
and wash their hands from a stool*

*Now if you were a Four Year Old Cowboy
With many a range to ride
You might gather together
Your toys in nice weather
and probably play inside*

*Four Year Old Cowboys take afternoon naps
They just happen to fall asleep
And dream of far trails
And fences with rails
and how many horses to keep*

*The sweetest people are Four Year Old Cowboys
That you're ever most likely to meet
They wear spurs on their heels
And hats during meals
And cowboy boots on the wrong feet*

Tears gathered and stormed out both eyes. At his father's side, he wept for his broken heart, for the music he had abandoned, for the band he had renounced, for his lost relationship with his mother. But mostly, he wept for the loving father God had called home so many years ago.

His sorrow drained his tear-ducts and a cool exhaustion filled him. He rested his tingling head against the gravestone and took in the sparkling heavens. He had loved Angel so passionately and unconditionally, and he knew she had truly loved him in return. Her love had been both one of his life's most incredible and traumatic chapters. The experience had stretched his mind and Adam had grown emotionally—but at the cost of his heart.

His biggest regret was not for himself, but for Angel's lost potential. He so much wanted that person struggling inside her to emerge from its cocoon to glorious flight. And she had been so close, so close. He knew he had helped her to the best of his ability. Maybe this was yet another contrast between their different worlds.

The music had never left him—he had only misplaced this piece of the puzzle he now found. He needed his band; they equally needed him. And he knew more than ever before that people needed to hear and experience and feel their music.

He thought about his mother and Bruce moving to California and he hoped they would visit; maybe he could even budget some time for trips to see them. He needed his mother's love and support, even if her intentions were not a part of his destiny. Maybe he and Angel had faced similar situations after all, yet he had answered the truer calling of his heart.

The sweet, serenity of peace of mind comforted him like an old friend. At his father's side, he fell asleep with new hope, to dream of life and of music and of tomorrow.

29

On Sunday morning, graduation day, Adam awoke at sunrise. He opened his window to a bursting sun, to leaves dancing on trees, and clouds so distinct one could almost see the Painter's brushmarks. Adam felt he had recovered from a long and delirious fever and his heartbeat pulsed with renewed purpose.

The previous day, he had spoken to his mother and she had apologized for her selfish assumptions. He knew she had only good intentions, but Adam could pursue no road other than the one to his ultimate destiny. In response, he wished from his heart happiness for her and Bruce's future together.

Wrapped in the Sunday comics, his mother presented him with a new muffler as a graduation gift. She regretfully told him that work rescheduling would force her from attending his graduation ceremony. Frankly, Adam had no overwhelming desire to attend himself; school had been a memorable experience, but never his priority. But mostly, he feared that seeing Angel again would unleash the emotions he had finally contained.

At the early Mass, timeless Latin hymns inspired his passion for how music nourished the mind and soul. At Communion, he reconciled with God his sins of self-pity, of self-doubt. He vowed never again to let anyone or any thing jeopardize the measure of his divine talent. As he prayed, he remembered Mrs. Griffin's parting words: "History predicts the future; learn from its success, and don't make its mistakes."

Mass attendance had been light and Father O'Brien seemed to wait in anticipation for Adam afterwards. "Adam," he called. "Please, come over here."

"Good morning, Father," Adam said.

"Dominos vobiscum," the Father greeted him. "That's Latin for 'The Lord be with you.' Good to see you at early devotion to the Lord."

Adam replied with a soft, tranquil smile.

“Adam,” the priest said, rubbing his jaw, “several weeks ago, while purchasing some groceries, I heard music from the market parking lot. A crowd of people had gathered and I thought I’d get a closer look.”

Adam nodded, knowing Father O’Brien was referring to Flatiron Market. He had seen and nodded to the priest from the stage, but Father O’Brien only frowned and scratched his bald scalp.

“As I approached, I was happily surprised to see you and your band. The music I would not normally listen to, but the lyrics were deep and meaningful. And the young people there drank in every word of it.”

“Playing music is my greatest passion.”

“Then by all means,” the priest told him, “use your God-given talent, Adam.”

No words could express Adam’s delight—the Father endorsing him only further sealed Adam’s renewed conviction. Adam hugged the man as a son may hug a father after a long separation. With a broad smile, Father O’Brien responded with firm pats to Adam’s back.

At home after church, Adam turned on his stereo, gave attention to Fluffy, and began cleaning up. He rubbed shaving cream over weeks of stubble and started shaving. When he finished his sideburns, the radio started a familiar melody and his reflection expressed immediate shock.

“ . . . And here’s a teaser of next weekend’s Colorado Battle of the Bands at Red Rocks . . . one of Boulder’s freshest, new bands. Here is Blue Denim with ‘Colorado Days, Colorado Nights . . .’ ”

Excitement screamed through his body, sending him to crank the stereo to full volume. The speakers gave birth to his music, the music he and his band had created. People everywhere were hearing the premiere of Blue Denim on the air!

He grabbed his father’s guitar and screamed and jumped and sang along. After the song, his exhilaration raged. Greater than high school graduation, his band had graduated into their first broadcast.

He eventually calmed down, but only long enough to suit up and stretch out. How long since he last strained out precious drops of delicious, sweet sweat? Resetting his watch and anxious for speed, he stepped out and shot his hungry feet forward to consume five ravenous miles.

He rushed eagerly forward but his pace craved more. Running shoes ate the pavement; they chomped through curbs and devoured sidewalks. He had never been so alive; with every step Adam grew stronger and hungrier and faster.

While at C.U.'s Folsom Field, Boulder Valley High's commencement was underway; but his ceremony blasted him down Baseline Road, pushed him through Chautauqua Park, persisting mile after gratifying mile. People strolling and walking dogs and kids on bikes blinked as he passed them in a blur.

The finish line in sight, Adam exerted full strength in his final delivery. His arms swung long and his feet lunged great distances. In a final bound, his fingers stopped his watch. While distant tones rang in his ears, shooting stars sparkled in his eyes. He inhaled gulps of air and paced to regulate his heart and lungs.

Inside the house, he pulled off his saturated tee-shirt and stepped into the bathroom. In the mirror, the red panting figure turned on the water and splashed palms of cool water over his blazing face. It dripped down his smooth, crimson cheeks, over his stubby facial hairs, and onto his shining chest.

His facial color returning, he checked his watch and blinked in disbelief. In his fury, he had completed his course in 27 minutes, 28 seconds, beating his personal record by over a minute.

The man in the mirror laughed. He bellowed hearty cries of accomplishment. Adam Jensen smiled at his reflection. He had resurrected and nobody and no thing could stop him from making his dreams come true.

30

At Gabe's house that afternoon, Adam arrived sporting his graduation cap as a party hat. In the backyard, a checkerboard tablecloth provided a shady spot for Sam. Mike still in cap and gown, and Gabe and his family, nibbled on snacks and sipped champagne. On the side of the house, Jesse played Frisbee with a Golden Labrador.

"Adam!" Mike called, bounding forward with an open bottle of champagne. "Hallelujah! We've graduated! Even you! I picked up your diploma."

Adam grinned, the hairs lining his upper-lip spreading wide. Mike handed his friend the bottle and shook his hand with a sticky palm.

"How was graduation—" Adam began.

"What's that?" Mike pointed at the goatee Adam had retained from shaving. "You've got dirt around your mouth. Let me clean it for you!" Mike lunged at him, playfully swatting at him before stealing back the bottle for a graduation baptismal.

The others joined them, offering jubilant smiles and handshakes.

"Did you get a new dog?" Adam asked as Jesse came over, scratching the animal's neck.

Jesse eyes radiated. "Better. Adam, meet Nugget, my dog from San Francisco. My mom found out the owners couldn't keep her. Can you believe it? I got my dog back!" He barked and the dog barked back.

"What about your apartment's pet policy?" Adam asked.

"Gabe's going to watch her until we find a house," Jesse said. Gabe stepped and handed Adam a full glass. Annoyed by the excitement, Sam limped off, his coat patchy and his right leg bandaged. Adam stared at the hobbling creature. "What happened to Sam?"

"Wilson's Rottweiler," Gabe replied. "Almost died doing it, but Sam chewed off the end of Killer's ear. He's got no more lives left than eyes, but Sam ain't no quitter."

At the picnic table, old friends renewed their friendship. Before long, the reorganized brothers of Blue Denim exploded into the jam session of the century. With a refreshed outlook, the band resealed their conviction for the music.

The following week they had one priority: Preparation for Battle of the Bands. Weeks behind schedule, they rehearsed day and evening. Mainly consisting of originals, they practiced and fined-tuned each song to perfection.

Adam spent midnight hours composing his self-promised masterpiece. In six-month's time, he had lived a lifetime. He had laughed and cried and lived and died and resurrected. And this he sculptured into a song like no other—his song to the world!

Angel still possessed each day's first and last thoughts. Even without being at her side, he hoped she'd someday achieve her greatest potential. He wondered if he'd ever see Angel again, concluding only destiny knew if their paths should ever cross again.

On Thursday, Adam received a legal-size letter with his mother's handwriting postmarked from Los Angeles. From his cage, Fluffy watched him rip the top open. Clipped to some papers was a note:

June 5

Dear Adam,

Bruce and I decided that instead of selling the house there, we'd keep it as an investment. We figured with my low mortgage, we wouldn't have to charge much for rent. Do you know any rock bands who would like to live there?

Please get back to me on this. Attached is a formal rental agreement. (I'm willing to offer the manager a cut rate for watching the place.)

*Love,
Mom*

Heartfelt, he smiled as if she was there. His mother and Bruce were indeed offering their sincere support.

That evening at rehearsal, Adam read the note to his friends. They took dibs on rooms and discussed how they would decorate. "We don't use the basement for much," Adam said. "It would make a very cool recording studio."

Gabe's eyes widened with exhilaration. Realizing he showed more delight than he'd ever want anyone to witness, he shifted to a cool facade. "I guess we could do that. Maybe. Someday."

Adam chuckled at Gabe's predictable reaction. "The rest of the house we share," he said. "But the basement belongs to Gabe."

Black arrows pointed to the date of Sunday, June 10, on Adam's calendar. Inside the box were the words "Battle of the Bands." When he awoke, Adam sank to his knees and prayed that Blue Denim might perform their best and most of all, take first place to tour with Snowblind.

The previous day, Adam had stumbled across a charcoal-colored pinstriped jacket in the back of a basement closet. Adam recalled vague memories of his father wearing it over 13 years earlier. To him, this found treasure was more than just an old article of clothing; it was a distinct message that his father was offering him a gift—and Adam would wear it proudly to a graduation of his own at Red Rocks.

Nestled in the foothills of the Rocky Mountains, Red Rocks Amphitheater looked down upon the skyscrapers of the mile-high city. Rusted stone walls molded nature's perfect musical sanctuary. So skillfully was Red Rocks designed that the Architect may have scooped out a handful of earth, and then landscaped with juniper and yucca plant and sagebrush.

Red Rocks backstage entrance buzzed with commotion; bands and crew unloaded equipment at the program manager's instructions. Scheduled to play seventh, Blue Denim learned they would follow a band from Glenwood Springs called "Mirage."

J. Drake from KFTM would introduce each band who had a thirty-minute time limit. With a split-stage, while one band performed, the next band set up behind curtains on the opposite side. With time to spare, Blue Denim joined the audience of the packed outdoor auditorium and soaked in sun and Colorado's most potential musicians. No better event could have kicked off the summer than this Battle of the Bands!

As Mirage started their set, Blue Denim and Stephen met back stage. As he had promised, Calvin stopped in for a quick visit of encouragement and coaching. When the stage was clear, they speedily set up and reviewed their song sheet. News reporters then interviewed them and they posed for photos—in one shot Mike showing his abdomen scar.

After the interview, Jesse signaled Adam over. "Come here. I want to show you something." Jesse reached into his back pocket and produced a photograph. "The other day you asked me how Denise was doing. This should answer your question."

Adam accepted the photo, taking in Denise hugging a tall, young man who wore a cowboy hat and held a guitar.

"She met a boy named Joe in Montrose. She says he's an incredible guitarist and that they're starting a band together."

Adam captured one more long look before returning the picture to Jesse. "Tell her 'hi' for me—ah, forget it. I just hope she's happy."

Jesse nodded. "I know you do," he said and patted him on the shoulder before leaving. To collect his thoughts, Adam stepped off stage where he marveled at the whirling swarm of music-loving faces. For so long he had dreamed of playing at Colorado Battle of the Bands. The sights and sounds and feeling were as real as he had dreamed, except for one missing ingredient: Angel. He had thought they would share this dream together—but, he considered, not all dreams come true exactly as envisioned.

Angel was probably already settled at Princeton. In his heart, he believed music could have linked his world of dreams to her world of riches. One last time, he reminisced on their love. It had been honest, natural, and unselfish—its only imperfection being that it didn't last forever.

In his daydream, Adam didn't register the footsteps behind him.

"*Music Flows*," came the voice from behind.

He shuddered. A cold sting chilled his spine. With only one person had he ever shared those words. And when he turned around, Angel filled his eyes—more radiant than he remembered her. Wearing a white silk blouse, denim jeans and boots, she pushed her hands into her front pockets. Her eyes welling with tears, Adam froze—confused if he should run to her or run away from her.

"Come to say good-bye?" he asked. Angel remained as still as a flower, and then her tears flowed. Unable to hold back, she embraced him and sobbed.

"Adam, what have I done?" She gasped and clung to him. "I can't do it. I thought I could, but I can't. I can't leave you."

Just when Adam had accepted his fate, she had returned; just when he accepted that she had walked out of his life, she stepped back in.

He had never blamed her for leaving him; he had never thought less of her. He reconciled that Angel had done what she sincerely thought was best. And no matter the depth of his pain, she was still Angel and he still loved her. "You're here," he whispered into her hair. "I can't believe you're really here."

“Adam, I am so sorry. I am so very, very sorry. I thought I had made the right decision,” she said, brushing back a tear, “but I was wrong.”

He kissed her mouth to quiet her, to renew her, to tell her he still loved her. And she kissed him as though trying to replenish the passion she had taken away.

“Could you ever take me back,” she asked, “after what I’ve done?”

He held her, admiring her pristine hair, her milk-white smile, and steady indigo eyes. “I guess I never really let you go.” Maybe, he considered, their different worlds weren’t that far apart after all.

They came together excitedly and passionately, the music whirling around them like a kaleidoscope of musical notes. They tried to recapture the lost time that each had yearned for this other soul. And there they stayed until a groaning voice separated them.

“I knew it!” Gabe cried. “I just knew something like this would happen.”

Mike and Jesse were close behind. “Am I seeing a mirage?” Jesse asked.

“No,” Mike said, pointing with his thumb to the opposite stage, “but you’re hearing one.”

Adam called to them. “How would you like to add female vocals again?”

They each welcomed back Angel as Mirage started their last song. “We have to get positioned,” Gabe stated. “You too, Angel. I’ll set up a microphone for you.” Gabe scurried away with Mike and Jesse behind.

“Wait,” Angel told Adam. “I have something for you.” She dug into a front pocket, biting her tongue. “I guess my jeans shrunk,” she said, her eyes dancing in jest. She then wrapped his fingers around a shiny object.

He opened his palm, revealing a silver ring with a Greek key pattern encircling it. Etched inside were the words ‘*Music Flows.*’

“Everyone should have a ring that means something special to them,” she said. “The Greek key pattern symbolizes ‘infinity’ – like your infinite passion for music.”

He slipped it on the middle finger of his right hand and admired its reflection. He pulled her close, shut his misty eyelids, and pressed his heartbeat to hers. He knew the moment couldn’t last forever, so he made its memory eternal.

“Would you two get moving,” came Gabe’s voice. “We have a show to perform.” He threw his arms up and they stepped over to the stage.

“I told my parents I’m taking a semester off.” Angel said, slipping into her jacket and pulling a brochure from her purse. “However, I might take a few classes while singing nights and weekends, time permitting. C.U. has a class called ‘Music Expression.’ Would you be interested in taking it with me?”

“Music Expression, huh?” Adam asked and raised his eyebrows. “College might not be that bad after all. But let’s keep this a secret from my mom, okay?”

“Why?” Angel asked. “I’m sure she’d be thrilled to find out.”

J. Drake from KFTM introduced himself to Blue Denim. As they moved into position, he wished them luck and stepped to his microphone.

“Colorado, is it hot out there?” The audience thundered in response. “Get ready because it’s going to get hotter. You’ve heard this next band on KFTM—The Rocker! They are the hottest new sound from Boulder, Colorado. Won’t you please welcome: Blue Denim!”

Quick guitar introduced piano, then drums and bass guitar set a swift tempo. The sound whirled between the red sandstone boulders on each side, millions of musical notes ricocheting through each ear, into each heart, and vibrating into the heavens. As he stepped to the microphone, Adam thought of his father, of his music, of his spirit. He felt a magic power permeate from within while from the deepest of his soul, he sang.

*Turn to a song when you’re high or low
If today’s too fast or tomorrow’s too slow
Feel the memories the melodies made
The love and dreams for which it was paid . . .*

*Let the notes calm your fears
Let the lyrics dry your tears
Wherever you go, whatever you do
Feel the Music Inside of You . . .*

*There’s a time to weep, a time to laugh
A time to mourn, and a time to dance
A time for winter, a time for spring
A time to be silent and a time to sing . . .*

*Let the notes calm your fears
Let the lyrics dry your tears
Wherever you go, whatever you do
Feel the Music Inside of You . . .*

*Feel the music, touch the sound
See each note dancing 'round and 'round
It's always with you, it'll pull you through
When you feel the music inside of you.*

*Yeah, feel the music
Feel the music
Feel the music Inside of you*

Each Blue Denim face testified to the ultimate thrill as the amphitheater screamed with pleasure. His face radiating, Adam felt his father's love, his band's love, the audience's love and again, Angel's love. But mostly, he felt his love for the glorious music.

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About the Author

Steven Richard Hoffman grew up in Northern Colorado. He has fond memories of riding his motorcycle and checking out the music scene in Boulder, Colorado. He is now a business professional with a passion for his first loves—music and writing. He has published numerous stories and articles in entertainment and jukebox hobby magazines. *Feel the Music* was awarded honorable mention for best novel by the National Writer's Association. This is his first novel.

Mr. Hoffman holds a B.S. in Marketing. He currently resides in Pleasanton, California with his wife Diane, and children Angelica, Michael, and Samantha. He can be reached at www.feelthemusicbook.com.

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