

# **The Liberation of Apartment 6-B**

by

S.C. MacDorman

ISBN: 978-0-557-09267-3  
Copyright © 2009 by S.C. MacDorman

Cover Art by Andrew White



**Recycle this book.**





## **Chapter 1**

The last thing I saw before the piano landed on my chest was the curvy outline of Gina D'Amore leaning over the balcony like a mermaid attached to the prow of a ship. It didn't kill me, or even knock me out. It's amazing what your body can withstand when there's a beautiful girl in shorts hovering over you. Sure, I nearly choked to death on my own puke while my rib cage collapsed under the weight of a baby grand. But I survived.

The hardest part was the breathing, or rather, the not breathing, though I doubt that had much to do with the piano sitting on my chest. What took my breath away was the vision of lovely Gina arching her back in that old white tee shirt. I wondered if that's what it felt like to

have a heart attack – to have the world come crashing down on you just when you thought you’d died and gone to heaven. For all I knew I was having a heart attack. It didn’t seem so far fetched. All the signs were there. The pressure on my chest. The nausea. Light-headedness. Racing heart. Not to mention the sweat pouring off me.

Suddenly I was burning up. I felt like that Hansel kid who got shoved in the oven and set to broil. Though it sure didn’t smell like the inside of an oven down there, unless you’re talking about the oven in Stella Mertz’s kitchen. We never smelled anything coming from her place that didn’t remind us of raw sewage. In fact, one of the more common dares back then had to do with sampling something made by Mrs. Mertz.

“Dare you to try one of her meatballs.”

“Are you kidding? I’d rather eat dog shit. Come to think of it, that’s probably what they’re made of.”

“Yeah, okay then, truth. If you could choose one other person to be stranded on a desert island with, who would it be?”

Like we all didn’t know the answer to that one. With her piercing brown eyes and perfect seventeen-

year-old body, Gina D'Amore was the sole inspiration for our most guarded teenage fantasies. The fact that she just happened to step onto her balcony only moments after my dive into the dumpster was nothing short of a miracle. I couldn't have planned it better if I'd tried. And believe me, I'd tried.

Not that I was some sort of dumpster voyeur or anything. I wasn't that sick. Still I have to admit, I'd stumbled into a pretty sweet set-up for a fourteen-year-old boy, that is, if you don't count the part about being knee-deep in stinking garbage. And really, it was a small price to pay for a free shot of Gina. Even after all these years, I can still remember the cheap thrill it stirred inside me being able to watch her every move without her knowing about it.

Unfortunately, things got a little complicated when the trash started flying in. It was tricky keeping her in my sights as I dodged the leaking sack of coffee grounds, which missed my head by mere inches. I wasn't so lucky when the second bag sailed in. It knocked me flat on my ass, landing me between a bucket of Pappy's Chicken

bones and a slice of anchovy pizza. Thank God dinner was still hours away.

The good news was, I could still see Gina, albeit somewhat crookedly. I held my gaze even as the third and fourth bags dropped. I was still holding strong when the sixth and seventh bags fell, although by that time I was up to my neck in it, like one of those guys in the old jungle movies who steps in quicksand and suddenly gets swallowed up. The end was near, I could feel it. Pretty soon all I'd be able to see would be the bottom of a bulgy white trash bag stuffed with last night's broccoli and a week's worth of used kitty litter.

It was the piano that finally sank me.

I lost my breath just as Gina was wiped from my field of vision. Then the temperature spiked about a hundred degrees and something lurched inside my stomach. Despite not being able to breathe, I clamped my lips together, trying to hold off the burning spurts of acid corn flakes rising in my throat. Choking to death on my own breakfast was not what I'd had in mind when I agreed to help Tham recover the equipment from the

dumpster that morning. It was supposed to have been a quick grab-and-go. “No problem,” he’d said.

Yeah, right.

Was I surprised to find myself suffocating under a stack of splitting Hefty bags, sucking up juicy molecules of cat turds and soggy broccoli? Not really. Any scheme involving Tham and Charlie was always inherently risky. I told myself not to panic, even though it was hard to remain calm lying there breathing in toxic vegetable effluvium.

It might have comforted me to know that Gina was as trapped as I was, but that information didn’t come out until later. Not that her situation was exactly the same as mine. It wasn’t like she was pinned under the weight of a thousand sagging garbage bags with a piano teetering on top. As far as I knew, she was free to drag her tanned bare feet across the soft plush piles of woolen carpet as she flitted from room to room. Not that I ever saw her do that, but she could have.

Either way, she definitely wasn’t confined inside a reeking bin of rusted metal caked in fossilized ketchup and dried beer. No, the freshly painted walls of Gina’s

prison enveloped her in soft warm hues of green and rose. And while I lay smothering in my cocoon of emptied cat boxes and rotting leftovers, Gina was suffocating on such sweet scents as lavender potpourri, gingerbread tea lights and lemon-grass soap.

Compared to my predicament, her plight seemed like a vacation in paradise. But I'm pretty sure it stank just the same. Anyway, I'd be free in less than ten minutes. It took us more than half the summer to liberate Gina D'Amore, which to her must have felt like a lifetime.

## Chapter 2

“Alec?”

“About time.”

“You see this?”

“Do you think I can see anything from down here?  
Get this crap off me, would you?”

“Yeah, yeah. Hold on.”

I held on. And on. The thing about Tham was, he never worried much about anything. Best friend’s trapped under a mountain of garbage at the bottom of a dumpster? No big deal. Not like I was going anywhere.

While I lay there concentrating on the tingling numbness spreading across my shoulder like spilled paint, Tham was making a play for the junked piano. As it turned out, it wasn’t a baby grand. It just felt like one

on my chest. What it was, was an old keyboard with a couple of sticky keys.

Even though it wasn't a piano, there was still no way for Tham to fish it out without actually getting into the dumpster, which would have been way too much bother for him. Even if he'd used that stupid grabbing stick with the claw on it, he'd have never been able to pull it out from up there on the wall.

Did I mention it weighed about as much as a baby grand?

What Tham did eventually manage to do was knock the keyboard-that-felt-like-a-piano off the top of the pile. It landed on a couple of pizza boxes two inches from my left ear.

"Watch what you're doing up there."

"Oops."

"Hey, a keyboard. I knew it was something like that. You think I'm psychic?"

"You got something green on your face." Tham's giant round head hovered over me like a moon at the edge of the dumpster. He was flashing that idiotic grin of his. Tham's teeth were too big for his face, which is

saying something when you consider how big his face was. But his face was big and round like the moon, whereas the teeth were big and rectangular. It struck me just then as I glanced up at him, then back at the keyboard, that his smile looked like a mouth full of piano keys. Just the white ones.

“Who would throw away a keyboard?” I said, as the numbness that was traveling down my arm made its way into my fingertips. Tham just stood there grinning. Of course, he knew exactly who would throw one away. After all, he was up on the wall standing guard when the trash brigade arrived to unload it. Some guard.

“I don’t mean to sound pushy, but do you think you might be ready to come down and help me out here?”

“No way. It stink worse than elephant dung in there. Beside...” He turned the stick toward me and started making circles in the air like it was some sort of magic wand. “You lose fair and square. Rock, scissor, paper. Remember?”

I remembered.

“Here.” He leaned over with his grabbing stick and snatched the bag of Broccoli-Cat Shit Casserole off my shoulder.

“Did I ever tell you how lame you are?”

Tham giggled. “Yes.”

I spit some residual vomit out of the side of my mouth and started shoving the other bags to the side, taking care not to cover up the keyboard. That was going to be my reward for going through with this screwy idea of his.

“Find it?” he said.

“Really, Tham, I’m all right. But thank you for asking.” I didn’t have to look up to know he was still flashing that piano-key grin of his. I picked up the leaking sack of coffee grounds and stacked it in the corner of the bin next to the sack of used kitty litter. Why do people have to throw away such gross stuff?

“According to my dad, it should be right on top.”

“According to my dad, it should be right on top,” I mimicked him. “In case you hadn’t noticed, there’s about twenty new bags of garbage in here. I’m guessing that’s what’s on top right now.”

“Actually, only eight new bag,” said Tham. “Plus keyboard. No extra charge.” He giggled again.

“Whatever.” I tossed another sack of garbage into the corner. “Who waits until they have eight bags before they take out the trash?”

Tham giggled louder than before. It was beginning to get on my nerves.

“No wait,” I said. “Let me guess. 8-C.”

“Who else?”

Everyone knew that the family in 8-C was the filthiest tenant in the Royal Oaks apartments, and that included Peg-Leg Pete on the fourth floor who was rumored to keep a dead dog in his bedroom. Knowing the keyboard came out of 8-C definitely lessened its appeal, but I’d already made up my mind to have it.

I moved a couple more bags and trudged over the moguls of reeking plastic to the other side of the dumpster. Just when I was almost to the corner, my foot kicked something solid. I glanced down to see what looked like a periscope sticking out from a stack of old newspapers.

“Well what do you know?” I moved the papers and there it was, sitting on top of a bunch of Halloween costumes stuffed inside a brown grocery bag. I reached down and lifted it out. “Got it!”

“Let see,” said Tham.

I held it over my head with both hands like a barbell. Then I did a little victory jig on top of the coffee grounds. A fly flew up my nose.

“What that other junk in there?” He was pointing at the grocery bag.

“Just a bunch of old costumes.” I grabbed something made of striped felt from the top of the bag. It was one of those goofy Cat-in-the-Hat hats. I put it on my head. “See?”

“Cat-in-the-Hat!” Tham stuffed the trash claw into his back pocket and reached out his hand. “Bring it here. Bring whole bag.”

“Anything else your highness?” I returned the fog machine to the bag and carried it to Tham.

“Keyboard.”

“No way.”

“Why not?”

“It’s mine.”

“You don’t play keyboard.”

“So. Neither do you.”

Tham shrugged. “Whatever. Gimmme Cat-in-Hat.” He was leaning way over the side, wiggling his long, grubby fingers at me. It was tempting to reach up and pull him in, but a couple more flies buzzed my face just as a chicken bone cracked under my foot, and I lost any desire I might have had to fool around. I just wanted to get the hell out of there.

“Here.” I handed up the grocery bag.

First he snatched the hat off my head, then he lifted the sack out of my hands. “Sweet.”

While Tham was examining his booty, I retrieved the keyboard and positioned it against the side of the dumpster so I could haul it up as I pulled myself out. Then I climbed upon a year’s worth of algebraic equations and United States history unloaded by some burned out kid on the last day of school and did a quick survey of the apartment balconies.

On the second floor, Stella Mertz was sitting beside her dead palm tree, sipping from a mug of spiked black

coffee while she scanned her daily paper. A couple doors down, Naked Herb was standing in his living room pressed up against the sliding glass door as if trying to gauge the weather before getting dressed. Meanwhile, Gay Tony was adjusting his chaise lounge two floors up, aligning his own nearly naked body with the direction of the sun's morning rays.

The rest of the balconies were disappointingly quiet, other than a glass door sliding open on the eighth floor just long enough for Señora Rodriguez to cast out her arm and scatter a napkin full of stale tortilla crumbs for a waiting pigeon. After eating its fill, the bird glided down to the sixth story, where it perched on the twisted metal railing barring the vacant balcony of apartment 6-B. Gina's place.

Smart bird.

I jumped up and grabbed the rim of the dumpster. As I was swinging my leg over the side, Tham said, "You got something stuck to your butt."

I looked over my aching shoulder. A chicken bone was clinging to the back of my shorts. I reached down and peeled it off. When I looked up, Tham was gone.

## Chapter 3

I decided to stash the keyboard at home before heading upstairs to Charlie's, where the heavy scent of bacon grease cleared my nostrils of any lingering broccoli-cat shit molecules. Tham was already wedged into the folds of the Little's living room couch, pretending to be sleeping with that stupid Cat-in-the-Hat hat drooping over his big moon face. The fog machine was sitting on top of an old *House Beautiful* magazine lying on the coffee table, six inches from Tham's clunky feet.

*House Beautiful* was the last thing you'd associate with the Little's apartment, unless you counted Charlie and his younger sister, Jo-Jo. Their faces were so angelic they belonged in a stained glass window. As for the rest

of the place, let's just say we never had to worry about breaking any Tiffany lamps when we tossed the ball around inside. Not that the place was gross or anything. Nothing like apartment 8-C. It was just a comfortable, no frills kind of place, a lot like the kids who hung out there.

Charlie wheeled across the floor on his skateboard, greeting me at the door wearing a torn sombrero he'd gleaned from the salvaged grocery bag.

"Where's the keyboard?" he asked.

I shrugged. "My place."

"Can I have it?"

"No."

"But you can't play it."

Here we go again. Unlike me, Charlie was a naturally gifted musician. Officially, he was our drummer, but that was more a matter of circumstance than choice. The drums were something he'd inherited from an older cousin, so the drums were what he played. But that didn't mean he couldn't play other instruments just as well. He could, boy, and how.

A year ago we found an old harmonica lying on a heap at the top of the dumpster. My guess is it belonged to Uncle Clarence. Now I'm not saying anything against the old guy – no way – but I wouldn't have touched it with a ten-foot pole. It was in the dumpster, for God's sake. But Charlie snatched it right up. He rubbed the mouthpiece across his jeans a couple times and, just like that, began to play.

While it was an incredibly gross thing to do, Charlie's playing was unbelievable. He sounded just like Bob Dylan. And the thing was, he'd never touched a harmonica before that afternoon. It totally blew us away. Even Tham's eyes grew round at the spectacle of it. I think both of us had always thought of Charlie as just another hyperactive kid who liked to bang on things. Then, *WHAM!* Suddenly he's this musical boy genius.

Not that we didn't already think of Charlie as special. We did, just not in that way. Even though he was a couple years younger than Tham and me, Charlie had this unshakable confidence that made him seem much older. Sometimes it scared me how gutsy he was. Compared to him, Tham and I were a couple of total

wusses, which is ironic when you consider that Tham grew up in Thailand where there are still tigers and monsoons and political uprisings and stuff like that. I guess we had just always figured Charlie's self-reliance came from being a latch key kid for so long.

He'd been fending for himself and Jo-Jo for over five years while Tham and I were still fumbling our way through the narrow halls of our crummy little middle school. While we were still trying to figure out where our classes were, Charlie was buzzing all over the city unchaperoned.

The fact of the matter was, kids like Charlie Little grew up faster than the rest of us. They knew about life's secrets way before we did, like how to get gum out of your sister's hair with peanut butter, or how to spot a fake Rolex by the way the second hand ticks. And when they encountered something they weren't familiar with, they picked it up fast. Exactly why I was keeping the keyboard away from him.

"I was thinking of giving it to my Dad," was what I told him, which wasn't exactly a lie. My family had to get rid of a lot of stuff when we moved from our house in

the suburbs to the cozy first floor suite in the Royal Oaks, and Dad's piano was one of them. The keyboard would make a great Father's Day gift. He'd probably be so touched by it, he'd offer to teach me how to play it. At least, that's what I was counting on.

Charlie didn't argue with me. He was used to getting no for an answer. Not because the Littles were hard-hearted or anything. They simply lacked the means to say yes.

He rolled past me to the coffee table, swapping the skateboard for the fog machine. I met him in the kitchen where Jo-Jo was sitting at the counter coloring pictures of farm animals, creatures she'd never laid eyes on in her life and probably never would. Despite all they knew about the world, the Little kids had never set foot outside the city. They'd never even been to the suburbs. What would be the point?

For the majority of tenants, the Royal Oaks was a temporary lodging, a rest stop between real homes. Some people took longer to regroup than others, but most everyone lived there with the intention of leaving someday. Tham would be gone by Christmas, when he

and his father went off to the big polo tournament in Nepal. They'd barely been there a year.

My family moved in a few months before Tham, in the spring of '97 when Dad decided to go back to school. When he finished, we'd be gone too. In the meantime, I told myself this was just some weird little detour in our lives, like stopping off for a visit at some kitschy roadside attraction on your way to your real destination.

But for Charlie and his sister, this was the end of the road. His parents had been living in apartment 2-C since the age of disco, long before Charlie was born. Only one other person had been there longer. That was Mr. Sable in apartment 7-D. We called him The Shadow because no one ever saw him. I wasn't even sure if he really existed.

"I can't believe no one else saw this," said Charlie, as he turned on the tap to fill the fog machine. "This is going to be so awesome."

Poor Charlie. He was never going to get out of that place. I couldn't understand how he could always be so upbeat when there didn't seem to be anything special for him to look forward to in life. What I didn't realize until

much later was that Charlie Little had already figured out the secret to eternal happiness. He lived in the moment.

“All right you guys,” he said. “Here’ goes.”

## Chapter 4

“Fire! Oh my God! We going to fry. FYYY-ERRR!” Tham jumped off the couch and crashed out the door. He was still holding that stupid hat onto his head as he ran screaming into the parking lot.

“Unplug it.” I shot a quick glance at Jo-Jo to make sure she was okay. The fact that her entire body was enveloped in fog didn’t faze her in the least. She simply puffed out her tiny cheeks like a chipmunk and blew the swirling gray mist out of her face. Then she held up her drawing to admire it.

“I did unplug it,” said Charlie. “There must be a short somewhere.”

That would explain why it was in the dumpster.

While Charlie continued to fiddle with the fog machine, I walked across the room and pushed open the sliding glass door to air the place out. A minute passed. Maybe two. The fog drifted next door and settled over Stella Mertz, who was still lounging on her balcony flipping through the paper.

Apparently, it became increasingly difficult for her to make out the paper's fine print, though to tell the truth, her blurred vision probably had as much to do with the so-called coffee balanced in her lap as it had the soupy gray cloud swallowing her. Whatever the reason, she became agitated enough to make a blind leap from her plastic Adirondack chair, and in the process, spilled the remains of her morning elixir down the front of her frock. The coffee shock sent her knocking about the balcony like a bull, causing her to displace the decorative dead palm propped in the corner. The tree tipped over the balcony railing, doing several flips through the air before coming to rest in the tot-lot sandbox.

Meanwhile, Stella began to feel her way through the fog to her own sliding glass door. It was about that point that she detected the unmistakable scent of bacon grease

and deduced Charlie had set the kitchen on fire. To this she reacted in exactly the way we'd come to expect from a grown-up under such circumstances. She became hysterical.

We froze as she pounded on Charlie's front door. I guess we hoped that if we ignored her, she'd go away. To our amazement, she did. To be honest, it was a little disconcerting to see how lame an effort she made to save us. I mean, didn't she care if three innocent kids were burning up inside the apartment next door? Would it have been too much trouble to wait more than three seconds before leaving us there to die?

If it was an immediate response she wanted, she got it at the next apartment down the hall. Before she could get the word "Fire!" out of her mouth, Naked Herb flung open his door and dashed past her, wearing nothing but the skin he was born in.

After that, things went a little crazy.

I don't know if it was because people were naturally curious about a fat naked man bouncing up and down between a couple of Japanese sedans, or because Mrs. Mertz had gone and pulled the fire alarm, but within two

minutes half the building was outside buzzing around the parking lot. The other half ran out when the fire department showed up. Shortly after that, Naked Herb was sent back inside to get a towel.

The three of us waited for Mrs. Mertz to roust the last couple of tenants on the floor before quietly making our own exit. Slipping out the door behind Officer Grimm and his creepy goth daughter, Crystal, we stealthily made our way to the back of the parking lot to join Tham. He was easy to spot among the crowd, standing up there on that crumbling concrete wall behind the dumpster wearing that...hat. He was grinning and waving at us like some cagey politician riding a float in a holiday parade.

“Hey muchacho!” He was speaking to Charlie, who was still wearing the torn sombrero, only now it was dangling down his back from a cord around his neck.

“That come with fog machine too?” asked Mr. Kantawong.

It didn’t surprise me to see Tham’s dad up there next to him. Like the rest of the tenants of the Royal Oaks, I was accustomed to seeing Mr. Kantawong on the wall.

Ordinarily he'd have that stick with him, the one with the claw at the end designed for plucking useful detritus from the dumpster. Though his purpose up there wasn't dumpster diving. Mr. Kantawong was a man of much bigger ambition, and I mean that literally. He had his sights on winning the world polo championship. The world *elephant* polo championship, that is. He trained for it every morning on the wall. Weird, I know, but also kind of cool.

Charlie helped Jo-Jo up onto the wall, then bounded up after her like a squirrel, in one effortless leap. I had to walk a few yards down to where the drainpipe stuck out to get a step up.

I took my place beside Charlie and Tham to survey the unlikely assembly of gypsies, tramps and thieves living under that leaky eight-story roof. None of us came out and said it, but I think we all felt a twinge of power to witness the chaos we had unleashed on our little community.

*Where's Kitty? Did she get out?*

*If I don't get back upstairs and reapply my lotion soon, I'm going to burn.*

*Who's going to burn? Didn't they hear the fire alarm?*

*Did you turn off the stove, Esther?*

*Kitty's probably still under the bed.*

*I never touched the stove.*

*Anybody seen my dog?*

*Where did all these pigeons come from?*

*Ay caramba! Les palomas!*

*Do you know how the fire started?*

*I'm not sure, Colonel. Why don't you hum a few bars for me.*

*How 'bout this, Uncle Clarence?*

That's when tiny Janet Pendleton began tap dancing in the bed of Officer Grimm's rusted pick-up truck. Uncle Clarence smiled. Then he pulled out his harmonica and launched into a jazzy rendition of *Blowin' in the Wind*, probably inspired by the ribbon of smoke streaming out of Charlie's backdoor.

It was about that time that Gina D'Amore emerged from the stairwell. She was breathtaking in her ripped cut-offs and old white tee shirt. Her movements were graceful and light, almost as if she were floating across the parking lot. And the way the sunlight caught her long blonde hair – I swear, I thought she'd come down straight from heaven.

But when I saw her tight-faced stepmother stalk out after her, I realized that apartment 6-B was a long way from paradise. Gina's back went rigid as the second Mrs. D'Amore prodded her along like a circus animal toward an empty patch of pavement between stodgy old Colonel Nosehair and that deadbeat policeman, Ed Grimm. You could sense the mutual resentment all the way across the parking lot. When they stopped, Gina took a defiant step backwards to put some distance between herself and her dad's new wife. I couldn't blame her. Just watching the way that woman strutted across the blacktop made the hairs on the back of my neck stand up.

Not that any of us gave a rip about the second Mrs. D'Amore. Our eyes were glued to Gina. Like hungry vultures, we stood there studying her every move. The

tiniest thing she did made us go crazy. The way she threw back her shoulders and eased her fingers into the tight back pockets of her shorts. The way she arched her back and shook out her hair. The way she swayed ever so slightly back and forth as she stared hazily into the crowd. It was perfectly maddening.

But what infatuated us most about the girl from apartment 6-B wasn't her tight fitting shorts or her flowing blonde hair or even the gentle sway of her hips. What made Gina D'Amore so painfully irresistible was the way she completely ignored us, as if we weren't even there.

Still, in silent hope we waited for her lazy gaze to find us. When it did, well who knows what we would do. We were all so hopelessly in love with her, we were too dumbstruck to think.

It was Jo-Jo who finally caught her attention. Those cute puppy dog eyes looking down from the wall sparked a hint of a smile in Gina, if only for an instant. After that, she resumed her posture of causal indifference.

"She looks unhappy," I finally said.

“She grounded,” said Tham. “Not allowed out of apartment.”

“Really?”

“I telling the truth.”

Wow. Gina D’Amore was on restriction. It was hard to comprehend. I wasn’t sure how I felt about it. I mean, I felt sorry for her and all, but at the same time, a twisted voice inside my head was saying, *If she can’t go out, no one can get to her.* I began to see her as one of those helpless fairy tale princesses who gets locked in a tower.

Naturally, there was more to that fantasy, but I wasn’t sure I was ready to take on the role of Prince Charming. Still, it occurred to me that we had managed to do something rather gallant that day. In a way, we had freed her from her prison. For ten minutes, anyway.

Then the firemen told us everything was okay, we could go back inside.

And Princess Gina was once again banished to the tower.

## Chapter 5

Charlie's place was still kind of foggy when the firemen left, so we figured it was as good a time as any for a jam session in the clubhouse. I ran to my apartment to get my guitar. It had a permanent spot in the dining room next to the windowsill where I kept my PEZ collection. I smiled inside every time I walked by.

Together those two things, my Fender guitar and my line-up of PEZ, represented all that was good in the world. The only thing that could have made it more perfect would have been for Gina D'Amore to suddenly materialize at the dining room table. Not that I ever really expected anything like that to happen. Guys like me learned to content themselves with things like plastic candy holders topped with Bugs Bunny heads. Still.

I looked at the keyboard sitting on the table where I'd left it. Nah, I thought, not yet. I took it to my room and stuffed it under my bed. Then I picked up my guitar and amp and headed over to the clubhouse.

Charlie and Jo-Jo were already there. The drums were still set up on the dance floor, right where Charlie had left them. He was supposed to lock them up in the storage room when he was done, but Charlie was never really done. That's how it is when you live in the moment.

Tham straggled in with his bass and amp about fifteen minutes later. By the time he got there, Charlie and I were locked into a game of *Zelda* on the TV screen. Looking back, it wasn't a bad set-up we had.

We had a hard time getting down to practicing. I'd say it was because the excitement earlier had us all jazzed up, but truthfully, it always took us a while to get around to playing. It's one thing to call yourselves a band. It's another thing to actually be one.

It was just so easy to get distracted doing other stuff. Playing video games, watching TV. Talking about Gina.

“So how do you know she’s grounded?” I asked Tham.

“I hear.”

“What do you mean, you hear?”

“Through ceiling.” He wriggled his eyebrows up and down. What a goof.

“Oh sure.”

“Really,” said Tham.

“Sometimes I hear Janet Pendleton tap dancing,” said Charlie. Jo-Jo nodded to affirm this.

Tham grinned. “You see?”

I supposed it was possible. On rare occasions I’d heard Officer Grimm and his goth daughter through the ceiling, though I never heard them talking. Just the TV. Cop shows mostly.

Tham admitted that he couldn’t really hear all that much either. Only when there was shouting. “Or vacuum,” he said.

“So what were they shouting about?” I asked.

“Not exactly sure.”

“Then how do you know she’s on restriction?”

Tham tapped his finger to the side of his big moon head. “I know.” He flashed that dopey square-tooth grin.

“Wonder what she did?” said Charlie.

Tham plopped down on the couch next to him. “She lose her mother’s bracelet.” He picked up the remote control and switched off our video game to watch TV.

“Hey,” said Charlie.

“Relax,” said Tham. “I put it back. One sec.”

It wasn’t that Tham’s English was so bad. It’s just that the word “relax” was not part of Charlie Little’s vocabulary.

“See, it’s just the news,” said Charlie. “Put it back on video.” He made a lunge for the remote. Not an angry lunge. Charlie was just hyper. But he was also small. It was easy for Tham to keep it away from him by holding it over his head.

For the hell of it, I jumped on top of both of them. I couldn’t resist. Then we all fell off the couch in one big heap and began to wrestle. There was no longer any purpose in what anyone was fighting about.

I could smell the distinct coconut-curry mixture of Thai cooking on Tham's breath. That's what had taken him fifteen minutes to get down there.

Jo-Jo stepped over us and grabbed the remote.

"Look," she said. "It's Herb."

I wasn't sure the others heard her. I, however, was at the bottom of the dog pile and alert to anything that would help me get out from under.

"She's right. Check it out."

Charlie eased up. Tham continued to lay sprawled across my back like a dead animal.

"Oh my God. It's Naked Herb." Charlie reached up and tapped Jo-Jo on the hand. Without a second thought, she relinquished the coveted remote. I never saw such a bond between two people. Not even my parents had it. Even though Charlie swooned over Gina right along with Tham and me, deep down we knew his heart belonged to Jo-Jo.

He cranked up the volume on the TV.

"I'm here with NASA spokesman Herbert O'Malley..."

I wriggled out from under Tham and sat against the couch. “Herb’s talking to that the doofy bald reporter from channel eight. What’s he saying?”

“He saying, nice hair, baby.” The *baby* thing was Tham’s attempt to imitate Austin Powers, a recently acquired idiosyncrasy.

The bald guy on TV was doing a report on some NASA footage of Neil Armstrong’s famous moonwalk, which apparently had been misplaced. It was hard to believe a government agency would actually lose a film documenting one of the most historic events of the twentieth century. And to think poor Gina had been grounded just for losing a stupid bracelet.

Herb was trying to sound reassuring, but we weren’t convinced, though we did agree he looked pretty good up there next to Baldy, particularly now that he was dressed. As soon as Herb’s interview was over, a shampoo commercial came on.

“That same shampoo Gina use,” said Tham.

“Like you know,” said Charlie.

“You can’t smell shampoo through the walls,” I said.  
“It’s not the same as Mrs. Mertz cooking.”

“I smell her,” said Tham. “She smell nice, like strawberry. Not like Alec, who smell like garbage. P.U.” He giggled and held his nose.

I jumped on him and we were at it again, wrestling around on the floor. That was pretty much the way it went during most of our band practices, which might explain why it took so long for us to get a gig.

## **Chapter 6**

We were finally getting down to some real practice when Dad popped in. He told us that a party had been booked there for the night and we would have to pack it up. The host of the party was Colonel Nosehair from apartment 4-B. The Colonel lived directly below Tham. He was sandwiched between Gay Tony and Peg-Leg Pete, neither of whom would receive an invitation to his party.

We'd nicknamed him Colonel Nosehair one day after he showed up at Tham's door to complain about our music. He was such a freak about noise. Any time Tham so much as plucked a note on his bass, the Colonel would march up the stairs – never used the elevator – and rap on the door. Exactly three times. Pop pop pop. If Tham

didn't answer right away, he would rap louder. POP POP POP. Always three times.

Tham liked to make him wait through at least six pops before he'd open the door. That got the Colonel's nostrils good and flaring like a bull's by the time they were standing face to face.

It was hard to keep from cracking up when the Colonel was chewing out Tham with those hairy nostrils flapping open and shut. I always wondered if it tickled when they did that. We couldn't imagine that guy hosting a party.

In our clubhouse, no less.

"What's he doing for music?" I asked.

Dad said he didn't know.

Tham grinned. "He no like music."

"It's not a party without music," I said. "Maybe we could play for him."

"It'd be our first gig," said Charlie. He banged a symbol.

Dad put his hands in his pockets and looked us over. He was at least thinking about it. "Jee Alec, I'm not sure..."

“We wouldn’t charge anything.”

Charlie balked. “What?”

Finally Dad said, “Okay, let’s hear you.”

I nodded to Tham and Charlie like I was some kind of rock star. “Ready?” I said, and we launched into a classic Dylan song called Positively Fourth Street. There was a lot more contemporary stuff in our repertoire, but that just happened to be the song we were working on when Dad showed up. Anyway, Dylan was a favorite of Dad’s, and I figured the nostalgia factor couldn’t hurt.

The thing was, we weren’t what you would call a great band. We weren’t even a good band. When you got right down to it, we stunk. But on that day we sounded particularly lousy, even for us. It wasn’t our playing really. Charlie’s drumming was always tight, and Tham and I were at least hitting the right notes for a change. What made it so uniquely God-awful that day – and really, I’m not trying to be critical here – was Tham’s singing.

None of us had much of a voice to speak of. But when Tham sang with his stilted English, it was hard to keep from laughing. Like watching Colonel Nosehair’s

flaring nostrils. Sometimes it wasn't all that noticeable. The singing, not the nostrils. But during an edgy folk tune like Positively Fourth Street, well just imagine these lyrics sung by a clown with a Bangkok accent:

*You got a lotta nerve,  
To say you are my friend.  
When I was down,  
You just stood there grinning...*

If it hadn't been so sad, it would have been hilarious.

When we were done, Dad just looked at the floor. "It's kind of short notice," he said. "Maybe next time. But hey, you guys are sounding great."

I guess the nostalgia factor only goes so far.

We were helping Charlie pack up his drums when he looked up and said, "You know what would make that song better?"

The answer was pretty obvious, but I didn't say anything except, "What Charlie?"

"Some keyboard."

"Yeah," said Tham.

Not that again.

“You should have played some Counting Crows,” said Jo-Jo. “I like that song about hanging around.”

I smiled at her. Was she a cool eight-year-old, or what?

I dragged half the drum set into the storage closet and was gathering up my own stuff when who should walk in but the Colonel himself. None of us were sure what to say to him. We weren’t exactly on great terms with the guy. As it turned out, it didn’t really matter because he basically ignored us. He just started moving chairs around like he owned the place. It was such an invasion of our space. Charlie looked especially tense.

“Come on,” I said, picking up my guitar and amp. “Let’s get out of here.” Tham and I prodded Charlie toward the exit, which got me thinking about the way Mrs. D’Amore had prodded Gina across the parking lot. So I backed off halfway through the door.

It was precisely at that moment that I spotted her.

We spotted her.

She was gliding down the hall, swaying ever so slightly in rhythm with the movement of those long,

tanned legs – legs that were carrying her straight toward us. It was nothing short of a miracle. Gina D’Amore, three times in the same day.

I felt another heart attack coming on. I couldn’t move. None of us could. We just stood there blocking the doorway, like a family of deer caught in the headlights of a sleek new Porsche.

It was Nosehair who finally shoved us aside. And I mean shoved us, without so much as an “Excuse me boys.” Like we were nothing but an old set of dining room furniture. Then he stepped up and ushered her past us, with his hand lightly pushing her elbow, just the way Mrs. D’Amore had done it. I felt the hairs on my neck prick up again. I wanted to slug him.

The Colonel waited until he’d prodded her deep into the room before he spoke to her. He obviously didn’t want us to hear him. Naturally, we strained to listen.

“Your mother says you’re interested in earning a little money.”

“My mother’s dead,” said Gina dryly.

## **Chapter 7**

“It definitely same shampoo,” said Tham when we were safely out of earshot.

Charlie nodded. “Tham’s right. It did smell like strawberries.”

I shrugged and started for the stairs. I just assumed we were heading back to Charlie’s. The fog would surely be gone, and frankly, I was starving. Since Charlie was the resident nanny among us, it seemed only logical to let him fix us lunch.

I had just pushed open the door to the stairwell when the sound of screeching car tires caused us all to turn and look outside. We instantly recognized the rusted blue Dodge. It belonged to a guy who lived a couple blocks

away in this crummy place called the Mayfair Commons. His name was Todd Baxter. We hated him.

Todd was this surly high school drop-out who thought he was God's gift to the world. You could just see it by the way he snapped his gum. His chewing was stiff and exaggerated, the way a marionette might open and shut its mouth. Come to think of it, he had about as much brains as a wooden puppet.

If he were a puppet, he would have probably been some swinish animal, like a wild boar. Blocky head, short coarse hair. He was disgusting. Nobody I knew could stand the creep. Except, that is, for one person.

As unbelievable as it sounds, Todd Baxter was Gina D'Amore's steady boyfriend. It made me want to puke every time I thought about it. I mean, I could live with the fact that she would never be mine, but why in God's name did she have to date Todd? What could she possibly see in that guy?

Through the glass door of the clubhouse we could see Gina blowing off the Colonel to check out the scene outside. Todd was jumping out of his car. We watched him run four or five paces to the dumpster and toss

something inside. Then he ran back to his car and burned rubber getting out of there.

Right after that, a couple of sirens roared by.

“Wonder what that’s about?” I said.

Charlie was already out the door and halfway to the dumpster. “Let’s go see what he threw away. I bet it’s something illegal.”

As much as I didn’t want to go near that dumpster again for the rest of my life, I put down my equipment and fell in behind Charlie. I did, however, let him beat me up there. Charlie easily scaled the wall as he’d done earlier that day, and in one exhilarating leap, sailed into the bin. It was pure poetry.

Charlie Little never stopped to think about things like toxic casseroles or cracking chicken bones. That’s why we always turned to him when there was anything objectionable that needed to be done. The only reason he hadn’t helped recover the fog machine earlier that day was because he was fixing breakfast for Jo-Jo when we came to get him.

Jo-Jo always came first. Period. Which is how I got suckered into a game of rock, paper, scissors and sealed

my fate. Charlie would have never let himself get buried under 8-C's stinking garbage. He'd have been focused and quick like he always was. One day he would make a great soldier, if he didn't get himself killed first.

Now Charlie had completely disappeared inside the dumpster. My stomach began to roll over just thinking about what was inside that thing. I could almost taste the bile rising in my throat again. But before I could get worked up enough to puke, Charlie called to us.

"It's a McDonalds bag. I bet there's drugs in it."

"Let see," said Tham. Typical.

"Come on out of there, Charlie."

Charlie's head popped into view like a gopher from a hole. Seconds later, he threw his legs over the side and landed beside us on the pavement. Sure enough, he was holding a McDonald's bag.

"So what's inside?" I asked.

Charlie ripped it open and smirked. "French fries," he said. "And half a cheeseburger." He popped a fry into his mouth. "Want some?"

I shook my head. Suddenly I'd lost my appetite.

He called to Jo-Jo. "Hey Jo, want a fry?"

It was at that point that we realized we'd left Charlie's sister asleep on the clubhouse couch.

## Chapter 8

Charlie tossed the bag back into the bin and sprinted toward the building.

“Miss D’Amore has taken your sister home,” Nosehair was saying by the time Tham and I finally caught up.

As the Colonel walked away, I tapped Charlie on the shoulder. “Oh my God. Gina D’Amore is at your place, Charlie. Do you know how huge this is?”

Tham beamed an entire octave of teeth at us. “What we waiting for?”

Charlie blinked, then was gone like a shot. Tham and I lugged our equipment up the stairs behind him. When we got to the Little’s place, we found a note on the door.

*Took Jo-Jo to 6-B.*

Charlie was standing there staring at it. I couldn't tell if he was thinking about the fact that Gina had basically beckoned him to her apartment, or that someone other than he was looking after Jo-Jo. I think the whole thing caught him a little off-guard.

I put down my stuff and reached for the note, but Charlie's quick hands beat me to it.

Damn.

I told myself it wasn't any big deal. Hell, the note wasn't even signed. In ten years, none of us would even remember who wrote it.

Yeah, right. Who was I kidding?

Charlie slipped the note into his pants pocket and headed back to the stairwell. Tham and I dumped our stuff at Charlie's and ran to catch up. Gina's place was four floors up, which normally would have meant we'd use the elevator. But who could wait for that?

We were like three little Colonel Nosehairs charging up those steps. Charlie even knocked three times when

we got there, though it wasn't like those militant pops of the Colonel's. Even though he was anxious, Charlie tried not to let it show.

But the suspense was too much for Tham. He began to giggle.

"Shut up," I whispered.

It only made him giggle louder.

I could feel my face flush bright, hot red as footsteps approached the door. I held my breath.

Jo-Jo answered with a quiet, "Hey." Then she slipped out into the hall and closed the door behind her. We idled there for a moment just staring at her like she was an alien from another planet. Then we hung our heads and dragged ourselves off to the elevator.

I allowed myself a minute to get over the letdown of not getting to live out my fantasy, the one where Gina D'Amore steps out, sweeps me up in her arms and declares her undying love for me. Then I asked Jo-Jo if she was able to clarify the shampoo question.

She rolled her eyes.

Jo-Jo was the only one among us who really understood the art of cool.

“Did you at least find out if she was on restriction?”

“Mostly we talked about animals.”

“So you don’t know anything about the lost bracelet?”

Jo-Jo frowned.

Charlie changed the subject. “You hungry, Jo?”

My own mouth was beginning to water. “I really wish I knew what the deal was with her bracelet?”

“What difference it make?”

“Well...” Tham had a point. What difference would it make? Probably none. Except that this idea had started brewing inside my head and I just couldn’t help myself. “I was just kind of thinking that, you know, maybe...we could...help her. You know, find it.”

Charlie stopped and looked at me with the exact same frown that Jo-Jo had worn a few moments earlier. “How are we going to do that? We don’t even know what it looks like.”

“It has diamonds on it,” said Jo-Jo.

“I thought you said you didn’t talk about the bracelet.”

“I didn’t say that.”

Jo-Jo was only eight, but she could be coy. Girls. I swear.

“So did she tell you how she lost it?”

Jo-Jo shook her head. “All she said was, she was in trouble for losing her mother’s diamond bracelet. Then you guys knocked on the door.”

“Good work Jo-Jo.” Charlie patted his sister on the back.

Tham giggled. “Face it, we too fast.” No matter how frustrated I got, Tham had a way of making everything seem so, well, ridiculous.

“I just wish I knew how she lost it.”

“So ask her,” said Jo-Jo. Easy for her to say.

“How can I do that?”

Jo-Jo looked at me like I was the most pitiful excuse for a boy she’d ever seen.

“What I mean is, she’s on restriction. When would I ever have the opportunity to talk to her?”

She smiled. “Tonight, silly. At the party.”

“Gina’s not really going to Colonel Nosehair’s party, is she?” said Charlie.

“She’s getting paid to help out,” said Jo-Jo.

“I still don’t see what good that does me?” I said.  
“It’s not like I got an invitation.”

“We crash!” said Tham. He was kidding, of course, but Charlie’s eyes flashed the same way they had right before he’d leapt into the dumpster.

“You’re not really thinking of crashing, are you?”

Charlie just grinned at me.

“I guess that’s a stupid question, huh?”

## **Chapter 9**

No, we didn't crash the Colonel's party. We may have been out of our minds over Gina, but we weren't crazy. Not that crazy, anyway.

What we did instead was wait for the party to end. Then we would put the plan into action. The plan was to somehow wind up on the elevator with Gina when she got in to go home. That way we'd have her all to ourselves and could ask her anything we wanted.

There was just one hitch. We had no idea when all this was going to happen. Thus, the stake out.

It wasn't really that hard to keep an eye on things at the Colonel's party. The glass doors and large picture windows of the clubhouse made it easy to see what was going on inside. All we had to do was come up with an

excuse to loiter outside. Not much of a challenge for three budding teenagers. Loitering was our specialty.

The tot-lot was the obvious place. Not only was it conveniently located right outside the clubhouse windows, it also offered most of the features we looked for in a hang-out. Tham and I had our respective lounging spots on a dented metal slide and rusty set of monkey bars. A buckled sidewalk gave Charlie enough of a surface to skate across. And Jo-Jo had a wobbly wooden picnic table where she could sit and draw. We even had snack service courtesy of Mom.

Every hour or so we'd hear the faint sound of a door sliding open at the other end of the lawn. Moments later, out would stroll Mrs. Jeannie Anderson bearing something cold and sweet. Popsicles were popular. We knew it was just an excuse to check up on us, but that was okay. Mom was cool. She didn't linger. Hand out the snacks. Admire one of Jo-Jo's pictures. Then just before she'd turn to go, she'd lob out some completely random comment like, "The dead tree gives this place a little ambience, don't you think?"

Mom.

Mrs. Mertz's dead palm in the sandbox turned out to be a very topical item. Even after Mom left, it kept popping up in conversation. Maybe because it was right there in our faces, we couldn't help but dwell upon it.

We speculated how the cats would hate it.

"Guess they'll have to find a new litter box."

But the dogs would love it.

"Why do dogs always have to pee on something like a tree trunk? Why can't they just piss in the wind like all the other species?"

"Jeez Alec, don't you know anything? The tree gives them privacy."

"Only boy dogs pee on trees," said Jo Jo, as she flipped over her paper to begin a new drawing on the other side. I leaned over the monkey bars to steal a peek at it. She was sketching a German shepherd lifting its leg next to a tall, spiky bush. I could hardly wait for Mom to come back.

"What the heck are you doing?" yelled Charlie.

I straightened, thinking he was yelling at me. But it was Tham who'd set him off.

“What?” There was this devilish innocence in Tham’s voice that made you know he was up to something. I looked up to discover he’d abandoned the slide and was now standing at the sandbox with his back to us.

“Can’t a guy take a whiz without you hassle me?”

Jo-Jo giggled. Then we all started giggling. Then we all started pissing on the tree. By the end of the night, we had collectively peed on that palm no less than fifteen times. If it hadn’t already been dead, we’d have surely killed it. The funny thing was, we loved that tree. Not for what it was, but for what it represented.

Like a corroded plaza statue, its bowed gray trunk and spiky brown fronds stood as a tribute to one of our more productive misadventures. Without even trying, we’d managed to landscape a playground, empty a building, beckon the fire department, and catch a long, satisfying look of Gina D’Amore. Not bad for a morning’s work.

And to think it all started by diving into a smelly dumpster. It seemed like forever ago. So much had happened since then. So much to talk about now.

We pressed Jo-Jo for details of her visit to apartment 6-B. When she didn't give us any, we invented our own.

*Charlie speaking with a squeaky girl voice:* "You're brother is such a hottie, Jo-Jo."

*Me, sounding like Mrs. Mertz in a fire:* "But not as hot as his friend with the wavy brown hair who plays the Fender."

*Tham, same giggly voice as always:* "That 'cause I like guy who roll in garbage and stink like dog doo."

"I don't smell."

"Yeah you do."

"Actually," said Charlie, "you do kind of reek."

"I do not. Jo-Jo, do I reek?"

How easy it was back then to while away the hours on a warm summer evening hanging out with your friends. We talked straight through the setting of the sun and the rising of the moon, our gangly teenage bodies strewn about the playground like wet towels left on the bathroom floor. Life was good. Peaceful. In fact, we were so completely content in our imaginary world, there were moments we almost forgot our reason for being there.

Then one of us would cast a gaze toward the clubhouse windows, and the evening's mission would fall sharply into focus.

"I don't see her. Crap, I bet she's already left."

"She right there."

"Where? I don't see her."

"Right there, by the closet."

"Behind the Fish-Eye Sisters," Charlie pointed.  
"See her?"

"Oh yeah, there she is. It's hard to see around those two lard-butts."

"You mean ass like bass," said Tham.

"Bass don't even have butts."

"Would you forget about their butts?" said Charlie.  
"Nosehair almost spilled his drink down Gina's shirt. Oh man, that would have been sweet."

"I'd pay a month's allowance to see Gina in a wet tee shirt."

"Too bad for you, Alec." Even in the dark I could see those big square piano teeth flashing at me.

"I bet Nosehair did it on purpose," said Charlie.

"He cheeky all right."

“Yeah, but Gina’s on to him,” I said. “Did you see the way she just slipped away when he leaned over to clean it up.”

“She good.”

“She’s brilliant.”

And she was, too. The way she dragged wearily across the room, brushing past the Colonel’s guests like they were nothing but a bunch of grazing cattle. Her behavior was completely insolent. We loved it. We cheered whenever she stopped to collect a dirty glass or refill a bowl of dip, marveling at the way she avoided eye-contact by never lifting her head. She was a master at keeping her distance, even at short range. She dodged every run they made at her. Well, nearly every run.

Nosehair caught her once while she was sneaking a break by the storage closet. Even from a distance you could see her response was forced. We took guesses at what he might have said to her.

“I know what I’d like to say to her,” said Charlie.

Tham tumbled to the bottom of the slide and jumped off. “You say, hey baby, wanna shag?”

Tham's Austin Powers imitation ignited a series of dumb adolescent theatrics, which seemed completely hysterical at the time. We got so caught up in our own performances, we lost all track of time. It wasn't until Mrs. Little came to collect Jo-Jo that we realized how late it had gotten. By then all the guests had disappeared and there was no one left in the clubhouse except for Gina and the Colonel.

While Mrs. Little carried Jo-Jo off to bed, Charlie jumped on his skateboard and took off down the sidewalk. "Let's roll."

We moved our loitering to the hall outside my apartment on the first floor. When we finally saw Gina heading for the clubhouse door, we sauntered to the elevator, trying to look casual. We got there exactly three steps ahead of her. Perfect timing.

When the elevator doors opened, we let Gina go in ahead of us. She didn't say anything, but she didn't look away from us either. That meant we at least rated above the Colonel's friends. And besides, we'd managed to pull off something they couldn't do. We got her alone.

"Hold the elevator."

Damn. It was Nosehair. What was he doing taking the elevator? As if we didn't know.

He seemed surprised to see us. Make that, irritated. This we knew by the way his nostrils began to flicker. He tried to pretend we weren't there and focused on Gina. But when he looked at her, we noticed her eyes drift upward toward the ceiling. Brilliant.

I had to hand it to the Colonel, though. He didn't give up. The more she ignored him, the more he tried to squeeze something out of her.

"Thanks for all your help tonight."

But our girl remained cool. She offered nothing more than a curt, "Sure." It was positively wicked the way she treated him. She didn't like the old fart any more than we did. Which meant, in a way, she was one of us. At least, that's what I told myself. I wanted to jump up and throw my arms around her.

When the elevator opened on the fourth floor to let the Colonel out, I couldn't contain my grin. Then the doors closed again, and my elation turned into panic. I began to perspire. What was I thinking, trying to corner her like this? I racked my brain for something clever to

say. I had nothing. Why hadn't I prepared something in advance? Maybe practiced in front of the mirror a few times, tried out a couple opening lines like...

"I saw you in the dumpster this morning."

"You did?" I couldn't think. Gina D'Amore was talking to me. To *me*. And that sweet scented strawberry shampoo of hers was jamming my brain.

"You were kind of hard to miss with him standing over you." She nodded at Tham. Guess I hadn't considered that. "So," she said, "that keyboard work?"

"Um, sure. I guess." I honestly didn't have a clue, but who cared? All that mattered was that I didn't make a complete idiot out of myself.

"I've always wanted to learn how to play one of those."

Wow. She was being sincere. I wasn't prepared for that. I mean, it was like having an honest to God conversation with, well, a real girl. Not some friend's little sister, who was great and everything, but you know, she was only eight. This was more like talking to a goddess. A sweet-smelling-golden-haired-tight-fitting-

tee-shirt-and-short-skirt goddess. I was so in awe, I blurted the first thing that popped into my head.

“My dad could teach you.”

Gina crossed her arms and gave me this skeptical look. “Isn’t your dad the super?”

Her words stung like a fast slap across the face, especially because what she’d said was true. My dad was, in fact, the building’s superintendent. But it was just a temporary job, a way to save on rent while he was going back to school. It wasn’t like it was his real profession or anything. He was a sound technician studying for his law degree. He’s a freakin’ lawyer, I wanted to scream, but didn’t.

Instead I simply shrugged and said, “Yeah, he’s the super,” quickly adding, “but he used to be a musician. Both my parents were. They had their own bands and everything.” I was blathering on like a complete idiot. She was going to think I was nothing but a stupid kid, which I guess I was. By the time I finally gained control of my mouth and shut-up, the doors were opening onto the sixth floor.

“That’s cool,” she said. And she left.

After the doors closed, Charlie dropped his skateboard onto the floor and rolled across the elevator until he was an inch away from my face.

“We waited outside all night so you could tell her about your freakin’ parents?”

Even though it was a little discomfiting feeling his hot breath on my chin, I couldn’t keep from grinning.

I shrugged. “Looks that way.”

## Chapter 10

That conversation would have been enough to sustain my Gina D'Amore fantasies for the rest of my life, which is why I knew I must have been dreaming when two days later, she left a message on our answering machine.

“This is Gina from 6-B. Something’s clogging our toilet. Any chance you could come up and take a look at it?”

I played the message back two times to be sure I was hearing right. Then I played it about a hundred times more just to hear her voice. Somewhere around the thirtieth replay, it occurred to me that she never specifically asked for my dad, the super. Which meant

that conceivably anyone living at this phone number could go upstairs and check her plumbing.

I eyed the set of building keys hanging from a metal ring by the phone, wondering how hard it could be to unclog a toilet. I imagined strutting into her apartment...cool and confident...plunger over my shoulder...

Yeah yeah, okay, bad idea.

I told Dad about it the second he walked through the door. Said it sounded urgent and he should probably get up there right away. Then I offered my assistance.

“Jee Alec, I really appreciate your wanting to help me. Aren’t too many teenagers who’d volunteer for this sort of work.”

I tried to look humble.

“And after we’re done there, maybe we could swing by 5-C to check on a leaky faucet.”

Apartment 5-C – home of Esther and Naomi Goldstein. The Fish-Eye sisters.

“Yeah okay, maybe,” I said. Not.

Mom said the reason the Goldsteins were fat and had eyes that popped out like fishes’ probably had to do with

a thyroid condition, though we preferred the theory about them being spawned by a giant tuna.

Dad grabbed his toolbox and headed upstairs. I fell in behind him, empty hands stuffed in pockets. As I followed him down the hall, I decided he looked good with his tools and jeans. Rugged. Manly. Nothing like the nerdy law student I was used to seeing nodding off on the couch with his glasses slipping off his nose onto an open text book.

Gina opened the door. “Thanks for coming.” Her hair was pulled back and she was wearing a black tank top, which left most of her beautiful tanned shoulders exposed. Thank God she was wearing jeans instead of shorts, otherwise I might have fainted to see so much Gina flesh up close.

I hadn’t really expected to see any of her at this short range. I figured her parents would handle junk like clogged toilets. But it turned out that her father and stepmother were out somewhere having lunch, which meant she was alone.

Alone.

Man, had I blown it. I could have been the rugged dude with the tool box up there with Gina.

Gina in her tank top. And me.

Alone.

“It’s the one in the master bedroom.”

I knew it. My psychic powers again.

We followed her down the pale green hall toward the bedroom. The air was thick with room spray, which grew denser the deeper we ventured into the apartment. By the time I arrived at the bedroom door, my eyes were stinging from a near-lethal dose of sugar and spice and everything nice.

I brushed away a tear as I crossed the threshold, which was like stepping straight into a Valentine’s card. In addition to the overpowering smell of perfume, everything in the room was pink and red and soft and silky. I half expected a fluffy white teddy bear to pop out and hand me a candy heart.

“In there,” she said, pointing into the small pink-tiled bathroom that was made to look larger than it really was through the effect of a wall-sized mirror.

Dad nodded and stepped inside. I started to follow him, but Gina slipped in front of me and leaned against the door jamb, leaving me stuck in the honeymoon suite peering around her smooth, tan shoulders.

Not that I was complaining.

Dad put down his toolbox and lifted the toilet lid. It was then I began to have second thoughts about tagging along. I could see there was potential for major embarrassment here.

“Shouldn’t be too difficult,” said Dad. “Your father have a plunger around here?”

Gina’s bare shoulders moved up and down in a shrug.

“That’s okay. Alec’ll go and get one.”

What?

Gina’s head turned ever so slightly back toward the bedroom. Not enough to make eye contact with me, just enough to confirm that Plunger Boy was still in fact standing behind her. Turning as red as a Valentine heart, I might add.

“On second thought, maybe I’ll just go ahead and snake it.”

Thank you.

As Dad was threading his long metal hose through the pipes, Gina tossed her head back, flipping her strawberry scented pony tail so it almost hit my eyes. “I hear you’re a keyboard player?”

What was this? Gina D’Amore was actually initiating a conversation with my father?

“Used to be,” said Dad, keeping his attention fixed on his work. What a nerd.

“Ever think about giving lessons?”

What?

Dad stopped what he was doing and glanced over at her. Or more likely, he was glancing at me, the one who’d obviously set this line of questioning in motion. But I was well hidden behind that lovely skimpy tank top.

“I’ve never really thought about it, actually.” He hesitated, then said, “You looking for a teacher?”

Her shoulders went up and down in another shrug. “Maybe.”

I felt dizzy.

“Yeah, well...” Dad rubbed the back of his neck, like he was thinking. It was a smooth gesture. Rugged looking, like carrying the toolbox. Funny how I’d never thought of him in that way before. Just like I’d never really thought of my mom as being hot, though Charlie and Tham said she was, in a mother/accountant sort of way.

It was at that moment that it occurred to me I might have been adopted. I mean, I wasn’t cool or good looking like either of my parents. And I certainly hadn’t inherited either of their musical abilities, which might have compensated for my deficiencies in the other two areas. Other than the fact that we were all basically thin, I didn’t really resemble them in any way.

“You have the same hair as your Mom,” said Charlie when I brought the matter up for discussion later that day.

“No I don’t. Hers is lighter.”

“That’s just ’cause she dyes it.”

“No she doesn’t.”

If anything my hair was more like my dad’s, dark and wavy, except his was thinning on the top, whereas

mine was thick and unruly like a briar patch. Some mornings when I got out of bed I looked like an honest to God Chia pet.

After a little more neck rubbing, Dad said that he thought maybe it'd be kind of fun to give music lessons. Then he asked her if she had a keyboard. That's when she spilled the beans about his Father's Day present, although Gina didn't know it was supposed to be his Father's Day present. I didn't really care because, for one thing, I suddenly had much bigger worries to deal with than a silly Father's Day gift, and secondly, Father's Day was just a day away, so no biggie.

But Dad giving Gina keyboard lessons – that was huge. Never in a million years would I have thought she'd take me seriously when I'd suggested it in the elevator the other night. I didn't even know what I was saying, for crying out loud. Now that it was really going to happen, I wasn't sure how I felt about it. It was always dicey getting your parents involved in your teenage fantasies.

“Wonder how that got in there.”

Dad leaned over and fished a pair of tennis socks from the toilet. The socks were pink, in keeping with the decor. He tossed them into the trash. Then he packed up his Rugged Guy tools and walked with Gina into the minty green hallway.

After they left, I went into the bathroom and sneaked a peek in the shower to see what shampoo they used. There were more than a dozen plastic bottles lined up around the shower wall. Several of them were pink and strawberry. Unfortunately, I couldn't remember the brand that was on TV. I picked up the smallest pink bottle and took a whiff. It smelled like the rest of the place, sweet and fruity like candy. I put it back and started to go, but at the last minute I had an urge.

No, not that kind of urge.

I reached into the trash can and snatched out one of the soggy pink socks. Don't ask me why. I guess I just wanted a souvenir. I stuffed it into my pocket and ran to catch up with Dad.

As we were walking out the front door, Gina spoke to me for the first time.

"You wet your pants."

Sure enough, there was a big wet spot around where the tennis sock was stuffed into my pocket. I shrugged like it was no big deal, then I left before I dropped dead of humiliation.

## **Chapter 11**

Dad was pleased with the keyboard, which thankfully was playable with the exception of a couple lower keys that stuck. I purposely let it slip that I was kind of interested in learning to play myself, which sparked this terrible brainstorm during which my father decided that he could teach both Gina and me at the same time.

Was he kidding? As if I'd ever be able to concentrate with Gina there. Despite my objections, our first lesson was arranged for Wednesday morning at 11:30.

At approximately 11:25, Tham, Charlie and Jo-Jo just happened to show up at our apartment. Without waiting to be invited in, they plopped themselves down

in the middle of the living room. Jo-Jo spread out on the floor with a pad of paper and box of markers, while Charlie and Tham sat at opposite ends of the couch and started tossing a ball back and forth. I was only slightly annoyed.

“Just don’t say anything about the sock,” I warned them.

Tham giggled. Charlie held up the ball to show me that it wasn’t really a ball but a rolled up pair of socks.

“I mean it.” Before I could say anything else, there was a knock at the door. We all moved to answer it, but Jo-Jo got there first.

Gina smiled at her. “Hey girl,” she said, giving Jo-Jo’s long blonde hair a stroke as she made her way to the dining room table where Dad had set up the keyboard.

I paused there for a minute just taking it all in. Gina D’Amore was standing in my dining room, right beside my Fender guitar and my PEZ collection. It was like a dream come true.

“Let’s say we get to it, eh Alec?”

Yeah, okay, my dream didn't usually include Dad. For that matter, it didn't include Tham, Charlie or Jo-Jo either, but what the hell?

Much to my relief, the lesson went along pretty well. There were moments I almost relaxed and enjoyed myself. Then Dad would wind me up again by telling some corny joke like, "You know why the piano was invented, don't you? So the musician had a place to put his beer." It was nearly as embarrassing as the wet spot on my pants. Except that something strange was going on this time. Gina was actually laughing at him.

Now I know that she couldn't possibly have thought he was funny. Yet she was wearing an honest to God smile, which I realized I'd never actually seen on her before. Not even when she was with Todd, which is fairly understandable. My God, she looked beautiful when she was smiling. Still, it felt weird watching her suck up to Dad. It was almost like she was, well, flirting with him.

Gina.

And Dad.

I thought I might barf.

Fortunately, a ringing phone saved me from further humiliation. Dad grabbed the receiver off the wall and walked into the kitchen, leaving Gina and me alone at the table. Sort of. I tried to think of something to say, something to redeem myself from the wet pants experience.

“Hey Gina,” Jo-Jo called out in her sweet little girl voice. “They want to know how you got in trouble with the bracelet.”

I nearly fainted off my chair.

“Do they, now?”

Jo-Jo nodded, looking all cute and innocent. I swear, what an actress.

Then Gina turned to me. “You really want to know?”

“Well, I mean, no, not really. It’s just that Tham said...”

“Who?”

I pointed across the room at Tham. I admit it was the coward’s way out, but hey, I was in a bind.

Gina looked at Tham. “I didn’t catch your name.”

Tham flashed that ridiculous piano key grin at her. Oh man, could it get any worse?

“You can call me Austin.”

Yes, it could. Well at least he didn’t call her *baby*.

“Baby.”

Even Charlie went red in the face then. But Gina didn’t seem to care. In fact, she looked almost amused. It was a miracle. Then she did something even more amazing. She told us the story of her bracelet.

Basically, her wicked stepmother somehow got her hands on this diamond bracelet that had belonged to Gina’s mother. Gina was beyond mad. She knew her mother had meant for her to have it. So one night, she took it.

She wore it to a party in apartment 2-A, home of Officer Grimm and Goth Girl. According to Gina, the party was a total bust, so she left after ten minutes. It was when she got home that she discovered the bracelet was gone.

“The catch must have come loose or something.”

Or something.

However it happened, her stepmother hit the roof when she found out. She grounded Gina indefinitely. Gina tried to appeal to her Dad for support, but he wouldn't go against his new wife. All he could do was promise to lift the restriction if she replaced the bracelet.

"Like I don't already feel bad enough losing my mother's bracelet. Where am I going come up with two thousand dollars?"

"It probably fell off at the party," said Charlie. "Did you ask if they found it?"

"Do you think the Queen of Darkness would really tell me if she had found it? Yeah, I asked."

After the other night, you'd think I'd have learned not to blurt out the first thing that popped into my head, but I hadn't. "Maybe we could go look for you," I said.

Gina's eyebrows shot up under her bangs. "What are you going do?" she asked. "Break in?"

Just then my dad came back in the room and returned the phone to its cradle, right beside the hanging metal ring that held the master key to every apartment in the building.

Charlie's eyes flashed across the room like a pair of lasers as Dad sat down and resumed the lesson. I tried not to think about the fact that I'd just sort of promised to break into a cop's apartment to search for her lost bracelet. Probably nothing more than a class C felony anyway. No big deal.

"Now the important thing is that you practice what you learned today." Dad was looking at me while he spoke, though I figured he was really talking to Gina. After all, it wasn't like I didn't understand the concept of practice. I had my own band, for crying out loud.

The problem was, Gina didn't have anything to practice on, which may have been the reason Dad brought it up. Good ole Dad, he'd worked out a plan.

"Maybe there's a way for you and Alec to share this keyboard."

What?

"That's okay," I said. "She can take it home and use it." I'd probably be in jail soon anyway.

Dad frowned. "Then how are *you* going to practice?"

“I don’t mind sharing,” she said, which should have made me do back-flips, but the blasé tone of her voice told me it was nothing more than a courtesy to my father.

“Great,” said Dad. “You all can work out a time to get together.”

Get together? What was he thinking? Like she would ever get together with me. How could things have spiraled so far out of control during one half-hour lesson?

“Broom Hilda plays tennis on Monday and Friday at 11:00,” said Gina. “You can come by then.”

## **Chapter 12**

That Friday I was up before dawn. I must have spent five hours getting ready for our practice session, which was really pathetic when you consider that Gina never raised her eyes higher than the level of my sneakers. She didn't even get off the couch to answer the door. Just shouted a tired "It's open" from across the room.

I tried not to take it personally. I could see she was preoccupied with a very compelling project involving a ball of yarn and two long silver needles. Since there was no point in waiting for Gina to show me around, I went ahead and took a seat at the desk in the pale green hall where the keyboard was sitting. The smell of peach-blossom-apple cinnamon or whatever it was hit me like punch in the face. It was coming from behind the

keyboard, where a glass bowl of potpourri sat along side a bunch of those aromatic candles that are supposed to calm your nerves. Fat chance of that.

I switched on the keyboard and began to quietly warm-up with a scale or two. I sounded decent enough. Hopefully, Gina thought so. I wondered if she was even paying attention to me. No, it went beyond wondering. I had to know. So I cast what was meant to be a fleeting glance her way, just to see.

Of course, there was no way I could take my eyes off her once I turned my head. She looked so beautifully peaceful sitting there knitting away. I became hypnotized by the clacking of her silver needles, which got me thinking how all the really hot fairy tale maidens were into sewing. Not that I'm saying I was into fairy tale maidens or anything. But I distinctly recall an image from Snow White where somebody pricks her finger on a sewing needle and loses three drops of blood.

I definitely remember the blood.

As I was contemplating the striking similarities between Gina and other fictional princesses, she lifted her head and looked at me. I must have seemed like a

total idiot to her. I know I felt like one. On the bright side, at least she was finally paying attention to me.

“Ummmm.” What could I say? I turned away and waited for her to say something like, “What are you looking at?” but she didn’t. She just sighed and went back to her knitting.

I breathed in a healthy dose of aromatherapy and resigned myself to practicing some music. It wasn’t the fantasy afternoon I’d been dreaming of, but I didn’t mind practicing. I know a lot of kids say they hate it, but deep down I really enjoyed making music, even when I wasn’t especially good at it.

Unfortunately, it was not exactly easy to concentrate in that place. Okay, it’s true that I often had a hard time getting down to practice even when Gina D’Amore wasn’t sitting eight feet away. But this wasn’t like those times with Tham and Charlie. I really was trying to focus on the music this time. It’s just that something kept throwing me off. Everything I tried to play sounded about as fluid as a duck waddling across the keys.

Any strides I’d made with her at our lesson the other day were quickly slipping away. She’d probably never

change her mind about me after this. In her eyes I'd always be this stupid kid who loitered in elevators and wet his pants. If only I could get her to see the real Alec Anderson. Not exactly talented or good looking, but not a complete loser either. Reasonably intelligent, easy going, occasionally charming. Great boyfriend potential. At the very least, I wanted her to rate me as someone who was socially acceptable to hang with.

“What’s your friend doing out there on the wall?”

I didn’t have to get up and look, though I did, just for an excuse to get closer to her. I knew by *my friend* she meant Tham. That is, Austin. Talk about socially unacceptable. And yet, that’s exactly what I loved about him. He sincerely didn’t care what other people thought. So what if he was sitting on a wall swatting at flies with his grabbing claw taped to his hand?

“He’s helping his father train for the world elephant polo championship. He does daily conditioning exercises on the wall to prepare for the big tournament in December.”

“That’s different,” said Gina.

Which was exactly the point. I started telling her what I knew about the sport. How Mr. Kantawong would extend his equestrian sized polo mallet to elephant length by attaching it to Tham's grabbing claw. Then to simulate the elephant polo experience, how he would sit on the wall with his long mallet and whack at beer cans and other trash lying around the dumpster. Not that it was anything remotely close to actually playing polo on the back of a real pachyderm, but it was better than nothing.

It was all weirdly cool, I thought, but Gina's eyes began to glaze over while I was explaining everything. If I didn't do something to grab her attention soon, I'd lose her for good. I had no choice but to make a bold move.

"By the way," I said, in what was one of the lamest conversational transitions of all time, "we're definitely going to search 2-A for your bracelet."

She blinked, which meant she'd at least registered my abrupt change of subject.

I forged on. "It'll probably be sometime next week."

That time I was sure I got something close to a nod.

“Just as soon as Crystal and her father step out,” I continued, “we’ll sneak in and check the place out.”

At which point her eyes drifted back to her knitting. The fact that I was willing to risk both my neck and my good reputation just to recover her bracelet hadn’t impressed her anymore than my keyboard playing, maybe because she didn’t believe I’d really go through with it. I couldn’t blame her. I wouldn’t have believed me either.

I slunked back over to the keyboard and sat down.

“Let me know what you find,” she said softly.

## Chapter 13

“Did you get the keys?” asked Charlie.

I nodded. I felt terrible for nicking them. Dad could have lost his job if we got caught.

Then again, this was for Gina.

Things happened quicker than I’d expected. The very next day after I’d foolishly reiterated our intention to search the Grimm’s apartment “just as soon as Crystal and her father step out,” they stepped out. Charlie passed Officer Grim and Goth Girl getting into their pick-up on his way back from a skateboard run to Pappy’s Chicken.

“We gotta move quick,” said Charlie, wolfing down two wings at a time over his kitchen sink. “No telling when they’ll be back.”

“Where’d they go?” I asked.

“Crystal’s going for her driver’s test.”

“Goth Girl’s getting her license?”

“Doubt it. She’s failed the test twice already.”

“Why doesn’t her dad just fix it so she passes?”

There was no doubt in our minds that Ed Grimm was not above breaking the law for his daughter. We just knew the guy was a dirty cop, though I’m not sure what evidence we had other than how he looked.

He had this way of squinting all the time that made him seem shifty, though he may have just had a problem with his vision. Even so, he was a scruffy character. Rumpled clothing, always looking like he needed a shave. Plus there was this little scar above his left eyebrow. Everybody knows that honest guys don’t have scars on their faces. Why do you think all the bad guys in comic books are called Scar-face?

Besides, even if we could have rationalized his squinty, scruffy, scarred appearance, that still didn’t account for Crystal. What respectable police officer lets his daughter walk around dressed like a vampire?

There was a knock at Charlie’s door. It was Tham. He was wearing that stupid Cat-in-the-Hat hat along with

one of those fake noses with the plastic glasses and mustache.

“What are you supposed to be?”

“In disguise. What you think? Here.” He handed me a flimsy plastic mask and a bandana.

“I’m not wearing this.”

“You be sorry.”

“What’d you bring for me?” Charlie wiped his mouth on his sleeve and skidded across the room.

Tham flashed his piano key smile and wriggled his eyebrows up and down like a goof. Then he reached into his back pocket and pulled out something red and rubbery. Before either of us could get a good look at it, Tham reached out and stretched it over Charlie’s face.

“Put this on.”

Of course. The classic devil mask.

“Nice,” I said.

“Let me see.” Charlie whipped around to examine himself in the smeary oval mirror hanging by the front door. “Oh cool.” He whirled back around and struck a scary pose. I couldn’t help thinking he looked like one of those cartoon witch doctors, the guys who are always

jumping up and down and waving their skinny little arms around their big totem-pole faces.

“It fits your personality,” I said, which wasn’t exactly true. Charlie was a bit of a handful, but he wasn’t what I’d call a hellion. I wouldn’t even have called him devilish. Tham, yes, but not Charlie. Charlie was just what my mother would call “all boy.” I wonder what that made me.

He ripped the mask off his head, revealing what suddenly seemed like such an innocent young face. He really was a stained glass window angel, with those bright blue eyes and rosy cheeks.

He waved the mask at Tham with his wiry witch doctor arms. “Where’d you get it?”

“Let me guess,” I said. “It was in that brown sack from the dumpster, right?”

Tham giggled and lifted his pinky to his lips, Austin Powers style. “You got it, baby.”

“What other costumes were in there,” said Charlie. “I never got a chance to look through the whole bag.”

“You were too busy setting off the smoke alarms.”

Charlie rolled his eyes. “Seriously. Was there anything else?”

“Not much. A couple clown nose and some fang.”

“Fangs?”

“I think he means those fake Dracula teeth,” I said to Charlie.

“Oh man, can I have the Dracula fangs?”

“What for? So you can go hang out with Goth Girl?”

Tham grinned. “Just like Angel hang out with Buffy the vampire slayer. I love that show. Buffy hot.”

“Can we just get this search over with?” I said. “I don’t want to get caught by Buffy and her father.”

“Don’t worry,” said Charlie. “We’ve got time.”

“Weren’t you the one saying we’ve got to move quick. No telling what time they’d be back, and all that jazz?”

“It takes at least twenty minutes to get across town to the DMV. That’s forty minutes round trip.”

“Well we’ve already wasted twenty minutes standing around here. Come on you guys.” This was completely out of character for me. It was usually Charlie who

prodded us along on these adventures. I guess I was just feeling anxious. I figured, the sooner we got in there, the sooner we'd be out.

Charlie left his devil mask behind on the couch and led us out the door. Luckily, we didn't have to worry about Jo-Jo tagging along, although she probably had sharper eyes than any of us and would have come in handy. But it was Saturday, and Charlie's mom wasn't working, which meant Jo-Jo got dragged along to the grocery store.

We cast a quick glance down the hall to make sure the coast was clear. There were really only two other people we needed to worry about. One was Naked Herb, who according to Tham had gone into the office.

"How do you know that?"

"My dad see him leave this morning."

"So? That doesn't mean he was going to the office."

"Yeah, sure," said Tham. "He wearing clothes. Where else he go?"

"Good point," said Charlie.

"I suppose he's working overtime trying to fix that mess with the missing moonwalk tape."

“Poor ’Erb.”

Sometimes I couldn’t help but smile at the way Tham said things. “You make it sound like he’s a piece of parsley.”

“He looks more like a beet,” said Charlie.

“Beets! Yek! They nasty.”

I wrinkled my nose. “Can’t be any nastier than what’s cooking down the hall.”

It was true. Something putrid was simmering in Stella Mertz’s kitchen. She was the only other tenant on the hall that we had to watch out for, and she was obviously busy. We held our noses as we strolled out the door, trying to look innocent. Except for Tham, of course, who insisted on wearing that stupid disguise.

I hesitated when we got to the end of the hall. Charlie must have sensed my uneasiness, because when I finally dug the key out of my pocket, he reached over and plucked it out of my hand. It was just as well. I’d have been too shaky to work the lock, assuming I could have really gone through with it. But for Charlie it was no bigger a deal than hopping a curb on his skateboard. He

just flung the door open and walked right in like he owned the place.

Not that it was the sort of place any of us would have wanted to own. Or even live in, for that matter. To tell the truth, I don't think I ever really appreciated my own home until the day we entered 2-A.

It was like walking into a cave. The place was not only dark, it was dank, which rhymes with stank, and for good reason. The smell wasn't as bad as whatever Mrs. Mertz was cooking, but it wasn't good either. I couldn't put my finger on what it was, but years later when I was in college, I remember thinking how much the smell of the fraternity house after a party smelled like apartment 2-A. A stale bouquet of cheap beer, body odor and urine.

Which gives you some indication of how bad Mrs. Mertz's cooking was.

We might not have been so tuned into the smell if we could have seen what we were walking into, but the Grimms never opened their blinds, which was just another indicator of suspicious activity if you ask me. While my eyes were still adjusting to the dark, I bumped

into Tham. His stupid fake nose and glasses fell off and landed on my foot. I practically jumped out of my skin.

“What the...did anyone bring a flashlight?” I asked.

“Hey, gimme back my nose.”

“I’ll go back and get one,” said Charlie.

“No, never mind.” I reached blindly to grab his shirt before he could dart out the door.

“Hey, watch the hat.”

“Shhh.”

“Shhh yourself. Where my nose?”

“Here.” I picked up the fake nose and shoved it into Tham’s chest.”

“Thanks.” I could hear him slipping it back onto his big moon face.

“How I look?”

“How should I know? I can’t see anything.”

“Why not just turn on the light?”

“No way,” said Charlie, but it was too late. Tham had already found the switch.

“Oh man. We are going to be so busted.”

“Relax, baby.”

“It’s probably okay,” said Charlie. “Anyway, if they come back and catch us in their apartment, what difference does it make if the lights are on or not.”

“That right. Anyway, nobody recognize me.”

“Sure Tham, whatever you say.”

I was actually grateful for the light. It made the place seem a little less creepy. I squinted down the hall to make sure it was more or less the same layout as the rest of our apartments, which it was. Two bedrooms, full bath in the master, half bath in the hall; living room-dining room-kitchen; balcony; various closets. What still amazes me is how so many people can occupy the exact same living space and yet fill it up so differently.

“I say we split up,” said Charlie.

“That works,” I said. “I’ll take the living room, dining room and balcony. Why don’t you take the kitchen, and Tham can do the bedrooms.”

“Hey, what? I do the kitchen.”

I could already see him eyeing the cupboards through those fake plastic glasses.

“No way, man. We don’t need you leaving a trail of crumbs everywhere. You check out the bedrooms.” I

gave Tham a nudge to set him off in the right direction. After letting out a dramatic sigh, he clunked down the hall like a herd of rhino. Fortunately, we didn't have to worry about the neighbors downstairs catching onto us. That's where I lived.

Charlie was already darting around like a squirrel inside the kitchen. Like Tham, Charlie's movements weren't exactly quiet, though not because he was a rhino-clunker. It was just that every time he took a step, it sounded like a piece of tape being ripped off the linoleum. He explained to me later that his shoes kept sticking to something spilled across the floor. He guessed it was beer.

Everything in that place was old and stained, like they'd had it for a thousand years. More evidence in support of my vampire theory, vampires living forever and all that stuff. In all likelihood, they'd furnished the place straight out of the Salvation Army. Either that or the dumpster. It was pretty depressing, really.

But I didn't have time to stand around feeling sorry for some shady vampire family. I was on a mission to find a diamond bracelet, and I was failing miserably.

Other than a few loose coins and a cheap rhinestone earring under one of the threadbare sofa cushions, I wasn't finding anything other than a whole lot of beer stains.

I picked up the earring and held it toward the light, trying to decide if I should leave it under the cushion or put it some place more obvious where Crystal could find it. I was leaning toward putting it back when somebody screamed.

“Oh my God!”

“Tham?” I don't remember dropping the earring, but I must have, because I didn't have it with me when I reached the master bedroom. Naturally, Charlie was already standing in the doorway blocking my view, though it was nothing like being blocked by Gina. I stood on my toes to see over his head.

“What is it? Did you find the bracelet?”

“Better than that,” said Charlie, stepping aside to let me pass.

At first I didn't understand what all the commotion was about. Then I spotted two eyes peering out from under a bed like a frightened animal. Except it wasn't an

animal. It was a frail, old woman wearing a fake nose with plastic glasses and a mustache.

## **Chapter 14**

She told us to call her Kitty. Whether or not that was her name, we never knew. Nor were we ever able to determine what her relationship was to Officer Grimm. Perhaps she was his mother. More likely, she was his mother's ghost. Whoever she was, she was crazier than a loon. Naturally, Tham took an instant liking to her, that is, after he got over the shock of her bony hands reaching out from under the bed and grabbing his ankles.

“She a trip,” he said.

I'll say she was, though after spending a couple minutes with her, we could see she wasn't as out of her mind as we'd first thought. In fact, she was a lot more with it than most adults we knew. For instance, on the topic of Crystal and her dark tendencies, Kitty told us

matter-of-factly, “Don’t let all that goth crap fool you. Girl’s nothing but a poser.”

“I knew it,” said Charlie

“Did she say *poser*?”

Not that Kitty was always so blunt. She had this weird tendency to lapse into nursery rhymes and other nonsense, which made her sound completely batty. But she definitely knew what she was talking about, even if we didn’t. Like when we asked her about Officer Grimm and she told us:

*Wee Willie Winkie runs through the town,  
Upstairs and downstairs in his nightgown.*

At the time we had no idea what she meant, but she had him pegged all right. It just took us a while to work it out.

Even though we couldn’t always understand her, we were completely enthralled by what she had to say. And her commentary wasn’t limited to tales from apartment 2-A. She had things to say about practically everyone in the building, including us.

“Wear a helmet,” she snapped at Charlie, referring of course to his skateboarding habits. Then to Tham she said:

*Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall,  
Humpty Dumpty had a great fall.*

It didn’t surprise us that she knew about the Kantawongs’ daily exercises behind the dumpster. Everybody knew about them. What surprised us was that she also knew the reason behind them.

“Constipation can kill an elephant,” she warned Tham. Then she pulled a bowl of prunes out from under the bed and offered him one.

*Little Jack Horner sat in a corner,  
Eating his Christmas pie,  
He put in his thumb,  
And pulled out a plum,  
And said, “What a good boy am I!”*

“No thanks,” said Tham.

She never came out from under the bed the entire time we were there. I began to doubt if she ever came out, though I supposed she would have to at some point, particularly if she continued on with those prunes. Whatever her reason was for hiding under there, it wasn't because she was shy.

She took off the fake nose and glasses and popped a prune between her pale, thin lips. A few moments later, she spit the pit at my knee. "How's about a hello Kitty, Sonny?"

"Okay," I shrugged. "Hello, Kitty."

But when I said this, she hissed at me.

"Jeez, Alec," said Charlie. "Why are you getting her all riled up?"

"I didn't mean to. I was just doing what she asked." Or at least, that's what I thought. But she wasn't looking for a friendly salutation. What she wanted was my Hello Kitty PEZ dispenser.

It turned out she was well acquainted with my PEZ collection. She could name almost every piece in it, which to be honest, freaked me out a little bit. I started wondering if maybe I should move it from the

windowsill to a more secure location, except I wasn't sure there was such a thing with this mystic troll living over me.

Don't get me wrong. I thought the old lady was cool. I just wasn't comfortable with her knowing my business. But then, she knew everybody's business, and she freely shared it with us.

She told us about the trashy family in 8-C, and how they weren't really a family at all, but a random group of illegal immigrants from Romania. This, she said, infuriated Señora Rodriguez, who was afraid they'd draw attention to her green card having expired. The good news was that Uncle Clarence had offered to marry her so she could stay in the country. Unfortunately, his Spanish wasn't very good, and she thought he was offering her a salad.

Kitty went on to tell us how Gay Tony had once dated Janet Pendleton's mother's boyfriend, who we'd nicknamed Tinky-Winky based on the Teletubbies character. She knew about the nickname too.

*Tinky-Winky,*

*Dipsy,*

*La-La,*

*Po.*

Tham giggled. He was the only person I knew who watched that stupid show, which was still a relatively new phenomenon in the summer of '98. Apparently Kitty watched it too. Maybe there was a television under her bed. Or maybe she had a screen built into her body like those annoying alien cupie dolls. Maybe she was an alien cupie doll too. Maybe that's how she was able to channel so much information about everyone in the building without leaving the bedroom.

Not that anything she told us was all that amazing really, well, except for the naming of my PEZ guys. We'd already heard about the Fish-Eye Sisters and their thyroid condition, same as we knew about the weird case of rigor mortis afflicting Peg-Leg Pete's zombie dog. When Tham asked what she thought about Colonel Nosehair, she ripped a fart, which was also the way she described Stella Mertz's cooking.

“Oh bee-haaave,” said Tham, slipping into one of his Austin Powers routines.

Kitty obviously was a fan of the movie too. “I’ve been frozen for thirty years,” she said. “I’ve got to see if my bits and pieces are still working.”

I started laughing so hard I thought I was going to pee in my pants. But suddenly her mood seemed to change and she got very quiet on us. Maybe the line about being frozen for thirty years struck a nerve with her. Whatever it was, the whole tone of our conversation shifted to something much more serious.

She began talking about the suicide in apartment 3-B. It happened before either Tham or I had moved in. Charlie was too small to remember. We’d all heard the story, though. How a beautiful young girl became so heartsick over a broken romance that she stuck her head in the oven and fried her brains out. No one dared to live in that place after that. The rumor was that it was haunted. It was the kind of rumor kids love, even though they secretly doubt its credibility.

But Kitty wasn’t a kid, and she had no doubts.

*When the bough breaks,  
The cradle shall fall,  
And down will come baby,  
Cradle and all.*

It was talk of the beautiful dead girl that made us remember the reason we were there. The old lady had us so mesmerized with her building lore, we nearly forgot about Gina and her diamond bracelet.

She seemed unsurprised when we brought it up. It was almost as if she'd been expecting it.

*Little Bo-Peep has lost her sheep,  
And doesn't know where to find them.*

"Yeah, something like that," I said. "So do you know where it is? The bracelet, I mean."

The old lady looked deep into my eyes as her face split into a wily grin. Then she said in this low, deadpan voice, "Who knows what evil lurks in the hearts of men."

I started to press her for more specific information that I could actually use, but all she said was:

*The Owl and the Pussy-cat went to sea  
In a beautiful pea green boat,  
They took some honey, and plenty of money,  
Wrapped up in a five pound note.*

Then her mood again changed and she became anxious.  
“They’re coming,” she whispered.

I shot a look at Charlie. “How long have they been gone?” I asked, meaning Officer Grimm and his goth, that is, poser daughter.

“Who cares? We’ve got to get out of here.” Charlie grabbed Tham by the back of his shirt and was shoving him toward the door when the Cat-in-the-Hat hat fell off his head.

“Hey.”

He was just bending over to get it when Kitty lurched out from under the bed and snatched it up.

“Hey, gimme the hat!”

But she was already hidden behind the threadbare dust ruffle, cackling like a sick chicken.

“Forget it,” said Charlie, now herding us both down the hall like a couple of Bo-Peep’s lost sheep. He stopped at the front door and put his ear to it.

“Hear anything?” I asked. He shook his head no.

The only thing any of us could hear at that moment was the chanting from the dark recesses of the back bedroom:

*Three blind mice*

*Three blind mice*

*See how they run...*

Charlie gave a sharp tug at my sleeve. “Let’s just go for it,” he said. Talk about the blind mouse leading the blind mouse. I felt like I was in that scene during Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid when they were standing at the door of their hide-out, trying to decide if it was safe to run.

I held my breath as Charlie eased open the front door, which was probably why I didn’t smell the Mertz’s meatballs stinking up the hall. If I had, I wouldn’t have let Charlie shove me out there quite so forcefully.

When Butch and Sundance made their break for it, the Bolivian Army was there to unload an arsenal's worth of bullets on them, blowing them to bits.

Compared to what hit us, it was a merciful way to die.

## Chapter 15

I figured we were probably in huge trouble, but all I could think of when we collided with Stella Mertz and her plate full of meatballs was the image of the old lady hiding under her bed ripping farts. I could just imagine what she would think about this little scene.

*On top of spaghetti,  
All covered with cheese,  
I lost my poor meatball,  
When somebody sneezed.*

We held our breath and gathered up the scattered meatballs, some of which had rolled down the hall as far as Charlie's place. (Jo-Jo promptly pointed this out to us

when she returned from the grocery store.) Once you got past the big splotch of toxic sauce spilled across Naked Herb's doormat, and the fact that Mrs. Mertz was lying spread eagle next to it, the situation wasn't as bad as it first seemed. Ironically, the fact that we'd leveled Mrs. Mertz seemed to work in our favor. She was too shaken up to ask any probing questions about what we were doing blasting through the Grimm's door like buck shot.

All she said was, "Now you've done it."

And it hit me that she was right. We had done it, hadn't we? We'd actually broken into apartment 2-A and searched the place, more or less, just like I said we would. I couldn't help feeling somewhat heroic, even if we hadn't found the bracelet. As long as no one – that is, no adult – ever found out about it, it would all be worth it.

For some reason I never worried about Kitty ratting us out. Hell, even if she did, who'd believe her? As for Mrs. Mertz, Tham managed to smooth things over with her fairly well. After he and Charlie helped her to her feet, which was no easy task by the way, Tham offered to give her some leftover saytay to replace the dropped

meatballs. She sneered and grunted a little, but ultimately accepted his offer. It was a good deal, I have to say, especially for the Fish-Eye Sisters. Instead of having to choke on Stella's fart-balls during their weekly pinochle game, they got to sample some of Mr. Kantawong's savory chicken on a stick. After that day, they were always extra nice to Tham.

Even though Stella Mertz never asked what we were doing in the Grimm's apartment, Tham went ahead and told her. "We check on mouse problem," he lied. "Alec dad sent us." Bigger lie. Oh man. "Then big rat chase us out the door." What a whopper. But Mrs. Mertz seemed to buy it. Apparently she'd had rodent problems in her last apartment and was sympathetic to the cause.

"Tell your father I want some traps, too," she said to me. "Maybe some rat poison." For the meatballs, no doubt.

"Actually," said Tham, as if he hadn't said enough already, "best thing for mouse is tiger pee. That what we use in Thailand." There was no stopping him once he got on a roll. Luckily Charlie was there to move him along. He suggested that Mrs. Mertz go on to her card game

while Tham fetched his food. It was amazing how a twelve-year-old boy could take command of a situation like that. He had that hall cleared in twenty-five seconds, which left a whole minute and a half before Crystal Grimm raced into the parking lot, the proud owner of an official Ohio state driver's license.

"Where are you going?" Charlie asked me when I headed toward the stairwell after Tham.

"I want to take inventory of my PEZ guys."

"Oh, right."

What I really wanted to do was run straight to the sixth floor and tell Gina what we'd done, but that would have to wait a couple days. In the mean time I went through my PEZ collection at least fifty times. On Sunday evening Dad saw me standing at the window holding the Hello Kitty.

He raised his eyebrow and opened his mouth. I thought he was going to make a crack about PEZ, but he had something else on his mind. "You don't know where I can get my hands on any tiger pee?"

"Huh?"

“I just had the weirdest conversation with Mrs. Mertz.”

## **Chapter 16**

By the time Monday morning rolled around, it seemed like ages since our visit to apartment 2-A. I began to think that word may have gotten around about our escapade, but it hadn't. Our secret was still safe. Which meant I got to be the one to blab it to Gina.

She seemed genuinely touched by our failed attempt to help her. She was even smiling as I was telling her about the old lady under the bed and the collision with Mrs. Mertz and her meatballs. That's when I knew she was finally beginning to warm up to me. She even put down her knitting and came over to the desk to watch me practice for a while. Thankfully, my playing was a lot better than it'd been the last time I was there.

I was doing a funky rendition of Yankee Doodle when the telltale screech of an amplifier screamed through the vents. Tham and Charlie, no doubt. They knew I was up there alone with Gina and were just doing it to razz me. Because of Colonel Nosehair, we rarely practiced at the Kantawongs. Not that they were seriously practicing. After a few riffs from the Beatles song Come Together, they segued into the theme from Teletubbies.

Gina had just the slightest grin on her face. “I think your band is waiting for you.”

I couldn’t tell if she was trying to get rid of me, or if she was really taking an active interest in my band.

Who was I kidding? As if anyone would be interested in a band that played junk like, “Tinky-Winky, Dipsy, La-La, Po.”

Then she said, “You guys ever play for money?”

I blinked. I thought she was trying to yank my chain, but she was being sincere.

“Well...” I tried to think of the best way to answer that besides, “Get real.”

“We’re not quite there yet,” I said.

“Oh.”

Suddenly I felt my status falling. After all I’d done to advance our relationship, now here I was back at square one. I had to recover fast, which is the only explanation for what I did next. I told a whopping lie.

“We’re working on a gig next month.”

“Oh yeah?” She brightened. I swear I could even see the slightest glimmer of a twinkle in her eye. “Where are you playing?”

Where?

“You’ve probably never heard of it.” I swore right then and there I’d never tell another lie in my life.

“What is it, some place like the Old Fire House?”

I laughed nervously. “Something like that.”

“That’s cool.”

. . .

I went straight to Tham’s and threw myself on the lone futon sitting in the middle of his living room. “We need a gig.”

“So how’d it go with Gina?” asked Charlie, who was standing at the kitchen counter slurping up a bowl of noodles.

“As if you don’t know.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I know you guys were down here listening through the vents.”

“I told you,” said Tham. “Only can hear when they shout. You two aren’t shouting.” He paused and wriggled his eyebrows up and down. “Maybe you doing something else.”

“Oh right,” I said. It was at that moment that I noticed Jo-Jo sitting in the corner of the room. She was eyeing me in this funny way, like she was trying to decide if there was anything different about me. As if there might just be some truth in Tham’s wriggling eyebrows. Obviously the whole notion of Gina and I doing anything was preposterous, but still I worried that Jo-Jo might detect some subtle change in me.

Could she somehow tell that underneath my calm exterior, my emotions were bouncing out of control like a

dog with rabies? I wiped my fingers across my mouth to make sure I wasn't drooling or anything.

"So did you tell her how we broke into Goth Girl's?"

"You mean Poser Girl, don't you? Yeah, I told her."

"And?"

"And she thought it was pretty cool, I guess." I don't know why I was trying to act so casual about everything. Maybe it was because suddenly I didn't want to share Gina with anyone else, even if there wasn't anything to share. I shot another quick glance at Jo-Jo to try to gauge her reaction. She was giggling at Tham, who was kissing his hand pretending to be Gina and me. I wondered which one of us was supposed to be the hand.

"Would you knock it off?" But it was hard to suppress a grin. "Seriously." I expelled a long sigh, mostly to stop myself from exploding in a fit of mad-dog behavior where I'd wind up running around in circles chasing my own tail. "Can we talk about the gig?"

"What gig?" said Tham.

"You got us a gig?" asked Charlie.

"No," I said a little more forcefully than I'd intended. Sometimes your best friends can really be

exasperating. But at least they'd taken my mind off of Gina, for the moment anyway. "I was just thinking maybe it's time we try and find some place to play."

"Who'd want us?" asked Charlie.

He had a point. Who *would* want us? "I don't know," I said. "There's probably lots of places we could play if we were willing to do it free of charge."

"What's with you always offering to play for free?"

"When have I..."

"Nosehair's."

"Yeah, okay," I said. "But it's probably the best way to get our name out there."

"We have a name?" asked Tham.

"Sure," said Charlie. "It's Royal Hoax."

"We never agreed on that," I said.

"How about the Shagadelics," said Tham.

"No Austin Powers crap."

"Hey! What you mean?"

"Forget it," I said.

"How about Three Blind Mice?" said Tham.

"I like it," said Jo-Jo.

I smiled. “I kind of like it too. Except, what happens if someone else joins the band?”

Charlie charged out of the kitchen. “Who’s joining our band? Nobody said anything about another person.”

“I was speaking hypothetically.”

“Well hypothetically, forget it, all right?”

“Why don’t you call yourselves the Dumpster Divers?” suggested Jo-Jo. A hush fell over the room. Charlie may have been our unofficial leader, but Jo-Jo was without question the brains in our group.

“I think you might be onto something,” I said.

She beamed. She was also, without question, the beauty in our bunch. One day she would definitely give Gina D’Amore a run for her money.

Tham picked up his trash grabbing claw, which had been lying on the kitchen counter next to where Charlie was eating. Before that it had been poking around a dumpster. Life in an all-male household.

“I know.” I scooted to the edge of the futon. “We could call ourselves White Trash.”

Charlie cringed. “No way, man. Besides, Tham’s not white.”

“I not?”

“Yeah, okay. Let me think.”

“How about The Garbage Men?” asked Charlie.

“Nah,” I shook my head. “Too Village People.”

“I love the Village People.” Tham was suddenly jumping around in the middle of the living room doing his own dorky version of the YMCA dance. By the time he’d repeated the chorus for the third time, Charlie launched himself across the room and wrestled him to the ground.

“I got it!” I jumped up, being careful not to fall into Charlie and Tham, who were now rolling across the rug like a couple of roped crocodiles. “One Man’s Trash!”

Tham managed to eek out a giddy “What?” before Charlie pinned him against the wall.

“So what do you think?”

“I don’t get it,” said Charlie, now sitting on Tham’s legs.

“Me neither,” said Tham, who was trying to snap at Charlie’s feet with the claw, which he’d somehow managed to hold on to.

“You know, one man’s trash is another man’s treasure.”

“I like it,” said Jo-Jo.

Charlie snatched the claw away from Tham and jumped to his feet. “Not bad,” he said. “Our first album cover could be us looking out from inside the dumpster.”

“Yeah,” I said, “and we could call it, And All That Garbage.”

“Huh?”

“One Man’s Trash...And All That Garbage.”

“Oh yeah,” said Charlie. “Cool.”

“Tham?”

“Groovy, baby.”

I looked tentatively at Jo-Jo. She licked her lips, then flashed me the thumbs up sign. I sat back down on the futon. “Okay, so we’ve got that all figured out. Now we just need a gig.”

## **Chapter 17**

We practiced like crazy for the next couple of days, and for the first time, we began to sound like a real band, that is, if you don't count Tham's periodic segues into the Teletubbies theme song. We were all jazzed up about the possibility of playing for an audience, even though we hadn't done anything other than talk about getting a gig. For the moment, talk was enough. It gave us something to dream about.

For me, of course, the band was only half the dream. Ever since my last visit to Gina's, I couldn't get her out of my mind. Yeah, okay, she'd always played the leading role in my teenage fantasies, but a fantasy is not the same thing as a dream.

A dream holds possibilities, and possibilities give you hope. It's the hope that drives you. Sometimes it drives you crazy, but it drives you, nonetheless. Because even if there's only a sliver of a chance...

there's still a chance.

The knock came exactly 11:25 Wednesday morning. I popped a mint into my mouth and waited for it to begin melting on my tongue in a deliberate effort to keep from rushing to the door.

"Come on, Alec. Open up, would ya'?"

POP POP POP.

I dragged over to the door and opened it.

"Who are you supposed to be?" I asked Tham, who was standing in front of Charlie and Jo-Jo, wearing that ridiculous torn sombrero along with a set of plastic fangs.

"It part of my look. For the band."

"We're not the Village People."

"I tried to tell him that," said Charlie, slipping around Tham with Jo-Jo and her drawing supplies.

"The band name One Man Trash." Tham pointed at his hat. "This my trash."

“How are you going to sing with fangs in your mouth?”

“No problem,” he said.

“One Man’s Trash.” Gina’s voice gave me a start. I had no idea how long she’d been standing out there.

“Cool name,” she said.

I nudged the Mexican Dracula out of her way.

“Never mind Tham,” I told her.

“Who?”

Tham spit out his fangs. “Austin.”

I rolled my eyes as I eased the keyboard out of Gina’s arms. For a split second, my hand brushed over hers. A chill ran up my spine as she stepped around me.

“Hey girl,” she said to Jo-Jo, who to my dismay was seated at the dining room table next to Charlie. Gina took a seat on the other side of her, which only left one chair, presumably for Dad.

I hurried over with the keyboard and took the empty seat before Tham got any stupid ideas.

“Where’s your dad?” asked Charlie.

“He’ll be here,” I said, glaring at him across the table. “He had to deliver something to Mrs. Mertz.” I couldn’t bring myself to say tiger pee in front of Gina.

On cue, Dad suddenly walked through the door. “Sorry I’m late, guys. Oh, hey,” he paused to see the four of us crowded around the keyboard. “We’re going to need a bigger table.” He smiled at Jo-Jo and went into the kitchen for a stool. On his way back to the dining room, he glanced over at Tham, who was sitting in his reading chair staring at a muted picture of the Teletubbies on the television screen. Normally I’d have found that amusing, but I was too irritated with Charlie for trying to weasle in on the lesson.

What I couldn’t figure out was, was he trying to horn in on Gina or the keyboard? Either way it made me mad. Naturally, Dad would be good-natured about letting him join us. He just squeezed in at the table between Gina and me as if it were no big deal.

To my relief, Charlie declined my Dad’s offer to take a turn on the keyboard. He was just there to observe. Of course, I knew he’d get around to playing it sooner or later, and when he did, it’d be all over for me.

But it was decent of him to stay out of the spotlight for the time being.

My own playing sounded pretty good that morning. Even Jo-Jo said so, which really affected me for some strange reason. I don't know why her opinion suddenly meant so much, but it did. Maybe it was because of the way Gina had taken to her. Whatever it was, I began to feel a lot better about things.

But there was still one thing bothering me, and it had nothing to do with Charlie. It was Dad who had me in a knot. I didn't like the way he was practically rubbing up against Gina, though it wasn't really his fault. If I had to be perfectly honest about it, it was more Gina rubbing up against him than the other way around.

Thankfully, music has a way of lifting your mood. Even though neither Gina nor I was an especially gifted player, we were having fun with the stuff Dad showed us. And when he took over and played a few Jerry Lee Lewis songs, no one could keep from bopping along. Tham popped off the chair and joined us, which by that point, didn't bother me in the least. Even Jo-Jo put down her drawing and rocked with the beat.

I leaned over and stole a glimpse of her artwork. It was a picture of us sitting around the table – Gina, Dad, me and Charlie. Naturally, she included herself next to Charlie. I couldn't help but notice that she'd drawn herself exactly the way she drew Gina, only smaller. It was the most realistic part of the picture.

When the lesson was over, Gina smiled as she picked up the keyboard to leave. She said good-bye to each and every one of us. Even Austin. When the door closed behind her, we went crazy like a bunch of wild cats who'd just been freed from a cage.

"Let's go somewhere," said Charlie, who would never have been able to sit still after spending half an hour across the table from Gina D'Amore, even if she'd completely ignored him. I was pretty wound up myself, but I wasn't sure if I was ready to follow Charlie on some spontaneous adventure into the city. With him, there was no telling where we might end up. And to tell the truth, I was a little nervous about it.

Mom had just started allowing me to cruise around on my own, and only after many hours of warning me about all the bad things that can happen to a kid alone in

the city. Maybe that's why I'd never ventured out any farther than across the street to Pappy's Fried Chicken.

"How about Pappy's?" I suggested.

Charlie just snorted and walked out the door. What choice was there but to follow him?

## Chapter 18

Two subways and ten blocks of walking later, we made it to...

“Buster Burger?”

“It just opened,” said Charlie, as if that explained why we’d spent the last hour and most of our pocket money to trek all the way across town. I have to admit, though, the greasy burger fumes wafting across the parking lot made me swoon. Then again, I was so tired and hungry by that time, I’d have started drooling over a cold bag of French fries from the apartment dumpster.

With what little money we had left after the subway, it looked like that’s what I would wind up eating. But we managed to scrape together enough change for two

decent lunches and four drinks. And refills were free. We were set.

Even though it was getting beyond the normal lunch hour, the place was crawling with kids. That's what happens when you offer free drinks in the middle of summer. We were cruising the aisles scouting for a booth, when whom should we see but that jerk, Todd Baxter.

He was sitting across from this skinny red-headed girl. She was perched on the edge of her seat, sitting on her hands as she leaned over the table. Resting on top of the table in a pile of greasy crumbs were two of the biggest boobs I'd ever seen, at least at close range. They were so big, and the rest of her was so small, it was hard to imagine how she could even stand upright with those things attached to her. Of course, she couldn't hold a candle to our Gina, even though it was sort of hard to keep my eyes off them. Her.

Todd was sliding to the edge of his seat like he was getting ready to leave, when he spotted us standing there holding our tray of food. We stood there waiting for him

to get out, but he didn't budge. He just sat there snapping his gum, giving us this dirty sneer.

"Come on," said Charlie.

We found a little table across the aisle and squeezed around it, just like we'd done earlier in my dining room. Except this time it was Tham wedged in between Jo-Jo and me, instead of Dad and Gina. The way he slouched over the stool with that sombrero flopping over his face and his elbows spread across the table, he occupied about the same amount of space as two people and a keyboard.

Charlie started divvying up food, but I'd lost my appetite. The sight of Todd Baxter made me sick, even though I wasn't really looking at him. My eyes were fixed on the big, skinny red-haired girl. It was impossible not to look at them. Her.

I was sitting there thinking about how Lot's wife was turned to a pillar of salt because she couldn't tear her eyes away from the city of Sodom, when suddenly, I spotted it. The skinny redhead with the huge pillars was gesturing to Todd with her hands, something along the lines of "Let's go." That's when I noticed the sparkly band of diamonds glinting off her wrist.

“Hey you,” I yelled across the aisle. “Where’d you get that bracelet?”

Charlie looked up at me in disbelief. Jo-Jo, on the other hand, cast her eyes downward, as if she couldn’t bear to watch. Meanwhile, Tham took the opportunity to snag some extra fries from the communal pile.

Todd stopped snapping his gum and squinted at me, which made his brow really stick out over his eyes like a caveman. His jaw was hanging open and I could see a pink wad of gum sitting on his tongue like a giant zit.

“Where’d she get that bracelet?” I asked again, just in case the caveman hadn’t understood me the first time.

“Buzz off,” he grunted. A spray of spit shot out of his mouth when he spoke.

Charlie murmured something under his breath, and I knew I was treading in dangerous waters, but I didn’t care. The adrenaline was now pumping through my blood so fast, my brain wasn’t working.

“I won’t buzz off until you give us Gina’s bracelet.”

Todd slid over to the edge of the seat. His nostrils were flaring just like the Colonel’s. Maybe they were related.

“Who’s Gina?” squealed the red-head. She sounded confused, which didn’t exactly surprise me. She had the vacant expression of a girl who was probably confused a lot of the time. Still, there was something sly about the way she lowered her hand into her lap, as if she were trying to conceal the bracelet on her skinny wrist.

Todd was now on his feet, standing in the middle of the aisle. “Get lost before I cream you.”

At this point, the smart thing to do would have been to back down and keep my mouth shut. Naturally, I did the opposite, or tried to anyway. The trouble was, I was squeezed so tightly between Tham and Charlie, it was hard to stand up. So instead I just leaned out into the aisle and said, “Kiss my ass, jerk.”

Todd was already standing over me with one arm cocked back ready to cream me before the word “jerk” had even rolled off my tongue. I braced myself for the knuckle sandwich that was going to be my lunch, but just as the big oaf was about to let it fly, Charlie popped off the stool and launched himself straight into Todd’s iron belly.

None of us could believe what we were seeing, least of all Todd Baxter, whose gum shot out of his mouth like a missile as he crumpled over Charlie's back. Charlie landed in a heap under the table. The gum landed in the middle of our food.

"Hey, watch it!" shouted Tham, who was just reaching for the last couple of fries when the wad of wet chickle hit them.

With Charlie out of his seat, I was no longer trapped, which meant I was obliged to help him. After all, I was the one who'd started everything. I shot a fleeting glance at Jo-Jo, who seemed to understand what I was about to do. Then I jumped up and threw myself on Todd's back just as he was straightening up.

Now jumping on Todd Baxter was nothing like throwing myself on top of Tham and Charlie during a playful wrestling match. Todd was big and, though I hated to admit it, strong. It was like jumping onto the back of a gorilla. Except that Todd wasn't quite as evolved.

He began spinning around, trying to throw me off while he let fly a string of curse words I'd never dare

repeat, even as an adult. I don't know how many times I'd gone around when the flying pickle hit me in the eye.

"Oops," I heard Tham say, as my eye teared up from the splash of briny green acid. I heard a squeal from somewhere behind me, which I recognized as belonging to the big, skinny red-head. Apparently, I wasn't the only one getting hit with flying food.

Upon hearing Red's squeal, Todd whipped around in the opposite direction from the way he'd been spinning, which caused me to lose my grip. I fell with a thunk right on top of Charlie, who, I found out later, was waiting for Todd to stop spinning so he could pants him.

Well, Todd had finally stopped. Unfortunately, his pants were still up.

"You're dead meat."

This time I didn't argue. The way I saw it, Todd had the upper hand. Literally. And when that hand reached down and pulled me up by my shirt, I closed my eyes and said my prayers.

I'm not exactly sure what happened next, except to say that a tiny angel was sent from above to save me. When I opened my eyes, she was standing on top of the

table preparing to dump her free refill over Todd's blocky head.

"Jo-Jo?"

"Hey you kids!" The manager was pressing his way through the crowd. But it was hard to move quickly in a place crawling with teenagers. By the time he reached us, Todd was covered in Dr. Pepper.

"Nice going, Jo!"

You've got to love those free refills.

The manager yelled something in Spanish, then all six of us were tossed out of Buster Burger. Todd dragged the red-head to his rusty blue Dodge, which had been parked out of sight behind the dumpster. As he screeched out of the parking lot, he rolled down the window and flipped us the finger.

"Crap," I said.

"What?"

"Does anyone have any money for the subway?"

Charlie shook his head. Jo-Jo shook hers too.

Tham shrugged. "Don't look at me."

I looked down the long stretch of road ahead of us and sighed. "That's what I thought."

## **Chapter 19**

I was so charged up I could have run all the way home, except that it was six miles away and I was – same as when we'd arrived – too tired and hungry to move. Luckily, Charlie was there to spur us along. It was a long, hot journey across town, especially when Jo-Jo began to fade. We took turns carrying her on our backs the last thirty blocks.

Charlie's turns lasted the longest. Despite his age, he was by far the strongest of us all. He could have probably beat the snot out of Todd Baxter if he'd been tall enough to land a punch on his big square face. As it was, he'd brought the dumb jerk to his knees. Anyway, there was more than one way to fight a guy like Todd Baxter.

“So,” said Charlie, giving Jo-Jo’s limp body a boost up his back as he crossed the street in front of Pappy’s Chicken, “you going to tell Gina about that jerk stealing her bracelet and giving it to another girl?”

What a question. “Of course I am,” I said. And why? I’d like to say it was because I wanted to help her recover the bracelet and gain her freedom, but my motives were much more selfish than that. I reasoned that if I told her what her creepo boyfriend had done, she would hate him.

And love me.

I couldn’t wait to tell her.

Two days later, when I finally got the chance, I blurted it out before I’d even crossed the threshold to her apartment. “I think we found your bracelet.”

She bit her lip as if she were trying to keep herself from smiling, just in case what I said wasn’t true. But her dark brown eyes were dancing, at least, I imagined they were. I thought for a second that she might really walk up and throw her arms around me. But she didn’t.

No matter. I was feeling bold. I walked right past the keyboard and straight over to where she was sitting

on the couch, where I began recounting in great detail the tale of our encounter with Todd Baxter. I was so caught up in my own story telling, it took me a moment to notice that her eyes had stopped dancing. She was still biting her lower lip, but the smile she'd been withholding had faded.

By the time I was done speaking, her expression was verging on stony. "What'd the bracelet look like?" She spoke in a quiet, sober voice, which should have reigned me in a bit, but I was so eager to share my good news, I never stopped to consider that it may not exactly have been music to her ears.

Though I'd only seen the bracelet briefly from a distance, I could still picture the way it was wrapped around the red-head's skinny wrist, like a sparkling tourniquet which somehow cut off her circulation, causing her breasts to swell like a pair of over-filled water balloons. Feeling similarly inflated, I puffed out my chest, no doubt dwelling subconsciously on that enormous skinny girl. Then, rather presumptuously, I said, "It looked like a gold chain with diamonds stuck all over it."

I waited for Gina to finally jump up and embrace me, but she remained seated as her eyes drifted across the room. Not to any point in particular, just away from me. “My mother’s bracelet was platinum,” she said softly. I stood there a minute in awkward silence as she continued to stare blankly into space. Finally I went over to the keyboard and sat down to play.

I started thinking about those fairy tale maidens again. For some reason, they always wound up in some catatonic state before their princes showed up to rescue them.

Gina needed a prince.

That was supposed to have been me.

But I wasn’t even worthy enough to play the part of the warty little toad with princely hopes.

What I was, was the complete opposite of all that.

Despite all my good intentions, I’d become nothing more than that heartless messenger of death who strips the forest of its leaves and snuffs out all the cute little bunnies.

I’d killed her.

I’d killed everything.

Even the desktop potpourri seemed to have lost its scent.

There was nothing left for me to do.

I got up and let myself out.

## Chapter 20

I spent the week-end moping around the clubhouse with Tham and Charlie. I had no desire to practice. I was killing the band, too. Thankfully, Charlie was there to keep it alive.

“Come on, Alec. We’ve got a gig to get ready for.”

“No we don’t.”

“Stop worrying about Gina, would you? She’ll get over it.” Charlie Little was definitely wise beyond his years. “By the time you go back on Monday, she’ll probably be throwing herself at you, trying to thank you.” Tham did that stupid kissing thing where he slobbers all over his hand.

“I’m not going back,” I snapped.

“Oh yes you are,” said Charlie. “And in the mean time, you’re going to pick up that Fender and jam with us before I crack it over your thick skull.”

“Ow.” Tham said that, not me. He was rubbing his big moon head, giggling.

It was Jo-Jo’s quiet smile that finally brought me around. I picked up my guitar and turned on the amp, letting my fingers strum limply over a few chords. I was still down, but not out.

The band played on.

At Charlie’s insistence, I went back to Gina’s the following Monday. Perhaps she would be over it, I thought, just like Charlie’d said.

But nothing was further from the truth. I knew the instant I stepped inside that pale green hall. She was sitting right where I’d left her. She looked bad. Not that she didn’t look beautiful – she did – just not in a good sort of way. This time I kept my distance as, tentatively, I asked her, “How’s it going?”

“How do you think?” she said. “It sucks.”

That was pretty much our entire conversation for the next half hour. When I got up to leave she told me to take the keyboard with me.

“Don’t you want to keep it here so you can practice?”

She rolled her eyes, which I took as a no.

I picked up the keyboard, which felt heavier than it had the day it crushed my chest in the dumpster, and headed downstairs to Tham’s. Charlie and Jo-Jo were already there. No doubt they’d gathered together to listen to our practice session through the vent again. If they’d heard anything, they didn’t let on.

Tham grinned when he saw the keyboard. “For me?”

“No,” I said sharply, as I set it on his kitchen counter between the trash claw and a wok with some dirty cooking oil in it. Tham’s apartment always smelled like something had just been fried in a wok.

He sidled up next to me. “Alec mad. What matter Alec?” He pretended to tickle under my chin like a baby. “Don’t be mad, lil’ Alec. Coo-chee-coo.”

I brushed him aside and walked over to the futon where Charlie was drumming his sticks on the seat

cushion. “Guess she’s still upset, huh?” He continued beating on the cushion as he talked.

“Well she sure wasn’t throwing herself at me, trying to thank me,” I said, squeezing my body onto the edge of the futon out of drum stick range.

Tham followed me over there. I was ready to jump him if he tried to coo-chee-coo me again, but he didn’t. “She play sad music all week-end,” he said. He was speaking seriously now, at least, as serious as Tham ever got. “She look sad, too.”

“How would you know anything about that?” I said.

“I see her on balcony.”

“You can’t see her balcony,” I said. “It’s directly over yours, for crying out loud. What, does that grabbing stick of yours have a periscope attachment?”

“Hey, good idea,” he said.

“So how do you know she looks sad?” asked Jo-Jo, with all the sweet, artful innocence of an eight-year-old girl.

“See from wall,” he said, nodding out the window in the direction of the dumpster. Then he looked back at me and wriggled his eyebrows up and down in that goofy

way of his. There was a limit to how long Tham could remain serious.

I got off the futon but I didn't jump him. It just wasn't very comfortable sitting on half a cushion. And anyway, I didn't really feel like hanging out. I needed some alone time. I forgot about the keyboard when I left. Not that it really mattered. Like Gina, I wasn't exactly in the mood to play it anymore.

## Chapter 21

Gina didn't show up for a lesson that Wednesday. Neither did Tham or Charlie, who were hanging out with Jo-Jo in the parking lot by the dumpster. I guess we all knew she wouldn't come.

Dad didn't make a big deal out of it. "How about you?" he asked. "You feel like a lesson?"

"Maybe later, okay?"

I went outside and joined my friends. Tham and Jo-Jo were sitting on the wall as Charlie gracefully maneuvered around the cracks and buckles of the pavement on his skateboard.

"Any sign of her?" I asked.

They all shook their heads no.

"Figures."

I knew Gina was sitting up there in her apartment brooding over that creep, Todd Baxter. What I couldn't understand was, why did she care about a jerk like that when she had us?

"Well," said Charlie after listening to me whine for the better part of an hour, "it's not like we've actually done anything for her."

"What do you mean?"

"Yeah," echoed Tham. "What you mean?"

"I just mean we haven't exactly gotten the bracelet back, have we?"

"It's got to be somewhere," I said. "We just need to keep looking." My eyes scanned the checkerboard of balconies rising out of the asphalt. Something glinted from a corner window on the seventh floor. I couldn't think whose place it was at first. The curtains were drawn, just like Officer Grimm's. Maybe I'd just imagined a flash of light. Then I remembered who lived there. Apartment 7-D – home to The Shadow.

My eyes drifted downward, coming to rest on the empty sixth floor balcony. "Where could it be?"

Tham waved his arm at me dismissively. “Forget about it.” He followed my gaze to Gina’s place. “Let just go up and break her out.”

I whipped around and stared at him. “What, like kidnap her?” I wasn’t about to admit that I’d toyed with that idea myself. Deep down I knew it wasn’t exactly practical. Besides, she probably wouldn’t come. Not with me anyway. And if she did, what would we do with her? Well, yeah, I guess I could think of a few things...

“We’ve done enough breaking into other people’s apartments for the summer,” I said, trying to conceal my heartache. Then under my breath I said, “There’s got to be another way.”

Of course, Tham’s radar ears picked up on it. “Yeah, sure. Why not just buy another bracelet?”

Charlie snorted, then for emphasis he did a three-sixty on his skateboard. “Don’t tell me you’ve got two thousand dollars stashed away that you’ve been saving for a rainy day?” Jo-Jo’s head lifted as she looked expectantly at Tham. Economics was a subject the Little’s didn’t take lightly. Not even Jo-Jo.

“You know, he might be on to something.” I kicked my legs onto the wall and stood up. “Maybe we could raise the money somehow.”

“Sell lemonade!” cried Tham. “Bake sale!”

Charlie’s eyes rolled back into his head.

“Listen,” I said, “we’re a band looking for a gig. Why don’t we give a concert or something? It could be like Farm Aid.”

“What’s that?” asked Jo-Jo.

“It was a concert Willie Nelson did back in the ’80s to raise money for farmers.”

Jo-Jo smiled, no doubt thinking about those cuddly barnyard creatures she loved to draw.

All of sudden Tham jumped to his feet and began dancing along the wall. “I love that Willie Nelson. On the road again.”

Listening to him imitate Willie Nelson was almost as bad as listening to him sing Bob Dylan. Charlie and Jo-Jo burst out laughing. Frankly, I was a little nervous watching him hop around up there.

*Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall...*

“Seriously,” I said, hoping to settle Tham before he fell. “What do you think? It could be our first gig.”

Charlie’s laughter tapered off. He was balancing over a speed hump with his face all screwed up, which had an eerie way of distorting his otherwise angelic features. He looked like an angry chinchilla.

“I thought you said we’d have to play our first gig for free, you know, to get our name out there. I mean, who’s going to pay to hear a bunch of kids they’ve never heard of?”

I hated to admit it, but Charlie had a point. “Yeah, well, they will soon enough,” I said, never believing it for a single second.

Charlie looked at me with this skeptical cock-eyed frown, but he didn’t say anymore. Nobody did for a long time. We kept our thoughts to ourselves as we took turns stealing glances at the empty balcony. It was Tham who finally broke the silence. Naturally.

“You need to come early to see her,” he said. “Before breakfast. That when we do our polo practice.”

I remembered the day of the dumpster dive. I guess it had been pretty early, for summer anyway.

“Was she there this morning?”

Tham shrugged. “How should I know? I was sleeping.”

“I thought you helped your dad practice.”

“Most days.”

“Think he’d mind if I helped too?”

“You no want to help. You just want to spy on Gina.” Tham wriggled his eyebrows up and down.

“So?”

“Yeah sure,” he said. “No problem.”

“Can I come too?” asked Charlie.

“Why not? It free country, isn’t it?”

## **Chapter 22**

Early the next morning, Charlie and I joined Tham and his father on the wall. Mr. Kantawong was delighted to have us taking such an active interest in his sport. Charlie really was interested. For him, this wasn't just about Gina. He actually thought playing polo atop an elephant would be cool. The only reservation he had about being out there was leaving Jo-Jo sleeping alone in the apartment while he came outside to practice.

As for me, I could have cared a less about how to hit a tiny ball with an extra long mallet from high atop anything. But Tham's father was insistent that we all give it a go. So I whacked away at the beer cans on the ground like everybody else, while quietly I mulled over my concert idea, keeping one eye trained on the sixth

floor's second balcony. My heart stopped when the sliding glass door finally opened, but it was only Gina's tight-faced stepmother. She appeared to be searching for something under the chaise lounge. Probably a missing sock.

I was beginning to doubt what Tham had told us about seeing Gina up there. I shot him a thorny look to let him see my irritation. He shrugged.

For three days we waited on that wall, but Gina never showed. The only thing I saw of any interest was the expansive backside of Naked Herb as he danced the Hokey Pokey in his living room. Just like Todd Baxter's red-headed girlfriend, Herb's larger than life bare ass was something impossible not to stare at, especially when he was shaking it all about.

Thankfully, I was spared the more alarming indecencies when, midway through turning himself about, he reversed course and staggered out of the room. As if someone had suddenly removed a large, fleshy magnet from the second floor, my eyes instantly dropped away from Herb's window like a pair of metal coins. They came to rest in the big blue dumpster, where a

vintage PEZ dispenser poked out from a splitting trash bag. It was a Hello Kitty, of all things.

“Well, what do you know.”

I bent over to retrieve it with the grabbing claw, but it was out of reach. Charlie volunteered to get it in exchange for a keyboard lesson with Dad. “I’ll ask him,” I said, in that way a kid says whatever it takes to get what he wants.

As he handed up the plastic Kitty head, I shot a glance at apartment 2-A. Naturally the curtains were drawn. I hadn’t seen Crystal or her shifty father since the break in. They were as elusive as Gina. “Doesn’t anyone besides us ever leave their apartment?” I said. Not that we usually got much farther than the parking lot. There were a few others who actually made it beyond the crumbling wall.

Typically Herb left for work just as Mr. Kantawong wrapped things up. It was fun to see what he wound up wearing each day after seeing him, you know, naked. We especially liked his plaid jacket and pink tie.

Occasionally we’d see Gay Tony leaving in the afternoon. I think he was a chef somewhere downtown.

Hopefully, it was some place nicer than Buster Burger. Señora Rodriguez was in the restaurant business too, though we never saw her drive away. Then again, she probably took the bus.

As for Gina, Tham insisted she was simply too depressed to show herself on the balcony anymore. The music upstairs was getting darker, he said. “Like funeral.” I wanted to hear it for myself, so one evening after band practice, I invited myself up for a sleepover.

My keyboard was still sitting on his kitchen counter gathering dust. I pulled up a stool and sat down to play it. My fingers slipped over the keys, which had been splattered with hot peanut oil from the wok. “Jeez, Tham. What’d you do to my Dad’s keyboard?”

“What you say?”

“It’s covered in grease, for crying out loud.” As I wiped it off, I thought about how I was wiping away Gina’s fingerprints as well. She had disappeared from my life as quickly as she had entered it.

Once I’d gotten it cleaned up, I sat up and proceeded to play In the Hall of the Mountain King, a song about some guy being chased by a troll around a castle. It’s a

sinister melody, which didn't exactly convey the mood I was in, but it came closer than Yankee Doodle or Turkey in the Straw, which were the only other songs I could play from memory.

I was on my third or fourth trip around the Mountain King's castle when the stereo started upstairs. I dropped my hands into my lap and craned an ear to listen. The music was soft and mellow, but I could hear it well enough. Tham was right, it was pretty melancholy, though in a soulful way. It was beautiful, actually, just like Gina.

"Is that Smashing Pumpkins?" I asked.

Tham nodded. "She play them a lot."

"Oh yeah?"

"Mostly the sad song."

"Oh." I slid off the stool and walked over to where Tham lay sprawled across the futon. I knocked his feet off the cushion and sat down. That sort of gesture would normally have evoked some whiney comment, ultimately escalating into an all-out brawl. But we were both too fixated on Gina's music to be bothered with any silly wrestling moves just then.

When the song ended, I reached for the television remote, but Tham shook his head. “Wait,” he said. “She just getting started.”

He was right. She followed the Smashing Pumpkins song with a selection of Beatles tunes. The Beatles songs were much more lively, though still on the depressing side. First she played Eleanor Rigby from their Revolver album, which has some of the saddest lyrics I’ve ever heard, even though it sounds like an upbeat tune if you’re not paying close attention. After that she cranked up the volume and played HELP! That one almost sent me bolting up the stairs.

“You think she’s playing that for us?”

“Us who? She playing that for me!” Tham giggled. “Maybe I better go up and see.” There was a moment when I was tempted to push him off the couch just for the hell of it. But the mood got sober again pretty fast when Gina switched over to a Tracy Chapman CD. Talk about depressing lyrics. I was relieved when she finally swapped it out for some R.E.M., even if the song she played was Everybody Hurts.

Then she totally changed course again and put on none other than Bob Dylan. Of all songs, she actually played Positively Fourth Street.

“Can you believe it?”

Of course, Tham had to ruin it by singing along.

*You got a lotta nerve,  
To say you are my friend.  
When I was down,  
You just stood there grinning...*

“I hope that one wasn’t directed at us.”

“Nah,” said Tham.

Most of the time we just sat there listening quietly, except for the beginnings of each song, when we’d both start bouncing up and down on the futon, trying to be the first one to identify it.

“Green Day! Walking Alone!”

“Gin Blossoms! Till I Hear It From You!”

“Third Eye Blind! Jumper!”

Tham usually beat me by a few seconds, though he’d had the distinct advantage of hearing most of these

selections before. I recognized a couple songs that my mother listened to on occasions when she was feeling nostalgic, like James Taylor's Don't Let Me Be Lonely Tonight and Someone Saved My Life Tonight by Elton John.

There were some songs that neither Tham nor I could place. A lot of them were old folk tunes that my parents would probably have known. There were some blues mixed in there too, as well as a couple of gospel hymns. Her music collection was amazingly eclectic, which I'd have never have guessed in a zillion years. Of course, every song shared a common theme – misery.

The last song she played was another Smashing Pumpkins tune. Farewell and Goodnight. I looked over at Tham. His eyelids were heavy and his legs had somehow crept back onto the futon where they were taking up most of the cushion. "What do you think it all means?" I asked him.

Tham yawned. "It mean she have good taste."

Gina's last few songs had lulled him right to sleep, but I wasn't tired at all. In fact, I felt more alert at that

moment than I had in days. Even more alert than when Naked Herb was Hokey Pokeying in his birthday suit.

I kept replaying her songs in my head, the same way I'd listened to her voice on our answering machine all those weeks ago. I thought about all the different lyrics, and what, if anything, they meant to her. Obviously she was feeling down, but I couldn't help thinking she was also reaching out. To us. To me.

Yeah, okay, so maybe it wasn't to me. Maybe she was just sitting up there listening to music like a thousand other kids did every night. But it was a bit weird that on this night she chose to start her concert right in the middle of my Hall of the Mountain King. She had to know I'd hear her. What if she were trying to tell me something? Like when she played HELP! or that James Taylor song, Don't Let Me Be Lonely Tonight. Suppose she really meant it?

I gingerly lifted myself off the cushion, trying not to disturb Tham. I wasn't even vertical when his long legs stretched out to fill the void. "Farewell and Goodnight," I said, as I worked up the nerve to march upstairs and rescue my Gina once and for all.

I was almost to the door when Mr. Kantawong materialized from out of the blue. He was wearing that torn sombrero from the dumpster, and clamped under his arm was a stack of videos he'd borrowed from Naked Herb. "Come see what I got," he said, waving me back into the living room, where he pointed at the floor for me to sit. "Check it out." He walked over to the television and popped in one of Herb's tapes.

"What is it?" I asked him.

He grinned a familiar smile of piano key teeth. "The greatest American ever born."

"George Washington?"

He also had the same twittering giggle as his son. "You funny Alec." He sat down beside me on the floor as the opening credits to *The Sands of Iwo Jima* crawled across the screen.

"You think John Wayne's the greatest American ever born?"

"No doubt. He ride his own horse in all his movies. No stunt man."

"This is a World War II film," I pointed out. "He probably doesn't ride a horse in this one."

“Aw, nuts.” Mr. Kantawong flung the sombrero behind him. It landed right on Tham’s clunky foot. He got up and ejected *The Sands of Iwo Jima*, swapping it out for a tape of *The Alamo*.

“Are those all John Wayne movies?” I asked.

He nodded. “All the one he die in.”

How cheerful.

When I finally fell asleep that night, I dreamed I was at the Alamo with John Wayne. Gina was there too. She was singing along with R.E.M. to the song *Everybody Hurts*. When it was over, Todd Baxter jumped out wearing a big sombrero and ran me through with a bayonet.

## Chapter 23

I woke up cold and stiff on Tham's living room floor when the sun blazed its way through the sliding glass door around six AM. Something hard and knotty was poking into my rib cage. I couldn't recall there being any rocks lying around Tham's apartment the night before, though nothing was impossible at the Kantawong place.

I rolled off Tham's limp hand, which must have fallen off the futon in the middle of the night, along with the torn sombrero and a single, smelly tennis shoe. The rest of his body seemed to be defying the laws of gravity, spilling off the cushion yet somehow remaining aloft. What kept him anchored up there was his big round head, which was planted face down on the cushion like an overturned dinner plate.

I badly wanted to relocate to my own warm bed downstairs, but I was too tired to move. Instead I curled into a ball and grabbed the sombrero to shield my face from the sun, hoping against the odds that I'd be able to go back to sleep. For close to an hour I lay there in perfect misery – in keeping with Gina's theme – until just when I'd finally reached the threshold of dreamland, Mr. Kantawong appeared over me and clanged a gong.

“Saddle up,” he said, just like John Wayne.

There was only one thing I could do.

I pretended to be asleep.

Unfortunately, it's not that easy to blow off a man who aspires to be a championship elephant polo player, especially one with a portable gong. He kept clanging that stupid thing every ten seconds, until the torture of that relentless reverberating ding became so unbearable, there was no choice but to surrender.

It came as a great relief to see him put the gong down, until he picked up the dirty trash grabbing claw on a stick and began prodding us out the door and to the wall. Charlie was already up there warming up when we arrived. Mr. Kantawong grinned. “He make a fine

manhut some day.” Manhuts are the guys who sit behind the polo player and actually control the elephant. I couldn’t imagine what their training routines entailed. They probably got breakfast, at least.

When it was my turn with the mallet, I leaned over the dumpster and used it to poked through the trash, just in case there was another PEZ in there. There wasn’t. I handed it back to Charlie before I was tempted to retrieve a half eaten donut from the bin and stretched out on the crumbling concrete wall. The morning sun was warm on my back, which made lying across a narrow concrete slab surprisingly agreeable. Anything was better than Tham’s living room floor. I’d have easily dropped off to sleep right then and there if it hadn’t been for the sirens.

I sat up as the ambulance rolled to a stop in front of the main entrance. The sound cut off, but the revolving red light continued to pulsate in exactly the same rhythm as my heartbeat. It was kind of weird.

When the EMTs jumped out and scuttled inside, I shot Tham an uneasy glance. His eyes were already fixed on the sixth floor balcony. “Who do you think it’s for?” I asked, though I had a pretty good idea what Tham

was thinking. But it was Charlie who answered me by jumping off the wall and tearing across the parking lot. He didn't have to say it. There was only one person who could make him run like that.

Not for a second did I think the ambulance was there for Jo-Jo. Ambulances don't roar into parking lots at seven in the morning for eight-year-old girls asleep in their beds.

They come for the older girls who stay up listening to sad songs on their stereos.

We waited, Tham, his father and I. From up on the wall we held our own quiet vigil, keeping watch over the pigeon stained tower of bricks as if we half-expected it to sprout legs and dash away. It was obvious that something not good was going on inside, but nothing prepared me for the sight of that body being carted off on a stretcher, covered by a long white sheet. The pulsating red light was still flashing in rhythm, but my heart suddenly skipped a beat.

It was Gina, I was certain of it. She'd killed herself, just like the girl in apartment 3-B.

I felt a lump stuck in the back of my throat as I watched the two medics heft the body into the back of the ambulance. It was hard to swallow, and I mean that in more ways than one. How could they have let this happen? Where the hell was her father?

It suddenly struck me that something wasn't right. I mean, something beside the dead body under the sheet. Where *was* Mr. D'Amore? Why wasn't he out there crying his eyes out? The stepmother wouldn't care, I knew that, but what about her dad?

Then something else hit me. It had to do with the way the one medic grit his teeth as he lifted the body. It wasn't some expression of grief over a beautiful dead girl. He was gritting his teeth because that body was heavy. The lump under that sheet couldn't have been Gina. It was too big to be her. Unless for some reason she was really bloated. I'd heard that can happen in death sometimes.

No way, I thought. No way she could have blown up like that. A sigh of relief escaped my lips, which I have to admit, was pretty shallow. I mean, someone had

died. Just because it wasn't Gina didn't mean I shouldn't feel bad, did it?

Mr. Kantawong put his hand on my shoulder, mistaking my sigh for one of despair. I saw no reason to let him think otherwise. I tried to look appreciative yet at the same time doleful while, shamelessly, I ran my mind through a list of possible candidates for the lump. Who in our building was old and fat? About half the tenants fit that description. My money was on one of the Goldstein Sisters who lived next to Tham. I imagined a plump, gray-haired lady stretched out under that sheet with eyes popping out of their sockets.

But I was off by three floors and an X chromosome. The lump turned out to be none other than Naked Herb. He'd had a heart attack. Probably doing the Hokey Pokey.

We all wondered if he was naked under that sheet and would they find some clothes to bury him in or just lay his bare ass in the coffin. In the same way that most urban legends take hold, our speculation of Naked Herb being buried in his birthday suit eventually was accepted

as fact. Another piece of building lore for the archives under the bed in apartment 2-A.

Just as the Kantawongs and I were going back inside, who should pull into the parking lot but that knob-head Todd Baxter. There was an awkward pause when we all reached the building's front entrance at the same time. We let Todd go in ahead of us. Truthfully, we were a little afraid to walk in front of him, even with Mr. Kantawong there.

He glared at me as he pushed the elevator button for the sixth floor. That's when I said good-bye to the Kantawongs and headed down the hall to apartment 1-A. I felt bad for bailing on Tham the way I did, but there was no way I was going to ride upstairs with that creep. Besides, I'd been desperate to get to my own bed all morning. Not that I was ever going to fall asleep now.

## Chapter 24

News of Herb's death spread faster than a colony of roaches through the Royal Oaks apartment building. You could see other tenants stealing glances at his second story balcony as they went about their comings and goings. There was something about death that sparked a natural curiosity in people.

But curiosity was all it was. Despite his habitual exhibitionism, not many people in the building really knew Naked Herb. Not enough to mourn him, anyway.

The one exception was Mr. Kantawong. He would miss their daily exchanges of pleasantries, which occasionally evolved into actual conversations during which they opined on such topics as elephant polo, outer space, and on several occasions, John Wayne. A

friendship born out of a chance alignment of habits, both men found a certain comfort in the familiar regularity of their encounters in the parking lot, when Herb set off on his morning commute just as Mr. Kantawong came in from the wall. Like most relationships, it basically boiled down to timing.

Aside from Tham's father, not many folks knew anything about Naked Herb, other than what they saw on the news. Or through the window. As the building's superintendent, my father naturally had occasional interactions with the man. The last one, I believe, had something to do with mice.

"You're not having any trouble with rodents, are you Mr. O'Malley?"

"None that I know of. Though now that you mention it, I've been hearing some sort of mischief in the ceiling lately." Herb's eyes rolled upward.

"Hmmm." Like everyone else, my dad was familiar with the rumors about the haunted apartment on the third floor. "I'll look into it," was what he said, and they left it at that.

Of course, Herb was cordial to his next door neighbors, the Littles on one side, the Grimms on the other. Not that he saw either of them much, which made it easy to get along with them. Charlie and Jo-Jo were the exception, but Herb wasn't particularly talkative with kids. Mostly he just smiled and nodded at them, unless he was thinking deeply about something. Then he basically ignored them. He was the same way with Stella Mertz, though smile or no smile, she faithfully baked him a loaf of dry nut bread during the holidays.

She did it for all the tenants.

Ho Ho Ho.

As a last gesture, Mrs. Mertz left a small arrangement of flowers on Herb's doormat. She set them smack in the middle of a Kentucky-shaped splotch of dried red sauce. The next day she took the flowers away after discovering a suspicious wet spot on the pavement where someone had obviously kicked over the vase. (It was an accident, I swear. I was in a hurry to see Charlie. But I picked it up right away. Honestly.)

By Wednesday, the wet spot had dried and hardly anyone gave a passing thought to the dead man in

apartment 2-B. I, myself, wasn't thinking much about anything other than where to stick my second Hello Kitty on the windowsill. I'd tried the obvious spots. Next to the other Hello Kitty, under Darth Vader, behind the skeleton head. No matter where I put it, it just didn't fit. It was like the second Kitty was throwing everything off.

"Hey, Alec! You in there?"

I went over and opened the door. Charlie and Jo-Jo were standing in the hall. Charlie had the keyboard with him and was looking at me expectantly. Of course, I hadn't gotten around to asking my father about a lesson. Stupid of me to think Charlie would forget about something like that.

"So, uh..."

"I haven't asked him yet," I said, selfishly tugging the heavy instrument out of his hands.

"Asked me what?" Dad was heading for his reading chair where a law book lay open on the seat. But he didn't go to the chair. He stopped in front of Charlie and me and gently lifted the keyboard out of my hands, much nicer than the way I'd snatched it from Charlie. "I forgot

it was Wednesday,” he said, and walked over to the dining room table.

Charlie grinned and followed him.

Dragging along after them, I plopped down in one of the seats facing the windowsill. “Hello Hello,” I said to my Kitties. Charlie followed my gaze to the PEZ.

“Are you going to give that to her?”

Dad fiddled with the keyboard, pretending not to hear Charlie’s question, but I caught the hint of a smirk on his face. He thought Charlie meant Gina. He didn’t, of course.

“I can’t decide,” I said, which was true. The issue wasn’t whether or not I’d be willing to give up my PEZ to a crazy lady upstairs. The issue was how to get it to her lair under the bed.

When he felt relatively certain that Charlie and I had finished our chat, Dad rocked his hands over the keys, rolling out a couple of warm-up scales as a way of getting the lesson started. “Just you guys?” he said. It was more of a statement than a question. I’d never said anything to him about Gina, but I knew he’d kind of

given up on her, just like the rest of us. I let his words hang out there where I could dwell on them for a minute.

Gina's absence filled the room, which made it all the more startling when I noticed she wasn't absent at all. All of a sudden, there she was, standing in the middle of our living room floor. "I'm sorry I missed last week," she said, as if she'd just gotten over the flu or something. "Have you started already?"

"You timed it perfectly," said Dad. He acted like nothing had ever happened, but I could sense he was as surprised as we were. The only person in the room who didn't flinch at Gina's appearance was Jo-Jo. She was the one who'd let her in. I hadn't even heard the knock at the door.

Gina glided across the room and slid up next to my dad. She was positively beaming. I couldn't for the life of me figure out what was going on. She was in such a good mood she was even nice to me. "I heard someone playing the keyboard at Austin's place the other night," she said to me, smiling. "Was that you?" Dad looked puzzled over who this Austin was, but he didn't let on.

“Maybe,” I said. I was acting deliberately cool toward her. I’m not sure why.

Scratch that. I knew why.

It was Todd Baxter. Just what business did he have showing up here the other day? And now she was so happy. Was it because of that creep? The thought of them together made my flesh crawl.

“Well whoever it was, he sounded pretty good.” Gina’s voice was unnaturally bright and sparkly. It went beyond the flirty bubblyness she typically bestowed upon Dad, which I had grudgingly come to accept. This was champagne overflowing from a bottle on New Year’s Eve sparkly and bubbly. The kind of stuff that tickles your nose going down and burns your throat on the way back up. It left a bad taste in my mouth.

“Why don’t we play a little now,” said Dad, quickly inserting himself into the conversation. He was probably afraid I’d say something dumb and fumble it. Dad was no idiot when it came to matters having to do with the female species. How do you think he snagged my mom? He cleared his throat. “Here Alec,” he eased the

keyboard in front of my hands. “Why don’t you give it a go?”

My eyebrows disappeared under my tangled mane of hair, almost the way Gina’s had the day I told her we’d search 2-A for her bracelet. Except that Gina didn’t suffer from perpetual bed-head like me. Gina’s hair was always perfect.

Just like the rest of her.

So why was I acting like such a jerk?

Who cared about Todd Baxter anyway? He wasn’t here now, was he? He sure as hell wasn’t there the other night when she was reaching out with her sad, beautiful music. He didn’t know Gina the way we did. Okay, so he knew her in other ways that I’d have killed for, but he didn’t know her deep down where it counted. He didn’t know her soul.

For Gina, I straightened up and trotted out the mountain troll. When I finished, she smiled and clapped her hands quietly while Dad tossed in an encouraging, “Great.” I flashed a humble look of appreciation and slid the instrument to Charlie.

It came as no surprise to hear the keyboard jump to life under his dancing fingers, as if he'd been born to play it. He had. The troll king Charlie conjured up could have kicked the living snot out of my pitiful garden gnome. I listened attentively to his playing, but I didn't watch. I'd seen this act before. What interested me was Gina's reaction.

She was holding her breath, almost as if she'd forgotten to breathe. Of course she was amazed. Who wouldn't be? Believe it or not, I wasn't upset by Charlie's upstaging me. Honestly, I wasn't. In some ways, it actually gave me a boost. Because while it was true that Gina was transfixed on him, somewhere out of the corner of her eyes, I swear she was searching for me.

Charlie was impressive, without a doubt, but I was her kindred spirit.

Out of reverence, no one spoke when he finished. Dad's words were lodged in his throat, though he finally managed to eek out a dazed, "Wow."

It was a hard act to follow, but Gina was a good sport about it. And why not? She wowed us just by showing up. After we'd all had a turn, Dad excused

himself to look for some more advanced music for us to play. “I think you’re ready to move beyond the Hall of the Mountain King,” he said.

As he disappeared into the bedroom, I was hit with one of my stupid impulses. I guess all the music had lifted my spirits, which in turn resurrected my dumb idea for a benefit concert to raise money. “We’re working on a plan to get you off restriction,” I said.

It was Charlie’s turn to lose his eyebrows under his forelock, that is, if he’d had a forelock. Charlie was a heavy gel user. His short blonde hair never fell in his angelic face.

Gina cocked her head and gave me this pitiful smile, the type you give to a little kid who doesn’t understand what he’s saying. “Thanks,” she said, “but Todd’s got it covered. I’m busting out on Friday.”

“With him?”

She gave a weak shrug.

“But...”

Gina must have been reading my mind, because she looked at me and said, “He told me that girl was his cousin.”

He what? Incredible.

“I found it.” Before I could blurt any more stupid comments, Dad strode into the room waving a piece of sheet music. “You can’t go wrong with the Beatles.” He opened the pages and placed it in front of the keyboard. The song he’d selected was Here Comes the Sun.

“The Beatles broke up after that album,” I said a little bitterly.

Dad sighed. “Yeah.”

When the lesson was over, Gina made a big deal of thanking my dad for all he’d done. Then she turned to me. “Thanks...you know.”

I couldn’t look her in the eyes. “Sure,” I said. I just sat there staring at my Hello Kitties while the girl of my dreams walked through the door and out of my life.

“Alec?” It was Dad. “You feeling all right?”

“Huh? Yeah, sure.” I got up and left him sitting there with Charlie and Jo-Jo as I retreated to my bedroom. Then I cranked up my stereo and listened over and over to the R.E.M. song Everybody Hurts.

## Chapter 25

That Friday I spent the entire day on the wall, waiting and watching. Tham hung around for a while after our morning exercises. We worked on our first original song for the band. “I got the title already,” I told him. I called it Taking a Dive. It was a song about a couple of boys hanging out by a dumpster while they waited for their dream girl to appear on the balcony.

Charlie and Jo-Jo came by around lunchtime. We tried the song out on them. Tham did the singing.

*I'm taking a dive,  
Hello hello,  
Is anyone up there?  
I'm over my head...*

*Hello hello (Kitty)*

*Can you hear me?*

*Do you care?*

“Well?”

Charlie shook his head.

“It’ll sound better when we add the guitar.”

“Can I play the keyboard?”

“We’ll see,” I said.

Tham went back inside with Charlie and Jo-Jo to get something to eat. “Bring me something,” I said.

About two hours later they returned empty-handed. “We’re heading over to the clubhouse to practice,” said Charlie. “You coming?”

“Later,” I said.

After they left, a lady came to clean out Herb’s apartment. She made several visits to the dumpster. Once the Romanians came out at exactly the same time. From up on the eighth floor, Señora Rodriguez watched from her balcony. Sometime late in the afternoon Colonel Nosehair came out and marched around the

building. He circled it three times before marching back inside. Weird, I thought, though who was I to talk?

At four-o'clock Dad appeared with a sandwich. Mom returned from work a little after six. She called me in for supper an hour later, right as Herb's cleaning lady was leaving.

Todd never showed.

The cleaning lady came back on Saturday, and Tham and I returned to the wall. We were playing a game called Guess Who'll be the Next Person to Appear on the Balcony.

"Gay Tony."

"Mrs. Mertz."

"Hello Kitty."

"Yeah, right."

Neither of us ever guessed Gina, yet there she was all of a sudden, leaning over the railing looking straight at us. She didn't wave or even smile. Just looked.

We looked back. After a while, she went inside.

At the end of the day, the lady cleaning out Herb's apartment had made about ten more trips to the dumpster. We sat on the wall watching her, never offering to help.

Just sat there like kings looking to see what this poor woman might have to offer us. Tham held his trash claw like a scepter, pointing to various treasures. For an instant we thought we spotted the diamond bracelet, but it turned out to be an old dog collar.

“Did ’Erb have a dog?”

“I thought Peg-Leg Pete was the only tenant with a dog.”

“Probably the Romans in 8-C,” said Tham.

“Romanians,” I said.

Tham plucked a bag full of old video tapes from a pile of Herb’s stuff. John Wayne movies, I guessed. We decided we’d have another sleepover and stay up all night watching them. This time Charlie and Jo-Jo joined us.

We let Jo-Jo select the first tape, figuring she would be the first to fall asleep. She chose True Grit, starring John Wayne and Kim Darby. Somehow it seemed fitting.

Standing in front of the sliding glass door, Tham spotted Colonel Nosehair getting into his car. That gave us a chance to play a little music without getting yelled

at. The Fish-Eye Sisters next door never complained, especially after Tham had saved them from Stella Mertz's fart-balls. I was glad they were still alive.

We didn't worry about disturbing the couple on the other side of the Kantawong's. They were never home anyway. Like Charlie's parents, they worked all the time trying to make ends meet.

We left Jo-Jo on the futon and went back to Tham's bedroom. I showed him and Charlie the rest of the lyrics I'd written for Taking a Dive. This time, Tham plucked out the melody on his bass while Charlie kept rhythm drumming his hands on Tham's desk. I sang. It didn't sound half bad.

We fooled around with a few more songs before heading back into the living room to join Jo-Jo. Halfway down the hall, Gina's stereo started up and Eleanor Rigby floated through the vents. "Get your bass," I said to Tham. I asked him if he knew how to play lead for Here Comes the Sun. He shrugged.

"I'll play it," said Charlie.

It no longer amazed me what that kid could do with an instrument. I was just glad to have him in the band.

When he got to the chorus, all three of us belted the lyrics into the vent.

*Here Comes the Sun,  
Here Comes the Sun,  
And I say it's all right...*

Gina followed up with the song Who'll Stop the Rain by CCR. After that, the music stopped.

"We're doing it," I said.

"Doing what?" asked Charlie.

"The benefit concert. We're doing it."

"What? Where?"

"Right here. Out there." I pointed to the parking lot.

"A week from tonight."

"You crazy," said Tham.

"What do we have to lose?"

"Besides our good reputation?" said Charlie.

"What reputation? Like you said, nobody's ever heard of us." Which was true, of course. But not for long. "Come on you guys, what do you say?"

Tham did his Austin Power pinky wave. “Shagadelic,” he said. You could always count on Tham.

I smiled. “Well Charlie?”

“Can I play keyboard?”

“We’ll see,” I said, as we stepped back into the living room where Jo-Jo was lying on the floor in front of the television. She’d ejected True Grit and replaced it with an old video tape that seemed vaguely familiar.

“I didn’t know John Wayne did sci-fi,” said Tham.

We stood there staring at the screen on which an astronaut was planting an American flag on the moon.

“Do you know what this is?” I said.

“Greatest American ever born?” said Tham.

“Better,” I said. “This is the video they’re all looking for at NASA.”

“The one Herb was talking about on the news?” said Charlie.

I nodded. “The original moonwalk.”

“Like Michael Jackson,” said Tham, who was suddenly sliding backwards across the floor like a wounded animal in retreat.

“Holy crap, Alec. Do you realize how much money we can get for this?”

“Enough for a diamond bracelet,” I said.

Charlie’s face dropped, but only slightly. “But they’ll be plenty leftover, right?”

“Are you kidding? Tomorrow at this time, we’ll all be billionaires.”

“Groovy, baby.”

## Chapter 26

I wish I could say I'm writing this in my mansion that I bought with the billions of dollars we made selling Herb's moonwalk tape. The truth is, when tomorrow came, we hit an unexpected glitch in our get-rich-quick scheme.

“You to have to give it back, Alec.”

Dad.

Charlie was a bit crestfallen when I told him, but he got over it. He always did. Anyway, everybody's mood brightened when the fat bald reporter from channel eight showed up at the Royal Oaks to interview us. We didn't tell him the tape had belonged to Naked Herb. What would be the point of getting him in trouble? He was dead. We just told him we found it in the dumpster.

Throughout the interview, the few long strands of hair the fat reporter had combed over his bald spot kept falling into his face. It was driving me crazy. I didn't say anything about it, even though I'd sworn I would. Instead I said something even more unthinkable.

"We're giving a benefit concert next Saturday here at the Royal Oaks." Speaking without thinking was nothing new for me, but I was taking it to a whole other level when I did it on public television.

The bald guy raked a hand over his drooping threads of hair. "What's the cause?" he asked.

What the hell was I supposed to say to that? I began to falter when, to my surprise, Tham stepped up to the microphone.

Okay, it wasn't exactly a surprise that Tham would have stuck his big moon face in there. What was surprising was that he actually had a half decent answer. He grinned that goofy grin right at the camera and said in his stilted English, "For the Liberation of 6-B."

Now I'm sure the only word the fat bald dude heard was the word "liberation," and he wasn't about to press a poor kid from Thailand for a better pronunciation of this

place called Sixbee. He probably just assumed it was some oppressed country in the South Pacific under totalitarian rule. “You heard it folks. Next Saturday. Come on down.”

“We’re really doing it,” I said afterwards, at which point I began to freak. It was just hitting me what I’d done, and frankly, I felt a nervous breakdown coming on. What was I thinking? No way were we ready to play for some big public audience.

Charlie and Tham must have been thinking the same thing, because as soon as the fat bald reporter rolled out of the parking lot, they dragged me straight to the clubhouse. That day we practiced like we’d never done before. Like we meant it this time. Meanwhile Jo-Jo made fliers with cute, cuddly farm animals wearing diamond-studded collars. It was a weird way to advertise a band called One Man’s Trash, but who knows, maybe people would be intrigued enough to come check us out.

Even before we’d had a chance to put them up, folks started coming up to us, telling us how much they were looking forward to hearing us play. Apparently, news of

a rock concert in your apartment complex spreads almost as quickly as news of a naked dead guy.

Mom and Dad took it in stride. Truthfully, I think my mom was more excited about it than we were. She started bopping around the apartment singing all the old tunes from her glory days. You'd hardly know she was an accountant. Dad was cool too. He even offered to help us set up a stage in the parking lot.

"That'd be great."

Then he asked if I'd like to help him paint Herb's vacant apartment.

There's always a catch.

"Jee Dad, I'd love to, but I'm pretty busy with the band right now." Which was true.

"How 'bout you just come up and take a look at it with me? It won't take a minute."

Mom may have been bopping around like an old musician, but the fixed expression she shot me was definitely that of an accountant's.

"Yeah, okay," I said.

After breakfast, Dad and I went up to Naked Herb's place. The cleaning lady had stripped the place of

everything but the stained doormat. Maybe she mistook the Kentucky-shaped splotch of red sauce for blood and was afraid to touch it. I can't say as I blamed her.

We went inside and Dad started walking around, running his hand along the walls, stooping down here and there to poke at a nick in the molding or check out a loose electrical plate, that sort of thing. I was pretty much just standing around being useless, when I heard this thumping sound coming from upstairs.

Dad stopped inspecting the walls and listened with me. The thumping got louder, loud enough that you couldn't just pretend it wasn't there, or that it was mice or something like that. There was definitely somebody up there, which wouldn't have been a big deal, except that *up there* had been empty for about five years. Unless you counted the ghost of the girl who killed herself, and seriously, I didn't want to count her. I thought about Gina.

"Maybe I'd better go check it out," said Dad.

"I'll come with you."

Dad paused in the doorway. "Maybe it's better if you stayed here. Just in case it's...you know." Actually,

I didn't know, which is probably what made me want to go up and see it so badly for myself, the same way I'd wanted to hear Gina's stereo wafting into Tham's apartment with my own ears.

As a courtesy, and of course, to be sneaky, I gave Dad a little head start before I trotted up the steps after him. When I got there, I didn't barge in or anything, just in case, you know. I basically just hung out in the hall, waiting and seeing.

Then the weirdest thing happened. Gina's stepmother came out of the apartment. Her expression was severe and twisted, making her face look tighter than ever. I wondered what could have happened in there to have caused such a face. By the looks of her, you'd have thought she'd just been pulled out of a rose bush. Her normally well-coiffed hair was flying everywhere, and her pink tennis blouse was noticeably untucked from her matching pink skirt, which was hanging a bit crookedly around her tight, slim waste. To top it off, her socks were mismatched. One was white; the other, pink.

I don't think she noticed me, or if she did, she pretended not to. I knew how that went. I watched her

fly up the stairwell. I figured that was pretty much all there was to it, though I couldn't for the life of me imagine what *it* was. That is, until a few minutes later when Dad walked through the door with none other than that scar-faced Officer Grimm.

*Wee Willie Winkie runs through the town,  
Upstairs and downstairs in his nightgown.*

The dirty cop was giving him a load of crap about a stake out and things being strictly confidential and Dad said, "Don't worry, I won't say anything."

I slipped into the stairwell and waited for the two of them to head downstairs. Then I ran to the clubhouse to tell Tham and Charlie EVERYTHING.

## **Chapter 27**

“Think we should tell her?” I asked, meaning Gina of course. Tham pointed out that she wasn’t exactly crazy about the last breaking news story I had for her.

“So what? ” I said. “This is different. She’ll love us for this.” Love me for this, was what I was thinking.

“What does he have to lose?” said Jo-Jo, my brilliant eight-year-old friend. Just what I was thinking.

But as much as I wanted to tell Gina about her stepmother and the dirty cop, the opportunity never seemed to present itself. I’d hoped she might show up for a keyboard lesson the next day – I’d learned to expect the unexpected from her – but she didn’t. Even Charlie forgot about it, what with the big concert coming up and all. I decided to let it go for the time being and

concentrate on the band. After all, everything I dreamed about was riding on this gig, sort of.

We hardly left the clubhouse for the rest of the week. We played until our fingers practically fell off. Mom and Dad came around on Friday evening for the last rehearsal. I caught them grinning at each other. They looked so young. Deep down, I guess they were. Is that how it would be when I was there age, I wondered. I sure hoped so.

On the day of the concert, Gina came out on her balcony to watch us set up. Or maybe she came out to watch Dad set up, I'll never really know. But this time she did smile and wave when she caught me looking at her. She looked perfectly lovely, and for a moment I imagined...

Well, you know what I imagined.

I smiled and waved back, then I went back to helping my father rig up a stage in front of the crumbling wall. We were hopping up and down on it, making sure it was sturdy, when Charlie came running out of the building. Of all things, he was carrying the broken fog machine. He was all excited, claiming he'd fixed it.

“I just need an extension cord,” he said.

Dad took the cue and went inside to get one. On his way across the parking lot he passed Tham. I couldn’t believe my eyes. He was wearing that ridiculous Cat-in-the-Hat hat.

“Where’d that come from?” I asked.

“Where you think?”

“No way. How’d you get it back?”

By way of response, Tham flashed that goofy grin and made some Austin Powers gesture. Then he pulled something out of his linty pocket and handed it to me.

“She say to give you this.”

It was a PEZ dispenser. Hello Kitty, of course. As it turned out, when the old gal had said, “How about a Hello Kitty?” she wasn’t asking for me to give her one. She was offering one to me.

Tham giggled. “She got like a million of them.”

I cast a satisfied gaze toward my dining room window. “Well what do you know?” I said, and I placed the PEZ dispenser proudly on top of my amp. Dad returned with the electrical cord. He paused and smiled

at my Hello Kitty. Minutes later, it disappeared in a thick cloud of fog.

“Is there a way to adjust that thing?” asked Dad.

Charlie nodded agreeably, then he rotated the fog machine so it blew in a different direction. After that, we stepped back and watched the spray of gray mist shoot upwards to join the other clouds, which had been hovering overhead since daybreak. The rain had since passed, but it was still overcast. A few scattered puddles dotted the parking lot and the ripe smell of wet trash emanated from the dumpster.

Perfect day for a concert.

## **Chapter 28**

The sun finally broke through around noon, about the same time the television crew showed up from one of the local stations. The bald fat reporter was there too. Jo-Jo handed him one of her fliers. In exchange, he gave her a can of pea soup. For the cause, he said. My mother decided it might be a good idea to set up a collection box in front of the stage. The accountant coming out in her again. Charlie was beaming.

While we were warming up, I noticed Dad standing by the dead palm tree in the sandbox. He was talking to this old man dressed all in black. I'm sure I'd never seen the guy before, but Dad was chatting away like he was an old friend. I watched as the man slipped something into my father's hand. Dad slipped it into his pocket.

Pretty soon a loose assembly of bodies began to populate the parking lot, though at first I assumed they were just part of the normal traffic flow of people coming and going. But those bodies weren't going anywhere. They were only coming. To see us. It was frightfully exhilarating, though I tried not to let myself think about it too much. Instead I concentrated on trying to figure out what the business was between the old guy in black and my dad.

Meanwhile Charlie got up from his drums and walked over to the keyboard, which Dad had thoughtfully set up in the corner. I could tell he was looking for some sort of okay from me before he laid his fingers on the keys. Of all the things I admired about Charlie, what I admired most was his fierce loyalty to the people he cared about. He'd never do something if he thought it might cause ill-will between us.

The truth was, I was glad Charlie wanted to play it. I guess having a real audience put things in perspective. It wasn't about Charlie being better than me. It wasn't about either of us. It was about the music.

I plucked out the first few measures of *In the Hall of the Mountain King* on my guitar. Tham picked up the beat from there, giving Charlie the go ahead he needed to set his troll king loose on the parking lot. I looked toward the sandbox to catch Dad's reaction. I could tell he was into it by the way he was keeping rhythm tapping his thumb on his leg.

By that time, the man in black had vanished. I looked for him among the faces in the parking lot, which seemed to have multiplied since Charlie started playing. The old guy was nowhere to be found, which didn't really surprise me. He looked like the kind of guy who was more comfortable in the shadows than out among the crowd.

What was surprising were the faces I did recognize out there. Colonel Nosehair, for instance. He was wedged between two identically plump sisters with eyes popping out of their sockets. *My* eyes nearly popped out to see that bunch.

Behind them a group of guys were goofing around, joking and laughing and shoving each other. You could see the annoyance in Nosehair's eyes, not to mention his

flaring nostrils. Nobody liked the Romanians, it seemed. And yet from where I stood, they looked like exactly the type of fun-loving guys you'd want to hang out with, if you didn't mind hanging in a little squalor.

One of them caught my eye and shouted something like *pian*, which I'm pretty sure meant keyboard in Romanian. I worried for a moment that he might want it back, but he just flashed me a thumbs up and smiled. I gave him the thumbs up back.

Mr. Kantawong saw the gesture and thought it was meant for him. So he shot me a thumbs up too as he crossed the lot and took a seat on wall behind the dumpster. I noticed the torn sombrero was hanging down his back, and he had his grabbing claw with him, along with that annoying mini-gong. As much as I liked Tham's father, I was a bit rattled knowing he was back there. You just never know about the Kantawongs.

It came as a relief when Uncle Clarence hopped up there with him. Uncle Clarence was cool, and I trusted he would keep an eye on things. As he was settling in, he pulled a harmonica from his shirt pocket. "Thought you boys might like a little back up," he said. Then he

winked at us, and I gave him a thumbs-up too. Charlie eyed the harmonica.

About that time, Peg-Leg Pete hobbled up to the stage and dropped something into the donation box. Later we discovered a fifty dollar bill wrapped around a dog bone.

“Same way he pays his rent,” Dad told us

Gay Tony made a donation too. A bottle of suntan lotion and an expired can of glazed carrots. We gave the lotion to Tham’s dad, figuring he might really need it in Nepal during the polo tournament. The carrots we tossed in the dumpster.

A few other folks added stuff to the box. Some of the donors I recognized from the building. The rest of the tenants who weren’t drifting around the parking lot were looking on from their balconies.

Stella Mertz.

Señora Rodriguez.

Gina.

Her father was standing next to her, leaning over the railing alongside his daughter. The second Mrs. D’Amore was conspicuously absent. So was Officer

Grimm, though while we were warming up, I spotted Poser Girl climbing onto the hood of her new car for a better view. I hardly recognized her.

She was dressed from head to toe in white, of all things. To top it off, she was wearing a familiar pair of rhinestone earrings. She actually looked nice. It was as if she'd transformed into a whole new person. She even smiled and waved at Janet Pendleton, the tap dancer, who climbed up on the car and sat quietly next to her.

There were lots of people I didn't recognize too. By the time we officially kicked things off, it made me almost dizzy to look out across the sea of faces in the parking lot. I fumbled over the first few chords of our opener, *Hanging Around* by the Counting Crows, though I doubt anyone but the band noticed. The crowd's attention was pretty locked on Jo-Jo.

It was Charlie's idea to let her sing the first song. Although he was generally opposed to anyone else joining the band, he made an exception for Jo-Jo. It was only a guest appearance anyway, and he rationalized that people would ante up more money if we put a cute eight-year-old girl in front of them.

I don't know whether that was true or not, but I'd have thrown an extra ten bucks in the collection box to hear her sing. She was amazing. I couldn't believe the way she could belt it out, though I guess it made sense that she'd be talented. After all, she was Charlie's sister.

Looking back, I think I was the only person up there without any natural musical ability. I probably knew it then, too, though the truth was, I didn't care. I was just glad to be there. I still couldn't believe we were really doing it.

"You kids are *doing* it."

I gave Uncle Clarence a grateful nod over my shoulder. Then I invited him to join us for our next song. Another guest appearance, I figured. I glanced at Charlie for a second just to make sure he was cool with it. He smiled and eyed the harmonica. Things were good.

Uncle Clarence led us off into a soulful rendition of Bob Dylan's Like a Rolling Stone, which naturally drew my parents to the edge of the stage. This time it was Charlie who did the inviting. I think it was Mom stuffing a twenty into the collection box that swayed him.

Tham turned his bass over to her, which was a cool gesture, I think. Teenage boys can be polite if the mom is hot. Not that I thought she was hot, but you know. As Mom slipped the strap over her neck, Dad stepped up to the keyboard and kicked off an old Bob Marley song, I Shot the Sheriff.

This was all the incentive Mr. Kantawong needed to pull the old sombrero over his head and start strutting along the wall. Every time we got to the chorus, he'd stumble, pretending he'd been shot. If you ask me, the guy'd seen one too many John Wayne movies. I just hoped he didn't fall.

Taking a cue from his father, Tham began to pantomime drawing a pistol from his holster and shooting him, except Tham did it with an Austin Powers flourish, blowing across the gun barrel like he was blowing out a candle, then winking at the sheriff every time he fired. Jo-Jo finally had to pull out her own invisible gun and shoot them both.

At which point the crowd went crazy.

Everyone on stage was pretty crazy too.

After a while, all that craziness does stuff to you, and you start thinking about doing crazy stuff yourself. Like maybe casting a longing gaze at the most beautiful girl in the world...

and blowing her a kiss.

Yeah, that would have been crazy.

I didn't do it, of course.

Still, it felt pretty bold to lift my eyes up there. When I saw Gina smiling at me, I really did go a little crazy. I raised my hand resolutely into the air and gestured for her to come down and join us. After all, she was the whole reason we were doing this.

She shook her head pretty decisively against it, and that would probably have been the end of it, except that my father began to wave her down too, and well. By that time half the crowd were turning their heads to look at her, and pretty soon everyone was calling for her to come down. She didn't have much of a choice, really. Before long, Mr. D'Amore was escorting his daughter out of the building and onto the stage.

She was still tentative – and who could blame her – but she let my father guide her over to the keyboard.

Then the Romanians went crazy. Dad offered her a few reassuring words, then took a step back to join the group's new back-up singers, Jo-Jo and Mom. Mom had relinquished the bass to Tham, while Mr. Katawong was back on his feet and holding his mini-gong, which wasn't nearly so obnoxious as an instrument in the afternoon as it was as an alarm clock at dawn.

I looked over at Gina. "Here Comes the Sun, okay?"

She gave me an anxious smile.

"Don't worry. With all these other musicians up here, nobody will hear either one of us."

Her smile broadened a little.

I gave her a nod and set the beat. "One and two and..."

She tripped over the music, missing notes every other measure, but it didn't matter. I wasn't lying when I'd said no one would be able to hear her. Dad had had the foresight to turn down the volume on the keyboard before she got there. I could barely hear her myself, and I was two feet away. Not that anyone would have cared how well Gina could play a keyboard. Like I said before, she wowed us just by showing up.

We were halfway through the song when who should stroll up to the stage but that creep Todd Baxter. He caught Gina's eye and winked at her, but she just blew him off, worse than she'd blown off Nosehair. She actually kicked the fog machine so that it blew right in his face. I loved her more at that moment than ever before.

Gina stayed up there with us for the rest of the concert, though she yielded the keyboard to Dad and Charlie. Jo-Jo took her by the hand, and we all sang and played into the afternoon. At one point I remember looking around the stage at all the people who meant so much to me, and suddenly I understood what Charlie had known all along. The secret to eternal happiness is living in the moment. I never wanted it to end.

## Chapter 29

Of course nothing lasts forever, but we did our best to stretch it out as long as we could. We carried on even after the music stopped, heading over to the clubhouse for a party that Mom and Mr. Kantawong had thrown together. They, too, understood the magic of the moment.

Halfway across the parking lot, Todd Baxter popped up again. Apparently he'd stuck around to watch the show even after Gina had made it pretty clear they were through.

"Get lost," she told him.

He locked his jaw and held this squinty-eyed stare, which made his forehead really stick out like a caveman.

Jeez, I hated that guy. Who the hell did he think he was, getting in her face like that?

“You heard her,” I said.

He turned to me and clenched his fists, and this time I really thought he was going to kill me. It’s funny, but I wasn’t even scared. I was too happy to care. If Todd wanted a fight, well then bring it on, I thought.

Suddenly Charlie was beside me wearing this fearsome *I dare you* expression, which even I found a little disturbing. I was glad he was on my side. I was even glad when Tham stepped up to join us, though it was hard to look threatening standing beside someone wearing a Cat-in-the-Hat hat. Still, there was strength in numbers, and the three of our bodies standing side-by-side presented enough of a barrier to keep Todd away from Gina.

And he knew it.

He stood there glaring at us with those squinty caveman eyes.

We glared back.

He stuck out his jaw and looked us over one-by-one.

Charlie sneered.

Tham raised an eyebrow exactly the way Austin Powers would have done. He looked ridiculous, and maybe that was the point. Whatever it was, I felt emboldened by it.

When Todd's caveman eyes fell upon me, I snorted like a bull. Honest to God.

Todd snapped his gum.

We grit our teeth.

He took a deep breath.

We held ours...

until we were just about ready to burst...

and he walked away.

Defeated.

Todd Baxter had lost.

And we had won.

Tham let out a long deep sigh for all of us. Even Gina looked relieved, though also a little sad. It was kind of awkward, especially because I couldn't have been more elated. I wished I knew something I could say to make her feel better.

Then I remembered. I did know something. As we resumed our walk toward the clubhouse, I broke the news

about her stepmother messing around with dirty Officer Grim.

Gina stopped dead in her tracks. “Are you kidding me?”

Then she did something I’ll never forget for as long as I live. Right there in front of the dead palm tree, she leaned over, wrapped her arms around my neck, and kissed me.

On the cheek, of course.

For me, it was enough. I drank in the sweet strawberry scent of her silky blonde hair as it brushed against my face. I shivered as her warm, bare arms rested on my shoulders. The feel of her skin made my head spin. Her whispered breath saying thank you in my ear lifted me ten feet off the ground, which was about as close to heaven as I’d ever been.

“What a day, huh?”

Dad.

With my head in the clouds, I hadn’t seen him ambling across the parking lot. He was carrying some of the instruments, which we’d absently left on stage. “You guys have come a long way,” he said.

I'll say we had.

I was smiling even before he'd said it, which may have tipped him off that I wasn't just reacting to his compliment. Gina was smiling too, though his words probably meant a little more to her. Even so, she didn't kiss him. Nope. She just smiled her beautiful smile, gracious and radiant, like a fairy tale princess.

By now Dad was smiling too. It was infectious. "By the way," he said, bouncing on his toes just like an excited kid, which he was, kind of. On the inside, anyway. "I was talking to Mr. Sable a while ago..."

"The Shadow?"

Dad chuckled and nodded. "Who knows what evil lurks in the hearts of men?"

"Huh?"

Another bounce. "The Shadow. You know, from the radio show."

I didn't know, and yet suddenly, I did. Instinctively, I shot a glance toward the seventh floor, though I never really expected to see anyone. Yet there he was, the man in black, reclining in the corner under a broad umbrella. The umbrella was tilted in a way that shaded most of his

body. He was easy to miss if you weren't looking for him. Maybe he'd been there all along and we just never noticed.

Then I spotted something else I hadn't been looking for. Peering out from under the old man's lounge chair was a fake nose and glasses and two watchful, twinkling eyes.

Well what do you know about that?

"Anyway," Dad went on, "Mr. Sable found something a while back. He's been meaning to turn it in to the lost and found, but just hadn't gotten around to it." He leaned over, handing me my guitar, and said more quietly, "He doesn't get out much anymore, you know." We knew. What we didn't know, nor could we have ever guessed, was what Dad was about to do.

"Gina," he said, "I think this might belong to you." And from his trouser pocket he pulled a sparkling diamond bracelet.

Gina's dark brown eyes grew round as saucers as she stared at the jeweled platinum band. Then she lifted her eyes to Dad and gazed at him for a long time. For a moment I thought she might actually throw her arms

around his neck and kiss him too. And truthfully, I'd have understood.

But.

She didn't.

"I can't believe you found it?" was what she said, and she teared up as Dad laid it in her hands.

"Not me," he said. "The Shadow." And he shot me a wink.

But of course, it wasn't The Shadow.

It was the Owl and the Pussycat.

Hello, Hello, I thought.

Thanks Kitty, Kitty.

## **Chapter 30**

We made just over a hundred dollars that afternoon, which wouldn't have come close to covering the cost of a diamond bracelet, not that it mattered anymore. The publicity did get us a few gigs over the next month, and we managed to raise enough money for front row tickets to the circus when it came to town. Mr. Kantawong arranged for all of us to have an elephant ride when it was over. I let Charlie have my turn too.

After that, Jo-Jo gave up drawing farm animals for renderings of more wild beasts, though her most wild drawings were the ones of her brother, usually portrayed with a friend or two in the background. My favorite picture, though, was the one of us gathered around the dining room table learning to play the keyboard.

I kept on with the lessons after the concert. Just Dad and me. Charlie never really needed lessons, and Gina, well, she had other things on her mind. By the end of the summer, her father had filed for divorce. She and Mr. D'Amore moved out midway through September.

She stopped by to say good-bye before she left. She gave me a pair of knitted socks. Something to remember her by, she said. As if I'd ever forget.

Just as she turned to go, I jumped up and grabbed a PEZ from the windowsill. I held it out to her. "Here." It was good to see her laugh. She was happy, I think. At least, I hoped she was. I still hope she is.

"I can't believe you gave her your Hello Kitty," said Charlie when I told him.

"I still have two left," I said.

"Can I have one?"

"Sure, Charlie. Why not?"

The band played on into the fall, though we changed our name after a rocker named Trey Anastasio released an album that October called *One Man's Trash*. After that we called ourselves *Three Blind Mice*. The one good thing to come from it was that Tham finally stopped

wearing that stupid Cat-in-the-Hat hat. He traded it in for a pair of Mickey Mouse ears.

Jo-Jo designed our first album cover. Three mice sniffing around the base of a dumpster. Too bad we never got to use it. The band fell apart when Tham and his father headed off to Nepal for the Elephant Polo Championship in December. They left just before Mrs. Mertz handed out the nut bread.

I heard that Mr. Kantawong's team was eliminated in the second round of the tournament when one of their elephants stepped on the ball. That's the way it goes, I guess. Tham wrote us a couple times when he got back to Thailand, but after a while the letters stopped coming. He always was lazy, though I suppose we'd have lost touch anyway.

Dad finished his law degree that spring. When school got out we moved into a nice house in the suburbs. Mom brought Charlie and Jo-Jo out a couple of times that summer, but for reasons I still don't quite get, things felt different between us. It became awkward, and eventually we just stopped seeing each other.

Years later I ran into Jo-Jo at a club where I was playing guitar. She had blossomed into a beautiful young woman. More beautiful I think than even Gina D'Amore. She said she'd seen my name on a flier and wanted to see if it was really me. I recalled the fliers she'd made for us back then. I never told her that I'd kept the picture she'd drawn of us sitting around the dining room table. I still have it tucked away in a desk drawer, along with a pair of knitted socks and a vintage collection of plastic candy dispensers.

She told me she was studying to be an artist. No surprise there. I guess I shouldn't have been surprised to hear that she was still living at the Royal Oaks either, but I was. I felt kind of sorry for her until she told me she was now the building's superintendent.

"You're kidding, right?"

"Free rent," she said.

I smiled.

She told me that most of the tenants from our day were gone. Some were dead. Gay Tony had moved uptown to open his own restaurant. Not long after that, Uncle Clarence took Señora Rodriguez out for a salad.

They eloped the same night and ran off to Canada. Mr. Sable, The Shadow, was one of the last to leave. According to Jo-Jo, he moved out about a year ago. Nobody knows where he's gone.

"It was around the same time Charlie got deployed," she said. Apparently Charlie had joined the Marines out of college and was serving in Afghanistan. I keep meaning to track him down and drop him a note, just to see how he's doing.

I wonder if Jo-Jo's ever told him about running into me. He'd probably laugh to hear I was actually making a living as a musician. Over time I actually got halfway good at it. I even teach a few lessons to some of the boys in the neighborhood. Most of them aren't serious about it. They just want to learn a few songs to impress the girls. And you know, I'm cool with that.



