

The Final Note

By

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Chapter 1

The last note sounded and Skeet Seaton plucked the low E string on his bass really hard, letting it slap against the fingerboard and pickups so it had a real percussive quality. It was a trick he had picked up from watching blues guitar legend Stevie Ray Vaughn. He took off the bass and handed it to Brian Shaw, his bass tech and then grabbed a towel next to his amp and wiped the sweat that had been flowing down his face almost nonstop for the last three and a half hours.

Tonight he was backing up Bruce Springsteen on the North American leg of his solo tour, but it didn't really matter. Skeet had played with tons of artists in his life across all genres of music. From Clapton to the Indigo Girls. From solo dates with Mick Jagger to Branford Marsalis. From Prince to the Dixie Chicks. He had played and recorded with them all and, as a consequence, he was very in demand.

They had just finished the last encore and hit the last note of Bruce's classic "Born To Run". Skeet waved to the crowd and walked off the stage. He was dripping in sweat and he hated it. He was met again by Brian who gave him a fresh towel and a pat on the back. Bruce, who was almost as sweaty as Skeet, grabbed his shoulder.

"Nice show, Hoss! You were really on! You sure you can't stay for another leg, or at least a few more dates? We love having you around!" Bruce said as he wiped away the last of the sweat.

"Sorry, Boss. I have to put the finishing touches on the new solo record. I had a blast though. Maybe after the album is in the hands of the record company..." Bruce broke in.

"When that thing comes out, you won't have time for me! You're gonna be touring everywhere. I got a feelin' it's gonna be heading to the top with a bullet. Maybe we could talk about an opening slot," Bruce said with a big grin on his face.

"From your lips to God's ears!" Bruce shot him an odd glance. "It's a figure of speech, man. Just because I'm Buddhist doesn't mean I can't borrow one of your Judeo/Christian sayings, now does it?"

Bruce broke into a laugh. "Well, I suppose we could rent you a couple for awhile. Oh well. Meet and greet in 10, OK?"

"Sure, I'm gonna catch a quick shower then I'll be in, but I gotta cut it a little short. I got this guy coming for an interview and then I have to catch a red eye back to O'Hare," Skeet said as he inched his way toward the band dressing room.

“No problem, Hoss. We’ll see you in a few.”

Skeet found the trip to the dressing room slower than he had expected. There were a number of pens and paper shoved in front of him as he tried to walk. Brian had tried to clear everyone and not to bother Skeet right now, but Skeet insisted on speaking to each one, signing whatever they wanted signed and took enough pictures that he felt like he was blinded by all the flashes. He genuinely liked the interaction with the fans but he also knew that, with a new solo album coming out, the extra attention couldn’t hurt at all.

As the last autograph was signed and the crowd cleared away, Skeet remarked to Brian, “Good thing I’m not claustrophobic, eh B?”

“Ain’t that the truth!” Brian responded with a grin. Brian had been with Skeet for over 25 years. While his official title was ‘Instrument Technician’, he was really Skeet’s right hand man. He took care of almost everything for Skeet. He essentially ensured that the only thing Skeet had to worry about was playing and being creative. While Brian looked up to Skeet for his enormous talent, he treated him more like a little brother. Brian took care of him at every turn and the entire entertainment industry knew that Brian’s word was law. Even Skeet’s management company dealt with Brian, only bringing Skeet in when most of the details were already hammered out.

This was not to say that Skeet wasn’t in charge of his own life. There had been a few times when Skeet had overridden Brian and Brian had been fine with it. Brian was definitely not on a power trip. He loved Skeet and wanted what was best for him, and, in turn, Skeet trusted him implicitly. If Skeet had an ‘inner circle’, it was Brian and that was about it.

Skeet made it to the dressing room where Brian had already laid out some clean clothes. Skeet took off his shirt and headed straight for the shower while Brian grabbed one of the 5 basses that were sitting on stands in the corner and began to clean it.

“What time is our flight again, B?” he asked. Brian had already told him numerous times but it was par for the course and he was used to it.

“We need to get outta here about 1:30. The flight leaves at 3,” Brian said in a tone that sounded like this was the first mention of flights or leaving or times, even though Skeet had asked the same question and gotten the same answer just before he went on stage.

“Man that was a great gig, B! I love playing with Bruce...” Skeet shouted from the shower. “...but I’ll definitely be glad to get home and finish up this solo record.”

“It’s been a blast. What time do you wanna head into the studio tomorrow? Not too early, I hope.”

“No, lets plan on 5 or 6 in the afternoon. I don’t have much left to do. I’m gonna need the Alembic fretless and the Fender jazz for tomorrow, k?” Skeet asked. He knew there wouldn’t be a problem. There never was. Brian always had the stuff ready to go when Skeet arrived.

Luckily for both of them, Skeet had made enough money to have a small studio in his house in Chicago. Brian even had his own small place out back and pretty much had free run of the main house and the estate.

“Is that interview guy here yet, B?” Skeet asked as he turned off the shower and grabbed a towel.

“Not sure, but I’ll go check.”

Skeet emerged from the bathroom and headed for his fresh clothes. He really hated being covered in sweat all the time, in fact, he hated to sweat at all, but he knew it was all part of the job. “Give me a couple of minutes to get tidied up and I’ll be right there.” Skeet looked down at the couch. It called him. He knew that if he did the interview in the reception area, he would have to sit on a bench at a table. But in the dressing room, he could rest his back on the couch. “Just have him come in here. I need to sit down on something comfy for awhile and this couch looks just like what the doctor ordered.”

“What doctor? Man I have been after you to see a doctor about your back for months. I can tell it’s bothering you. Would you PLEASE go see one?” Brian said.

“Yea yea yea. I’ll get to it when we get back.” Skeet definitely had a back problem and Brian was always hounding him to see a doctor. So far, no amount of pain or nagging had been enough to get him to go.

Skeet glanced at the clothes Brian had gotten out for him. There was pair of black Levi’s and a purple bowling shirt. He slipped into the fresh outfit and made himself comfortable on the couch. It was big and puffy and he almost sank into it. He took a deep breath and finally felt a small wave of relaxation wash over him.

“Excuse me, are you Hanigan from some music magazine?” Brian asked in a loud voice hoping the right person would hear him. He had no idea what this Mr. Hanigan was supposed to look like, but he knew the type. Brian had always been able to spot the music press. He always said they looked like nerds and bookworms who were trying really hard to be cool. In spite of his great record for picking them out, he was having no luck.

Skeet fixed himself a drink and leaned his head back. It had been a long day and he was ready to relax but he still had this interview to finish up and then a 4 hour flight and he knew he wouldn’t be able to sleep on the plane. He thought if he could just get 10 minutes, maybe he could recharge and be ready.

The door opened and Brian walked in, paused for a second, shot Skeet a look and rolled his eyes. Skeet was confused and it showed in his face. Skeet was just about to ask what was wPaulg when Brian stepped to the side and she walked in the room. She was not incredibly tall but had the most gorgeous green eyes that Skeet had ever seen although they were partially obscured by a pair of glasses that gave her that sexy librarian look that Skeet loved. She was wearing a pair of tight, black Levi’s that matched his as well as a purple shirt, although not the

same style as the one Skeet was wearing. Her hair was brown and cut relatively short. He thought she was just drop dead gorgeous. He paused for a moment, slightly taken aback, but then got up off the couch and stepped toward her, hand outstretched. If he had learned nothing else from his southern upbringing he did have manners.

They looked each other up and down, each noticing the similarity in the others outfit. A big grin crossed Skeet's face. "Well you have nice taste in clothes, Mr. Hannigan," Skeet said, trying to fill the awkward silence.

Brian spoke up. "Skeet Seaton...Chap..." She cut him off which irritated him slightly.

"Chapin Hannigan. I'm from Jazz Journal. It's a real honor to meet you," she said. Skeet was immediately smitten, which was unusual.

"Skeet Seaton, maam. You'll forgive my surprise, but I was expecting a guy," Skeet said.

"Is this going to be a problem, Mr. Seaton?" Her voice had taken on a rather irritated tone.

"Why no, not at all. This is a PLEASANT surprise!" Skeet was trying not to trip over himself. "But please, don't call me 'Mr.'. It's like puttin' and elevator in an outhouse. Just don't belong. I'm just Skeet."

"Well, nice to meet you, Skeet. I see you're a Roadhouse fan." The statement caught Skeet off guard. He used that line all the time and hardly anyone had ever recognized it, or if they had, they had never called him out on it.

"Yea, I'm kinda the king of beatin' a dead horse around here," Skeet said, trying to recover. He was feeling oddly self conscious. He had been interviewed thousands of times but had never fumbled over himself like this before.

"That's good to know, I'll keep it in mind," Chapin said with a light smile. She wasn't sure if he was taking her seriously or not. She tended to think he wasn't, as most male musicians she interviewed tended to not take her seriously. They either had no respect for her, wanted to get in her pants or some combination of the two, so she assumed she was well prepared for any shenanigans this guy might pull. It was one of the draw back of being a working female in a male dominated industry.

Because of this, she usually got assigned to interview female artists, but this came with its own unique set of problems. But she had specifically asked for this assignment. She had always been a fan of Skeet's work, especially the obscure solo albums he had released over the years. These albums were hugely popular with musicians and received critical acclaim, but no real popular success.

There was an awkward moment of silence which Chapin finally broke. "Should we get started?" she asked more to break the silence than anything else.

“Absolutely!” Skeet exclaimed in a slightly over exuberant tone. “As long as you don’t hold my fumbling over obscure lines from old movies against me.” He realized that he was beginning to sound like the typical celebrity who was trying to sound genuine and that really bothered him. He took a deep breath and offered Chapin a seat on the couch.

Chapin pulled a pen, paper and a small, digital recorder from her bag. “You don’t mind if I record this, do you? It makes it much easier in the long run.”

“I’d be a pretty sad recording artist if being recorded bothered me, now wouldn’t I?” Skeet said as he collapsed into a corner of the couch.

“I suppose so,” she said with a smile. Skeet smiled back, took a deep breath and prepared for yet another interview. He always did these begrudgingly since most of the interviewers wanted to know about the same stuff. What was it like working with Michael Jackson or Britney Spears or Prince or any of the other hundreds of stars he had worked with before.

“Let’s start with the basics. It’s widely known that you were raised in the Shattock Orphanage in Clarksdale, Mississippi, but is that where you discovered your love of music?” Chapin asked. She immediately regretted asking the question.

“Of course it was you nit wit,” Chapin said to herself. “He left the orphanage to tour with Stan Balch! He HAD to get his love of music there! Are you going to act like a Cornell graduate with 7 years experience or are you going to act like a reporter for the high school paper?” Her mind was swimming with embarrassment and she almost missed the start of his answer. “Thank God for recorders,” she thought.

She swallowed hard and tried to listen intently. She had interviewed so many musicians and had not really been that interested in what they had to say. She would ask them the same stable of questions that every other reporter had asked since their career had begun, but Skeet was different. Nothing about him was typical. His background wasn’t typical. His career wasn’t typical. His manner wasn’t typical. His talent definitely wasn’t typical. And besides, for an old guy, she found him pretty cute too, but she tried to remain professional.

“Well let’s see,” Skeet began. “When I was at the orphanage, there wasn’t much music, especially popular music. We had a music class in school but there wasn’t much substance to it, a lot of ‘Row Row Row Your Boat’ kinda stuff, until I got into 4th grade. I had Mrs. Smith for music. She loved real music and passed that love on to us, well, to me anyway. You know she was the first cousin of Big Mama Thornton? Yea, we listened to a lot of blues...” Skeet told Chapin the usual story he told every other reporter. Mrs. Smith gave him an appreciation for great songs of the common man and taught him a few chords on the piano. He would sit at the rickety old piano in the big hall at the orphanage and plink away for hours. After a couple of years, he joined the Junior High School band and began to play cello, but he much preferred the playing blues on the school’s stand up bass and eventually the Fender Jazz bass that the high school jazz band would use.

He told her the story of sneaking in to see the legendary guitarist Stan Balch at the age of 15 with his high school band director, Mr. King and even being able to sit in. He told her how well they hit it off and about quitting school two days later because Stan needed a bass player. He related numerous stories of being on the road in an adult world at 15. He told her about how the music made him feel and that, unlike most of his life, it was something he had control over. He talked and talked. It had gotten to be a script he had almost memorized over his 25 year career that was simply repeated for whatever reporter, radio interviewer or fan that happened to ask.

She asked him about all the people he'd played with and, as usual, he ran down a virtual who's who of rock, pop, jazz and country music. She asked the standard question, "Who have you enjoyed playing with the most?" and as usual he answered Stan.

Shortly after joining the band, Stan and Skeet found they had a lot in common. Both were orphans, although Stan was adopted when he was 7 by the Balches and had grown up in Chicago. Both had an intense love of the music and discovered that they complimented each other in almost every musical way you could imagine. When they started writing together, they topped the charts numerous times and made tons of money, a situation that had been completely unfamiliar to Skeet.

"Who has had the most influence on your career?", Chapin asked.

"Stan, obviously!" he answered with a half chuckle.

Chapin didn't get the joke. "Obviously? Why Obviously?"

"Because he made me rich!" he said and roared with laughter.

Chapin was suddenly taken aback. Could this man whose feeling and soul she had admired so much have just been in it to get rich? "So it was all about the money?"

Skeet's laughter stopped suddenly and stared at Chapin quite coldly for a moment. "Have you heard 'Live at the Paradise'? Have you heard 'Ace In The Whole'? Have you ever listened to 'Hot Java'? We had a musical chemistry that was unmatched. He is the greatest player I have every worked with and probably ever will."

Chapin recoiled slightly which caused Skeet to realize that he was coming off a little aggressive. He forced a slight grin. "But he still made me rich and you can't argue with that, now can ya?" Both of them giggled.

"Now in '89, you recorded your fist solo album, 'Hittin the Note'. There was some incendiary playing on that record," Chapin began.

Skeet shot her a confused look. No one ever asked about the solo stuff. "Uh huh. Thanks." It was all he could muster. He didn't have a script in his head for this. Improvisation was something he was well versed at with his bass, but in interviews? Not so much. Skeet caught

himself and tried to recover. “I’m surprised you’ve heard that album. It didn’t get much airplay when it was released...or since.”

“I really think so much of the great music out there goes unnoticed by the public at large. But this interview isn’t about what I think,” Chapin said, quickly jumping back into the reporter role.

“Well, maybe it should be. I’m not trying to pimp that album, but you’re right. There’s so much stuff out there that doesn’t get the attention it deserves. I’m not sure I think that ‘Hittin The Note’ qualifies, but it would be great if people could take a good, hard listen to what music is out there, not just what’s in the top ten this week.”

Chapin could tell she struck a chord and really wanted to talk more about undiscovered music, but she was here to do a job. “What drove you to make that album?”

They continued their talk for an hour and a half and were both having a blast. Brian, however was ready to go and assumed he was doing Skeet a favor by saving him.

“We gotta head out, Skeet. They don’t hold the plane for anybody, even the likes of you!” he said with a grin. “I’ve got the stuff loaded so we’re just waiting on you.”

“What time does that plane leave again?” Skeet asked.

“Um...2:30, so we really need to leave now.” Brian was counting on the fact that Skeet couldn’t remember anything.

“2:30? I would have sworn it was 3:00. Oh well,” he said. He turned to Chapin. “I can’t keep track of anything. I don’t know what I’d do without Brian around.”

“Well thank you so much for sitting down with me. If I need any follow up info, I can contact your management company. That’s the Larry Baker Agency, right?” Chapin asked. She was disappointed the interview had to be cut short.

“Nonsense!” he exclaimed. Chapin was taken aback and cut him off quickly.

“Nonsense?”

“No no no. I mean don’t call L.B. Just call me. It takes too long for you to contact them, then they contact me, then I contact them...you’ll be way past a deadline if you have to wait on that. I tell you what. Do you have a card?” he asked. Brian looked at him completely puzzled.

“A card?” She paused. He looked at her expectantly. “OOOHHH! You mean a business card!”

“Of course,” he said.

“Yea, I have one right here! Just write the number on the back,” she said

“Oh, that won’t do...” he said trying to sound as disappointed as possible.

“Won’t do? What’s wPaulg?” she asked.

“I’m gonna need two of them.” He worked hard at trying to hold in his chuckle.

“Two? Ok, here ya go. But what do you need two for?”

“Well, I’ll write my number on the back of this one and give it to you.” He paused. “And I’ll keep this one so I can get a hold of you.”

“Get hold of me?” She sounded thoroughly confused which left Skeet very nervous and self conscious.

“Well, in case you wanted to go have coffee and discuss the plight of the popular music scene,” He paused not knowing what else to really say. “...or something.” He really hoped that she was going to take this as charming.

She looked at the card for just a moment and then the right synapse fired. He was wanting to ask her out! She looked up and looked into his eyes. “Of course,” she said as she handed him the card. “Anytime.”

Skeet could hardly contain his glee. Meanwhile, Brian could hardly contain his thought that this whole thing was silly. He rolled his eyes and tossed his bag over one shoulder and Skeet’s over the other. “You ready?” he said. The impatience was obvious in his tone.

“Yea...yea,” Skeet said. He turned to Chapin. “Well it was wonderful to meet you Ms. Hannigan. Be sure to call me if you need anything else.”

“Yea, definitely. And you do the same,” she blurted. Skeet just smiled. Brian rolled his eyes again. She quietly wondered if she could embarrass herself a couple more times before she left. She shook his hand and made a swift exit.

“Pretty cute, huh Brian?” Skeet asked.

“If you say so, Skeet. If you say so,” he said as they headed out the door.

Chapter 2

Chapin got out of the cab and began walking toward the check in counter. It had been a short trip so she just had her small, rolling suitcase and her laptop bag slung over her shoulder. She walked through the sliding doors and looked around. The airport looked abandoned for the most part. As she made her way to the escalator she passed the 'Jebus Counter' as she liked to call it. It was normally manned by volunteers with little "Jesus Loves You" or "W.W.J.D" badges, under the guise of "Information" but as soon as you asked them for directions or where a good place to eat was, they gave you a cup of coffee and cookies, handed you pamphlets about accepting Jesus Christ as your personal savior, and wanted to talk about religion. Since it was 2 o'clock in the morning the counter was abandoned. "Don't they think someone may need 'information' in the middle of the night?" she chuckled to herself.

Chapin was in no real hurry since her flight didn't leave for another hour and a half. She went to the counter but no one appeared to be there. She used a nearby courtesy phone to see if she could get checked in. The voice on the other end sounded very sleepy but assured her that someone would be right out. Chapin felt a little guilty for waking anybody up, but she did, after all, have a flight to catch.

While she waited, Chapin looked around the airport. The ceilings were over 30 feet high and reminded her of the ceilings in some of the halls she used to play recitals in when she was in college. You see, she had only minored in Journalism. Her major was music and, while she enjoyed what she did now, she longed for the days of sitting behind a piano and playing some of the great jazz standards with a small combo. She had been a better than average pianist throughout high school and college, but not much more. But she loved to play and had always wanted to be a professional musician, just not a struggling one and Jazz Journal let her be around great music and musicians without having to take any financial chances.

The check in clerk appeared through a curtain behind the ticket counter, wiping sleep from his eyes. His button down white shirt and cheap blue slacks were wrinkled terribly and it was quite obvious he had been taking a nap. She handed him her ticket.

"I'm heading back to Chicago," she proclaimed. He looked at her with only a forced smile. She realized he didn't care but she was tired too and would have liked a little positive reaction, especially considering how much had been paid for these tickets.

"Any bags to check?" he asked, eyeing Chapin's rolling suitcase.

"No, just the carry on," she replied.

He looked at her computer bag. "More than one carry on is gonna cost you \$75 and I'm not sure that one is small enough. We'd have to check it. He covered his mouth as he began to yawn. "Scuse me," he said just before the yawn was through.

“They let me take both as carry on when I flew in yesterday,” she said. I can’t believe the planes compartments have changed sizes in 36 hours.” She was tired and didn’t need this harassment.

The clerk paused. “I’m sure it hasn’t maam, but I would have to check the luggage for myself.”

Chapin looked around the airport, again noting how empty it was and continued. “It doesn’t look like space is going to be an issue on the plane to me. Does it to you?” Chapin said with an almost growling tone.

“Look maam, I have to follow regu...” Chapin cut him off.

“We can stand here and argue about this until the flight leaves in an hour and a half or you can just stamp the ticket and I’ll be on my way and you can go back to your nap.” She had clearly had enough, but was determined. Now it was the principal of the whole thing and her Irish temper was coming out.

The clerk paused for a moment and looked her right in the eyes. “You know. You’re right. It makes no difference in my paycheck.” He stamped the ticket, pulled a boarding pass off the printer and handed the pile to Chapin. “There ya go. Have a pleasant flight, maam.”

“And you have a pleasant evening, sir.” She was quite surprised that trick had worked. Although she had been prepared to stand there arguing for quite a while, she was fully expecting to lose.

The clerk disappeared behind the curtain and Chapin tossed her laptop bag over her shoulder, grabbed her suitcase and headed for security.

Security was not on Chapin’s list of the most fun things to do. She had been singled out a couple of times for the full search: The wand, the pat down, the whole shebang. She felt like she was being felt up by the high school quarterback after the game. But she considered it a necessary part of her job so she stepped up to the line.

“Remove your shoes and everything from your pockets and place them in the tray,” the TSA guy said. He had a very creepy voice, Chapin thought.

“You not even gonna buy me dinner first?” Chapin mumbled under her breath.

“Ordinarily no, but for you I might make an exception,” he said while clearly staring at her ass while she removed the shoes. Chapin thought he sounded remarkably like Vincent Price in a bad horror movie. She had no idea he would have heard her.

“Sorry,” she said, not trying very hard to conceal her embarrassment.

“Don’t be”, the guy said. He was now visibly bending over the conveyor belt to look at her. She shot him a look and he sat up straight with a very lecherous grin plastered across his lips. She tossed the shoes in the tray, along with her keys and some pocket change, threw each of her two

bags up on the conveyor and walked toward the x-ray doorway. There was a large African American woman sitting there reading a magazine.

“Step on through,” she said barely raising her head from her copy of “The National Enquirer”. Chapin wondered if she hadn’t heard her co-workers comments, or just didn’t care. She stepped through the arch, really hoping nothing would set it off. The quicker she got away from these people the better.

“Git cha stuff and have a nice day,” the agent said. She paused and looked toward a window. “...or night,” she corrected herself and put her nose back in the magazine.

Chapin slipped her sneakers back on, grabbed her stuff and made a b-line for gate 9B. She still had about an hour so she decided to get caught up on a little work. She grabbed a quick seat next to a plug and pulled out her laptop, fumbling to get the power chord plugged in. “I really hope they have free wi-fi here,” she thought to herself. “C’mon,” she mumbled under her breath. A window popped up on her computer screen. Connected, it said. “Yes!” exclaimed Chapin. She immediately became self conscious but looked around and didn’t see anybody

She pulled up her email and gave a quick glance at the 50 or so new arrivals since her last check. “Let’s see....spam....spam...spam...” She began clicking the small selection box next to each unwanted message. “...spam...spam...Jack? Oh man, what does he want now, as if I didn’t know?” She quickly deleted the spam messages that she had already checked and then opened the email from Jack.

“Chapin, my love,” the email started. She knew exactly what he wanted. Chapin began talking to the screen as if Jack were listening on the other end.

“Dear God, man!” she exclaimed. “We have been broken up for over 9 months. It’s over! Don’t you get it?” A wave of self consciousness washed over her again. Someone was surely going to think she was crazy as a loon, sitting there talking to the computer. “Inner monologue, Chapin. Inner monologue,” she mumbled to herself.

‘Jack’ was Jack Palero, her ex-boyfriend. They had dated on and off for about a year. She found him to be controlling, anal-retentive, manipulating, and arrogant and she was beginning to think delusional. Just the sight of his name on the email conjured up memories of when she had broken up with him last New Year’s. He had decided to re-organize her closet. He had complained that all the boxes didn’t match each other so he went to ‘The Container Store’ and bought matching blue plastic crates, meticulously packed each one by category, stacked them alphabetically, again by category and printed the category on each crate with a black Sharpie and the entire contents of the box neatly with a green Sharpie. He then created a database and entered each item, what box it was located in and where in the stacks it could be found. Considering that he broke into her apartment to do it as a surprise, she had deemed this the last straw.

Now she received an email or phone call from him every 2-3 weeks. He almost seemed delusional in that he acted like they were still together. Now not only was she mad at him, but she thought he may be completely out of his mind.

She clicked the delete key without reading any further and scanned the rest of the emails. The next email that got her attention was from Joe Bailey, her editor at Jazz Journal. She had been waiting to hear from him to see if she had landed an interview with Sting.

“Hiya Chaps,” the email started. Believe it or not, this was not a good sign. When the news was good, Joe was very official and serious. When his tone got more familiar, it usually meant the news wasn’t good and he was trying to play the comforting father figure. “I’ve talked with the higher ups and they really want a more experienced reporter to talk with Sting.” Chapin’s heart sank. The magazine was putting together an issue that tied jazz influences to popular music and the Sting idea had been hers. “I know this is hard for you, but there’s going to be other great interviews for you. In fact, I have almost worked out an interview for you with Christina Aguilera. Now, I know she’s not Jazz in the classic sense, but I think you can make it work. Besides, she cut an Ella tune on her latest album. Just think about it.”

“I could have made the Sting piece work better, damn it,” she muttered then continued reading.

“Also, we want to do a piece about jazz influences in music that has topped the charts, so I am going to need some research. This is only about pop songs that have hit number one because our copy space is limited. We’ll talk about it more when you get back. Oh, by the way, I assigned you to cover the Fund Raiser Patti LaBelle is putting on at Metro. It’s really turning into a huge deal so you should be able to get some great stuff there.”

“Well that’s just great. I’m a reporter for a supposedly respected jazz magazine and they saddle me with Christina Aguilera. Christina Fucking Aguilera! What the fuck?” Chapin was becoming more and more frustrated with every passing second. She had never been a musical snob, but even she had limits.

Chapin glanced up and noticed that the attendant was preparing the area for boarding. She started hastily unplugging the computer and putting it back in the bag. She would finish this when she got home, and she could hardly wait to get back to Andersonville, her cat, Jaco and her own bed. Andersonville was on the north side of Chicago and it suited her perfectly. Once she got back to her apartment, she figured she would be able to deal with all this drama much better.

The boarding call came and Chapin made her way, along with a grand total of 12 other passengers to the door of the plane. She settled into her seat, pulled out her iPod and put the ear buds in. It was two in the morning after a whirlwind couple of days and she had a four hour flight ahead of her. She punched up Diana Krall’s ‘The Look Of Love’. Diana Krall was a favorite of Chapin’s when she needed to relax. The light piano and soothing voice sent her into a dream world and that’s exactly where she wanted to be right now. She leaned her head back as far as she could in an airplane seat, closed her eyes and drifted off.

Chapter 3

Skeet sat cross legged on a small black cushion, which was perched on a larger black cushion. The light scent of incense filled the room. He sat facing a small table that had a small statue of the Buddha, a bell and several other spiritual accoutrements. He sat very straight with his hands resting on the tops of his thighs. His eyes were lowered and his breathing was slower than normal. Most people never saw this side of Skeet, except for Brian, of course. But Brian steered clear of him when he meditated. He didn't really understand all that stuff and wasn't sure he wanted to try.

"You'd be lookin' groovy...In a 60's movie...Maybe tell the press ya died..." The music poured out of Skeet's cell phone. He knew instantly it was Pat Torpey. Skeet had a different ring tone for everyone in his cell phone. Skeet clicked the green answer button.

"Pat! What's going on?" Skeet said with a boisterous grin. Brian wandered in the room. He often wondered how Skeet couldn't seem to remember what he had told him 10 minutes before but had his entire phone list memorized by ring tone.

"Same shit, different day. How's life in Chi-town?" Pat asked.

"You know man. Trying to keep busy to stay outta trouble."

Pat and Skeet knew about trouble. They had met backing up Belinda Carlisle on her world tour in the mid 80's and were known for the drunken debauchery they inflicted on the world from the setting a bath house in Japan on fire to driving a motorcycle through the front door of Ed's Tavern in Conrad, Montana, population 2736, in the middle of winter. How they had ended up riding double on a motorcycle in northern Montana in January, neither was real sure of. Nor were they sure how Brian had been able to bail them out of that one, but as usual, he was right there to fix everything.

"I'm gonna be in your neck of the woods tomorrow night. I thought we might get together, grab a bite and jam, if you aren't headed back out on the road."

"Naw, I just put the finishing touches on the solo album. Dude, I'd love to and I'm free all day tomorrow. We can go get some BBQ at Fat Willie's Rib Shack and then hit B.B. Kings place. Anson and the Rockets are playing and I know he'd love to jam. We can go all night!"

“That sounds like a blast, but I actually need to call in a favor,” Pat asked, sounding slightly self-conscious.

“Anything, Pat. What do ya need?”

“Well you know we’ve reformed ‘Mr. Big’...me, Paul and Billy. We aren’t doing anything heavy but we are jamming together some times. It’s been really cool.”

“Someone told me that. I don’t remember who. I didn’t even think you guys were speaking. Glad it’s working out...but what do you need from me?” Skeet looked up at Brian and shrugged. Unfortunately, Brian was only getting half the conversation.

“We’re scheduled to do a gig day after tomorrow at a benefit show in Chicago, but, unfortunately I just got off the phone with Billy and he slipped on some ice on his back steps and sprained his wrist, so he can’t play.”

“You guys are playing American Cancer Society fund raiser? I’m at that gig too! Niles Rodgers and I are gonna play some old ‘Chic’ songs from back in the day.”

Pat could tell from the tone of Skeet’s voice that he had completely missed the point so he figured he needed to be a bit more direct. “So Skeet, would you be willing to play with us too. Billy’s cool with it. He loved the idea. He’s flying in for the gig just to hang out. So...,” Pat paused, waiting to be interrupted. “Will you do it?” There was a slight pause.

“Hell yea! I mean, if you’re sure Billy’s cool with it.”

“Oh yea...he’s totally cool with it. And Paul is gonna shit when he finds out you said yes.” The relief was evident in Pat’s voice.

“I don’t know about that. Billy’s one of the best around. I don’t have near the chops he does, but I’m sure we can put something together. Is everyone flying in tomorrow? We can do a rehearsal here at the studio and still have time to get some Bar B Que and raise a little hell.” Skeet could barely contain his excitement at seeing his old friend again.

Skeet grabbed a piece of paper and a pencil and started making some notes on what time Pat and the guys were flying in as well as what time they were playing and some song ideas and a promise to take some time out to write and record together.

Skeet hung up the phone and filled Brian in on his plans.

“It’ll be great to see Pat again. What’s it been? A year?” Brian wondered out loud.

“At least!” Skeet said. “Maybe two. Man, B. I can hardly wait. This is gonna be a hell of a night.” Skeet jumped up off the floor. “I’m gonna go hit the bass. I’m so excited I just gotta play for awhile!”

“Oh, the courier came while you were lounging on your pillow.” Brian took every opportunity to give Skeet a little dig about his meditation. “The final cut is heading for Dave’s office. They should be there in a couple of hours.”

“Cool. That means we should hear something from him in two years? I don’t think my music really excites him. Oh well. Doesn’t excite me too much anymore, either. Fans either, for that matter.”

“C’mon Skeet. You’re the greatest, man. And the new album is gonna put you over the top. I just know it.” Brian tried to inspire a little confidence but he knew that it was a futile effort. Still, he believed in Skeet and wanted him to believe in himself.

“Well, we’ll see.”

Chapter 4

Skeet sat in his home studio, the lights dim and Miles Davis' "Kind Of Blue" album playing quietly over the speaker system. Skeet was a huge Miles fan. He had done a couple of dates with him in the mid 80's when Miles was so messed up on drugs and was abusive. But no matter what Miles did, Skeet would just look at him and smile really big. He was playing with MILES FUCKING DAVIS! He had become fast friends with saxophonist Bill Evans from Miles's band but when Skeet went back to work with Stan, he told Miles to check out bassist Marcus Miller. The fit was great and Skeet was more than a little jealous.

He sat on a big, comfy green couch and put his feet up on the coffee table. Skeet's furniture was always soft and fluffy. He liked to feel as if he would get lost in whatever he was sitting on, a fact that he had never connected with his bad back problem.

He listened to the syncopated rhythms of "Freddie Freeloader" and lightly hummed along an improvised bass line over the one Jack Chambers had laid down. He leaned his head back, closed his eyes, trying to mentally relive playing the piece off the cuff with Miles and Bill at Birdland in New York City.

The intercom came on and Brian's voice boomed through, spoiling Skeet's fantasy. "Skeet! Pat and the guys are here."

Skeet jumped up off the couch and headed for the intercom on the wall. "Do they need help with any equipment? I'll be right up." After a short pause, Skeet moved toward the studio door, but the intercom exploded with Brian's voice again. "Nahh...we got it. Paul's got a guitar case and I think Pat was gonna jam on the set down there."

"Great! Send them on down!" Skeet reached for the knob on the wall and adjusted the room lighting. The darkness quickly faded and the studio lit up. Skeet looked around and surveyed the layout, making sure that everything was ready.

Skeet's studio was his pride and joy. He had it built in the late 90s, converting the racquetball courts that came with the house. He had outfitted the whole thing in hunter green and dark, subdued wood tones because he liked the vibe it gave the place when the lights were low.

While it was small when compared to most commercial studios, numerous tracks and even whole albums had been recorded there. Of course, it was the place that all of Skeet's solo efforts since it was built got their start.

Skeet was noted for loaning out the space to new artists that he really dug or friends who just dug the vibe of the place and wanted to record away from the public eye. Bill Evans had recorded here with Jimmy Cobb. The Marsalis Brothers had cut some tracks here with their father. Blues great B.B. King and Eric Clapton had recorded a track here. Skeet always felt that when he opened his space up to these musicians, they left an energy or vibe in the place, and he fed off it. To bring in a little extra money, he rented the studio out to Chicago area media and ad companies to record and mix commercials and other forms of mainstream media. Brian always hassled him about 'selling out to the man' but Skeet would always tell him that renting the space out occasionally gave him the opportunity to get people in there to add to the vibe for free.

The door to the studio swung open and Brian walked in with Pat, Paul Gilbert and Billy Sheehan in tow.

"Please, TRY to stay outta trouble this time? I really don't want to have to pull you guys off a motorcycle in some Montana bar again!" Brian never let them forget their debauchery on the road during their younger days, more because he missed the excitement than anything else.

"Pat!" Skeet exclaimed. He hadn't seen Pat in what seemed like forever and he could hardly contain his glee. There was a loud slapping noise as their palms met and the two embraced. Pat tossed his coat on the couch. Pat was dressed as he normally was, in jeans and a Robert Plant tour t-shirt with a stick bag slung over his shoulder. "Still can't pick out clothes, can ya?"

"You're one to talk, Skeeter," Pat shot back in a playful tone, glancing back at Skeet who was also wearing jeans and a t-shirt.

"Yea but you got a wife to pick out your clothes. I've got Brian." He gave Brian a little poke in the stomach ala The Pillsbury Dough Boy. Brian scowled.

"Bill, you summa ma bitch!" Skeet did his best Bernie Mac impression. He looked down at Billy's right hand which was in a brace and pointed. "Didn't we have a talk about you trying to play bass and jack off at the same time?"

Actually it was a mad accident involving groupies, a barber chair and Paul's world famous wontons and spicy peanut sauce." There was a momentary pause then they all burst into laughter.

Skeet glanced over at Paul and offered his hand. "You must be Paul! I've heard so much about you from these two convicts and it's great to finally get to meet you," Skeet said.

"It's a real honor. And whatever they've been saying about me, it's all lies," Paul said somewhat sheepishly. He was dressed in a black, 'all in one' jump suit which made him look like some

odd sort of a chain saw killer. He had a two guitar cases, each covered from one end to the other with stickers.

“Well, have a seat,” Skeet said as he motioned toward the center of the room. There was the huge couch, two matching chairs and four mesh covered work chairs in front of the board. There were eastern inspired rugs laid out over a hard wood floor that gave the whole space a warm feeling.

Skeet sped over to the big, stainless steel refridgerator that stood in the back of the room next to a antique, portable bar. “Anyone want something to drink? Beer? Whiskey?”

Brian piped in “At your age, maybe you guys should stick to warm milk!”

“Probably not a bad idea, Bri,” Billy said. “But boring. Toss me a beer!”

Skeet handed everybody a beer and plopped down on one end of the couch. He held his beer out for a toast. Each bottle in turn bumped his with a clinking sound and Skeet took a swig.

“So what’s the plan guys?” Skeet asked. He was always one for getting down to business when it came to music.

Pat said that they were supposed to play around 6:15 that night and the set was relatively short, about 30 minutes. They discussed possible song choices and made notes on what they would need to sit down and work out. Billy’s hand was in bad enough shape that he wasn’t even going to attempt any bass playing at all, but he would be on stage for some vocals and general crowd pumping, at which he was a master.

“Well let’s plug in and run this stuff,” Skeet said after most everything had been laid out.

“Let’s do it!” Paul said, grabbing his guitar case and pulling out a pink Ibanez. Pat headed for the studio door toward the drums and Billy headed for the refrigerator to get another beer.

Skeet, Paul and Billy went into the main room of the studio where Pat was already sitting behind a set of drums that Skeet kept on hand for just such events as this. Truth be told, his studio was loaded with instrumentation. There were Marshall, Randall, Carvin and Fender guitar amps lining one wall with Ampegs, Fender and Hartke bass amps lining the other. There were several guitars on stands in one corner and tons of basses littered throughout including a pair of stand up basses and 3 fretless models. The place was also littered with various keyboards and synthesizers in various states. Pat was the only one who had been here before and Billy and Paul stood with their jaws on the floor. Various mics on stands of various sizes were laid out strategically

“Holy Fuck,” Paul said, his eyes as big as saucers.

“You said it kid,” Billy said as he looked around the room. “I’m like a kid in a candy store!”

“I like to collect things,” Skeet said somewhat sheepishly. “Pick whichever one does it for you Paul. I heard through the grape vine that you were a Randall guy, so that 50 watt is already wired up but it’ll only take Brian a minute or so to run another one, if you’d rather.”

Paul grabbed a cord and plugged in. He ran a slinky lead line and ended on a huge A chord. “No man, this is great!”

“Feel free to play with whatever you guys want,” Skeet said as he grabbed his black Fender Jazz bass from a stand. He tossed it lightly over his shoulder and plugged into his favorite Ampeg SVT. In reality, it was his favorite for playing rock, but he much preferred his Fender Bassman for most other music.

“So I talked to Pat a little yesterday and took a look on the internet at some videos of y’all. I must say I’m impressed! I noticed you guys do a kickin’ version of the old Humble Pie song, ‘30 Days In The Hole’. How ‘bout we warm up with that? Billy, are you doing the lead vocal duties?”

Pat started playing his high hat cymbal while everyone made sure they had a working mic. Pat counted off. “1...2...3...”

Paul struck a short chord to give everybody a starting note. “30 DAYS IN THE HOLE!” The room erupted with acapella vocal harmony that brought goose bumps to everyone in the room. Even Brian sat up straight in the control room to take a listen. Not much got his attention, but this did. “30 DAYS IN THE HOLE,” they all repeated. They looked at each other and smiles came across their faces. “30 DAYS IN THE HOLE”. Brian reached down and started a digital recorder that would pick up the activity in the room.

“Wow!” Billy said into the microphone. He held up his arm and motioned over the top as if he was pulling the hair out and pointing. He gave a scream into the mic.

“30 DAYS IN THE HOLE,” they said for the final part of the vocal only intro. Then they kicked in. Skeet was right in the pocket, locked in with Pat. Paul was shredding on the guitar and Billy’s lead vocals were pretty darn good. Billy wasn’t a vocalist normally. He was just having fun, but his singing this afternoon bordered on amazing.

When the final note of the song hit, they all sat there and stared at each other for a moment. Brian, who was in the control room, handling the sound punched in. “So much for the warm up,” he said in the best smart ass tone he could muster.

“What’s next?” Skeet asked. “Let’s try some of y’all’s stuff.”

“How about ‘Alive and Kickin’’. You think you can handle that one, Bill?” Paul asked with just a hint of sarcasm in his voice.

“I’ll just follow you, Junior. Have you heard the song Skeet?”, Billy asked.

“Oh yea.” Skeet began to sing the song lightly into the mic. “Jump into the fire, keep our love alive and kickin...”

“That’s it!”

“Ok, Skeet, we do it in D. It’s gonna start like this...”

Pat cut him off. “I think he’s probably got it, Bill,” Pat said with a grin. Pat knew Skeet had it, note for note. He knew that Skeet had any song that he heard played just once down cold, note for note. Pat counted off and led into the song with a drum fill. Skeet hopped in perfectly with Paul and locked in with Pat on the beat. They played a fairly straight version of the song with both Paul and Skeet throwing in some killer improvisational licks here and there. In the middle of the song there was an instrumental break down that Skeet nailed.

“You’ve been doing your homework. I’m flattered. I can’t believe you had the time to learn that song note for note since last night,” Billy said.

“Cut it out, man. It’s all your licks. I just copied ‘em”, Skeet said.

“Dude,” Pat interrupted. “You know people who have photographic memory? Well, now you can say you know someone that has PHONOgraphic memory.”

Billy and Paul looked puzzled. “You made that shit up, Torpey!” Paul finally said.

“The term? Yes. The phenomena? No. See, Skeet can hear a song and then reproduce it. Not like normal, where you learn the song. It really is like a photographic memory. All he has to do is hear it.” Pat said.

“Yea...whatever. I just have a knack,” Skeet said, trying to change the subject.

“I’ll say you do,” said Billy.

“Hey Bill, your right hand’s busted, but how is your left?” Skeet asked.

“Fine, why?” Billy looked puzzled.

“On the break, lets do the old ‘two players, one bass’ trick. I’ll take the right....obviously.”

“That’s a pretty tight break. It would take some work to pull that off,” Billy said. The skepticism was obvious in his voice.

“Nah, man. We can do it. Give me two measures before the break. You ready, Bill”

“What’s the worst that can happen?” Billy said as he walked up behind Skeet.

“You can fuck up the other hand?” Paul shot with a grin.

“1...2...3...4” Pat counted off and they dropped easily into the break. Skeet dropped his hand to his side and Billy grabbed the neck. They played through the complicated break as if there was nothing to it. Billy shook his head, his bleach blond hair flying all over the place.

“That’s what I’m talking about!” exclaimed Skeet.

“I can’t believe we just pulled that off with NO PRACTICE!” said Billy.

“Nothing to it, man.”

Paul just stared at them, his eyes as wide as saucers. “That was....it was...FUCK!”

“I told you guys he was that damn good. We are gonna kill tonight. We have two of the baddest bass players on the planet playing the same bass!” Pat said.

They really were recognized as two of the greatest bass players in the world. They had even played on the same stage together before, but just loose jams. Nothing like this.

Skeet’s phone began to ring again. “That’s Niles. B, could you get that and tell him I’ll call him back?” Brian grabbed the phone, slipped off to a corner and began talking. Pat was already beating on the drums in the next room, but the control room that everyone else was in was totally soundproof.

“Skeet, I think you should talk to him,” Brian said. “Niles is really excited. He says he has some great news.”

Skeet looked at Billy, shrugged, and took the phone from Brian. “Hiya Niles. What’s up?” Billy, Brian and Paul all looked at Skeet as if maybe they could pick up the other end of the conversation by staring at him.

“Cool, man! The more the merrier! Who are we talking about?”

Billy and Brian exchanged glances, and then resumed staring at Skeet.

“You’re kidding, man! That will bring down the house!” Skeet covered the mouth piece and looked at the three men staring at them.

“You guys are NEVER gonna guess who’s showing up to sit in tomorrow!”

Chapter 5

Chapin sat hunched over her computer at a small desk in the living room of her north side Chicago apartment. “C’mon Google Fu!” she lamented. “Bring me something I can actually use.” She tried a different combination of search terms which yielded nothing. Again she tried and again she came up empty. She had been working on an article for hours and was having no luck finding anything new or even useful. “Damn!” She leaned back in her chair, let out a loud sigh and crossed her arms. “I gotta get my mind off this for a minute,” she thought.

She thought a shower and a quick meal might help. She hopped in and out of the shower and into some flannel pajama bottoms and a t-shirt sporting a picture of John Coltrane on the front. She ran a comb quickly through her hair and headed for the kitchen.

Chapin wasn’t much of a cook. It wasn’t that she couldn’t follow a recipe, it just always seemed like more trouble than it was worth. She popped open the door of the microwave and headed to the freezer.

“Hmm...pot pie or burrito? There is no choice. Burrito.” She grabbed the burrito and a plate and tossed both rather haphazardly in the microwave and ran back to the computer to try another search while she waited. She didn’t get much more than she had gotten before.

“Well,” she said as she let out a long sigh. “I’ll just have to work with what I have.”

The microwave began to beep and Chapin immediately headed back to the kitchen. She grabbed the plate from the microwave. “Hot! Hot!” She gasped while simultaneously wincing and performing some sort of odd plate – burrito juggling act. She grabbed a kitchen towel and fork and headed back to the computer.

Chapin had been trying to write the article for hours. She had two that were due plus she would have to write an article about the charity event she would be attending the following evening. One was the interview with Skeet which she was able to knock out in a flash but the report on ‘Jazz Influence in Popular Music’ was proving more formidable, the major reason being that she didn’t really care for most popular music.

She banged away several more paragraphs citing the backgrounds of Alicia Keys, Bruce Hornsby and anyone else she could think of that sounded remotely ‘jazzy’. Finally, she had at

least reached the word count she needed. She finished off her burrito and leaned back in her chair, shaking her hair out and enjoying a slight sense of accomplishment minus the pride.

She grabbed a remote control from beside the keyboard and pushed the play button. The room filled with the sounds of 'So What' from Miles Davis' "Kind of Blue" album. A slight smile shown on her face and she decided to check her email one last time before turning in. It was early, but she had been writing for hours and had a long day planned tomorrow.

She leaned forward again and opened up her email in box. There was the ever present spam, of course, the standard offers to meet married people in her area that were out for discreet fun, the African prince who really needed her help to recover his fortune and the old standby offers to enlarge her penis. "Ahh...an email from Mom?" Chapin's parents had an internet connection and email, albeit the twenty dollar a month America Online that they had used forever, but it was unusual for Chapin to get an email from them unless it was her mom forwarding her every false virus warning, religious spam crap or funny pet picture that ever crossed the wire. But this one was different. There was no 'FW:' in the subject line and it, in fact, read "Thanksgiving Dinner". Intrigued, she opened it.

"Dear Chapin," her mom was always so formal in emails. She had tried to get her to loosen up a bit and join the modern world but so far her efforts had failed miserably.

Papa and I just had the most wonderful conversation with your 'friend' Jack. He is simply delightful. Papa says you have a real winner there. He said he would really like to meet us so we invited him to Thanksgiving dinner. We are so looking forward to meeting him in person. Maybe there is some question he wants to ask your Papa? Oh how wonderful this would be.

We are planning a supper in the late afternoon, around four or so. You should come by about three so we can have drinks.

We are so happy and excited for you both.

Love,

Mom

"Oh shit!" She was livid, or freaking out, or both. She wasn't sure. "What the fuck did he do? What the fuck did THEY do? Oh God! Oh God! Oh God!" She buried her face in both hands then began to massage her temples. She could feel a headache coming on. The pressure was getting to the point that she felt as if the whole world was a vice and her head was sandwiched right in the middle of it.

"I've gotta stop this," she said, sitting up suddenly. She knew that the longer her parents thought the she and Jack were..."AAAAARRRRGGGG! She shuttered and suddenly became nauseous. She grabbed her cell phone and dialed her parent's house. "Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck..." she

mumbled trailing off as the phone began to ring. The phone rang and rang. “C’mon! Pick up”, she said, trying to will her mom to answer.

The phone picked up. “Mom! You’ve got to...,” She was cut off by the sound of her mom’s voice, Minnesota accent and all, on the other end.

“HI! You’ve reached Alan and Agnes Hannigan!” She said in one of those ‘just too happy you called’ voices.

“The fucking answering machine?!” Chapin said in disbelief. Her heart sank.

“Please leave your message at the tone and we’ll get back to you as soon as we can!” Chapin paused for what seemed like an eternity waiting for the tone then she heard a familiar muted voice on the other end of the line. “No Alan, you’ve got to push the....” BEEEEEP

“Mom! Dad! Me and Jack are not together!” She could immediately hear her mom, a former Literature professor, chiding her for her English. “I mean, Jack and I are NOT together. We haven’t gone out in almost 8 months!” She was practically screaming into the phone. “He can’t come to Thanksgiving Dinner! You’ve got to tell him NO! I mean, he’s mentally not all...well...I can tell you the rest later. But you have to uninvite him! He can’t come to dinner. He just can’t! Just...ummm...call me as soon as you get this...”

Chapin hung up and thought about calling her mom’s cell phone, but she knew neither her mom nor dad would ever hear it. She looked back at the email and the panic set in again. She tried calling her parents again, but got the answering machine again.

“This just can’t be happening.” She knew what she had to do and began to dial Jack’s number.

Chapter 6

It was quite chilly in Chicago, even for a November morning. The first snow of the season had fallen during the night and an ocean of white powder covered the ground. The sunlight streamed into Chapin's bedroom window and caught her right in the face. She covered her eyes with her hand, sat up with a start and dropped her feet over the side of the bed.

She glanced at the clock as she grabbed her robe. It was just after 10:00 in the morning all she could think about was Jack, and not in a good way. She had called him the night before but there had been no answer. She knew he was avoiding her, knowing how angry she was going to be. She was sure that in his fantasy world, he truly believed they were still together. This was his justification for going to meet her parents as long as she didn't tell him not to.

She knew he was just getting to work and there was no choice but to have it out with him, yet again. And the sooner the better. She jumped into a pair of blue jeans and a white T-shirt because she knew he would hate it. He always said it made her look 'common' and she should dress more to her status. This had always made her uncomfortable, but at this point she felt anything that made him uncomfortable was worth doing. She grabbed a heavy coat and headed out the door.

Jack worked as the station manager for WWLH, a large pop format station in the Chicago area. It was a station that Chapin never listened to. She thought most pop music was fairly soulless. It was all about commercialism and full of nothing but Britney Spears and Jessica Simpson clones or boy bands fabricated for the consumption of adolescent girls.

The elevator doors parted and Chapin headed straight for the doors of WWLH radio. She swung open the door and walked in with a purpose. The receptionist smiled at her with a plastic kind of smile.

"Welcome to WWLH. Can I help you?" Even her voice sounded 'pop' to Chapin and it only served to irritate her more. She also appeared to be the typical dumb blonde with big boobs that Jack would hire for a receptionist.

"Jack Palero!" she stated emphatically. "I'm looking for Jack Palero"

"Is Mr. Palero expecting you, maam?"

"If he isn't, then the bastard is a bigger nut job than I thought he was." The receptionist cocked her head sideways and just stared at Chapin with a look of total confusion. Standing in a doorway, stood a bald man in a Black Sabbath t-shirt who almost shot Pepsi out his nose at the comment.

“Oh Jeez! Well, you obviously DO know the flaky bastard, don’t you?” the man chortled. “Oh wait, wait. Let me guess. You wouldn’t be that Chaplin chick? The girlfriend he’s always talking about? I figured it was only a matter of time before you showed up here. Of course I always pictured you carrying a deer rifle, but I see you’re more the revolver in the purse type. To each his own, I guess.” The man paused and took in the confused, yet still irritated look on Chapin’s face. “Shawn Thorpe...aka Shawno Gordo...you know....Shawno and the Gang?” He extended his hand.

She glanced at his hand and crossed her arms. “OK...let’s see...where should I start correcting you Mr. Thorpe?” Chapin’s normal laid back attitude gave way to her mother’s perfect diction, pronounced clearly in staccato tones. “First, the name is CHAPIN. Not CHAPLIN. Chaplin was a comic and I am not he. Second, I am in fact NOT Palero’s girlfriend and have not even seen him socially for 8 months. Third, I don’t own a deer rifle or a revolver, although I am beginning to like the idea and fourth, you mean ‘Kool and the Gang’”. She began to glance back and forth between Shawn and the receptionist. “Now could one of you please point me in the direction of Palero?”

“I’m sorry, maam. If you don’t have an appointment, I’m afraid Mr. Palero won’t...” Shawn interrupted her.

“I got this one, Tiffany. You just sit there and think about how lucky you are to have been able to move here from the Canadia’s. Right this way, Ms. CHAPIN.”

“How many times do I have to tell you Shawn? It’s pronounced CANADA,” she said in a tone that had turned quite irritating.

Shawn opened the door he had been standing next to and motioned to Chapin. As they passed through the door he glanced back at Tiffany. “If you are Canadian, you are from Canadia. End of story!” he said and scurried through the door, closing it before she could respond. Chapin was waiting for him in the hall.

“This way” he said and motioned down the hall. “By the way. ‘Shawno and the Gang’ is my show. I’m the morning man around here.”

“Sorry. I write for Jazz Journal magazine so I don’t listen to much pop music.” Her tone of voice gave away her disdain for the genre.

“Yea, me either.” Shawn said as if a wave of depression had washed over him. “But they won’t let us play good music around here.”

“Wrong demographic?” She had know idea why she asked because she really didn’t care, but hell, the guy was guiding her where she needed to go.

“That’s what your boyfriend...”He caught himself mid sentence. “I mean...that’s what that ‘guy who claims to be your boyfriend but obviously isn’t, which tickles me to death because now Jen

owes me five bucks' thinks. Hey maybe while you're beatin' him for whatever reason you are going to beat him, you could beat him into letting me change the format?"

"I'll see what I can do."

They arrived at a closed door. A placard saying 'Jack Palero - Station Manager' hung in the center.

"Here it is. Now, before you go in, I gotta warn ya. The rooms not soundproof and the carpet stains real easy so no screaming and I'd recommend blunt trauma. You know, less blood to clean up." Shawn grinned at her, grabbed the knob and opened the door.

"Hey Jack. You got a visitor." Shawn said with a huge grin.

"Chapin? What are you doing here?" Jack asked with an obvious note of concern in his voice.

"What do you think I'm doing here, Jack ass?"

"Well, I can see you two wanna be alone, make out or something so I'll just step out." Chapin shot Shawn a dirty look. He held his hand up to his mouth as if trying to not let Jack hear what he was saying. "Remember. Blunt trauma. Call me when you're done and I'll help you hide the body."

"Thorpe!" Paul snapped. "I told you not to wear that type of t-shirt around here. 'Black Sabbath' is not the image we here at WWLH are trying to convey. You need to go change it now and don't make me tell you again." It was obvious in Paul's voice that he was trying to show off.

"Uhh...yea...I'll get right on that, big guy." With that, Shawn closed the door.

Chapin turned and looked at Jack. He was tall and thin with a runners build and always had a condescending smirk on his face. His hair was short, brown and always seemed to have too much gel in it.

"I'm sorry about that, sweetie. Sometimes the hired help is a little hard to handle," Jack said, a note of condescension lingered in his voice. "I'm so glad you stopped by. Our schedules have just been so busy. I'm sorry we haven't been able to spend more time together."

Chapin's jaw almost dropped to the floor. "You really are out of your fucking mind, aren't you?" Her mind rattled with disbelief. She couldn't believe he actually had it in his head that they were still together. She blinked and her mind snapped back to why she was here.

"Look Jack. First, there is no WE. WE are not together. WE have not been together in over eight months. And WE are definitely not going to my parent's house for Thanksgiving. You can get that thought out of your head right now." Chapin was speaking more aggressively than Jack had ever seen.

“Well, hun...” She cut him off.

“Don’t call me ‘hun’. I am not your ‘hun’. We are not anything to each other, so cut it out. Get it through your head.” Chapin was not going to let him get a word in. There was no reason to. He should have nothing to say. This was not an issue for discussion, just an end.

“Your parents DID invite me. We can’t disappoint them,” Jack said calmly, with his usual smile on his face.

“THERE IS NO WE!! Don’t you get it? NO US! NO WE! NOTHING!” She knew she was getting nowhere so she tried to calm down and start again. “Look, I will take care of my parents. I’ll send your regrets. Now, listen to me very closely because I really want you to understand this. I don’t want to be with you. I don’t want to date you. I don’t want to have any contact with you. I don’t want you to call me, email me, text me or anything else having to do with me. Do you understand? Have I made myself quite clear?” She was quickly becoming exhausted.

“You have made yourself perfectly clear, Chapin,” Jack said, still sporting the smile.

“I really hope so. I don’t want to have to go through this again.” The tone of her voice showed that she wasn’t convinced.

“Oh, I’m sure we won’t. I’m sure we just need a few days of alone time and then we’ll be able to address our issues much more calmly. We’ll get through this, baby. I just know we will.”

Chapin couldn’t believe what she was hearing. She was running out of ways to make it any more clear. She looked him right in the eyes. His eyes fell away. “Look me in the eyes so that I am sure you get this and you will know that I am serious.”

“Ok. Let me try to explain it one more way. I don’t want to have anything to do with you. If you contact me again in any way, on the phone, email, text or in person, especially if you try to show up at my parent’s house, I will call the police, have you arrested for harassment and take out a restraining order. You may consider this your final warning. I hope this makes it totally clear, although I’m sure it doesn’t because nothing else has. Maybe the authorities can convince you where I can’t seem to. Am I getting through to you? Am I making myself clear?” She was so mad that she was almost spitting when she talked.

“Ok, I got it,” Jack said. He lowered his head and looked at the top of his desk. He seemed to be dropping the fight, but Chapin knew he wasn’t. He was just placating her for the moment.

She opened the door, turned around and looked him right in the face. “I mean it, Jack. One more time and I’m calling the cops.”

She walked out the door only to see Shawn sitting on the couch outside the office.

“I thought you would have at least hit him or something,” Shawn said.

“Thorpe! I thought I told you....”

“Umm. I believe the lady said if you harass us, we are calling the cops,” he said, grinning ear to ear. “So I suggest you not push us. We will be taking our leave of you now, Jack!”

Chapin looked at him confused but he smiled and offered her his arm, which she took. She turned for one last look at Jack. “I mean it!” she said. She grabbed the knob and closed the door to Jacks office, turned and she and Shawn started down the hall arm and arm.

“So now what?” Shawn asked. “I think I should get out of here for a while and let him cool down.”

“I don’t know what you are doing, Mr. Thorpe, but I have to go cover the American Cancer Society benefit show. Some of us have to work.”

“You know, now that you mention it, I am supposed to MC that show. We could walk there together, if you would like. Actually, having you around would keep good ol Jackie away from me, what with the restraining order and all.” Shawn was only half kidding. He was sure he wouldn’t lose his job, but he knew he would have to listen to Jack bitch at him for awhile.

“OK. Where’s your car parked? I came here in a cab,” the irritation slowly dropping from her voice

“Well, I don’t have a car, but it’s only 7 blocks. We can walk. It won’t take long and I could definitely use the exercise.” Chapin reluctantly agreed and they headed for the elevator.

“I’m sorry you had to be involved in that,” Chapin said. “I hope he doesn’t come down on you too hard.”

“Nawww, I’m not worried about him. Nobody really takes him seriously. He’s only there because his uncle owns the station and his uncle is much more attached to the money making power of the station, which is me, than any nepotism he may feel he owes his nephew,” Shawn said with more than a hint of cynicism in his voice.

They exited the elevator and headed for the front door. The building faced West Irving Park Road and was just North West of Wrigley Field. The Metro, the venue for the fund raiser was just a couple of blocks up from Wrigley Field so they headed out. Chapin was glad she had worn flats and not heels.

“We’ve got a little time, do you mind if we grab a bit to eat?” Chapin hadn’t had anything to eat since the burrito the night before and was somewhat famished. “I don’t really know the area, but I assume you do,” she said to Shawn expectantly.

“Sure! Not a problem. ‘Bob’s Burgers’ is right up here, about another block. Best burgers and fries in this part of the city. “

“Perfect!” Chapin breathed a sigh of relief. “I’m a burger fiend!” she exclaimed.

“I, madam, am a burger connoisseur!” Shawn said in the most condescending tone he could muster. They exchanged a laugh and walked the block to Bob’s. Chapin ordered a standard cheeseburger and fries and, reluctantly, a Pepsi. Shawn had the bacon cheeseburger and settled into a booth.

“So, if you don’t mind me asking, what happened with you and ol’ J.P.?” Shawn asked.

She paused for a minute and debated whether to talk about it. She was initially inclined not to. As a reporter, she was used to trying to get the secrets out of other people but revealing her own was something she wasn’t used to. But she was beginning to view Shawn as an ally. He seemed to have quite a bit of disdain for Jack and an ally on the inside may help her situation, especially if she had to involve the authorities.

“We met at a friend’s party. I was kinda set up on a blind date with him, but my friend didn’t tell me. I just showed up, we got introduced and he had thought we were together ever since.” Chapin face winced a little at thinking about it.

“I assume that your friend is now your ex-friend,” Shawn said with a smile.

“Well, at first he didn’t seem too bad. It’s not like I fell head over heels for him or anything, but he seemed ok to hang out with. We dated on and off for about three months.”

“So how did it get from that to this?” Shawn asked.

“I came home from a business trip and…” Shawn interrupted.

“And you found him in your bed wearing your underwear? I knew it! At first I thought that pair of panties in his top desk drawer was his, but now I know the truth,” Shawn exclaimed with huge smile. He always tried to lighten a situation with humor when it got too tense. Of course, sometimes his humor could make the situation even tenser.

She grinned and smacked him on the arm. “You’re a real perv, you know that?”

“So those panties ARE his. The plot thickens. Continue…”

“Well, basically I went to hang some stuff up in my closet and it had… umm… changed… while I was gone.” She paused to try to think of a way to explain it, but decided just to blurt it out. “You see, I have a large walk in closet in my bedroom. I hadn’t lived there very long so I still had some stuff from my last move in cardboard boxes stacked in the closet. Now the boxes were gone.”

“He stole your cardboard boxes? Man, that guy is weird. And I just thought he stole your panties, but cardboard boxes? Mental ward for J.P., I tell ya.”

“Can you just leave my panties out of this?” she said with a smirk.

“You’re the boss. So missing cardboard boxes...”

“Yea, the boxes were gone, but they were replaced by matching blue storage containers, with all my stuff sorted and categorized.” Chapin shuttered just remembering it.

“You should never have let him move in with you. That was your first mistake.”

“Move in with me? Oh no, we didn’t live together. We had only been out maybe 10 or 12 times, but I accidentally forgot my keys one evening when we went out, so he saw where I hide the spare. I didn’t think anything about it at the time. I mean, I trusted him.”

“Mistake number one,” Shawn said. “Now let me get this straight.”

At that point, the waitress arrived with their food. Chapin was amazed at the size of the burger and felt a little intimidated. Shawn on the other hand looked like he was in hamburger heaven. The waitress asked if there was anything else and walked away.

Shawn continued. “Now let me get this straight. The pin head lets himself into your apartment, without permission. Goes through your closet, tears everything out of cardboard boxes, sorts everything out, puts it into nice new storage containers and re-stacks them? I wonder if I could get him to do that at my place. My wife, Jen, will love this story, but I can’t tell her!” Shawn paused. She has been on my ass for months to sort out some old stuff we have in boxes from our last move. If she finds out Jack did it for you, I’ll really be in the dog house.”

“Well, he also labeled each box with category and a contents list. Oh, and set up a database on my computer so I could,” Chapin made quotes in the air with her hands. “Track down which box something was in at the click of a mouse.”

She took a bite of her burger. Shawn was almost halfway done with his. “You were right,” she said staring at the burger in disbelief. “These things are really good!”

“Oh yea! They’re the best!” Shawn exclaimed. “So what did you do when you found the closet redone? Did you figure it was him?”

“I knew it was him. He left a note detailing how I should use the database and how the color coded Sharpies had special meanings and reminding me that I have to follow the system for it to work for me. He was very proud of himself.”

“You’re fucking kidding? Didn’t he see that what he had done was criminal, breaking and entering? Not to mention the whole psychotic, anal retentive, just plain nut job part.”

“Nope...just proud of himself.” Chapin got a chill. “Most of the time I just look at it as weird, but every once in a while when I tell someone about it, I mean, it’s like a fucking horror movie trailer or something.”

“Anyway, I told him we were through and I didn’t want to see him anymore. I found a new place to hide my key. I even changed the locks because I began to wonder if he had made copies of them.” She paused and took another bite. “These are seriously good fries!”

“And how long ago did all that happen?” Shawn asked.

“Let’s see. This is November and that was in March so 8 months or so. Why?” she asked.

“Because as far as we knew, you guys were still engaged as of yesterday.” Shawn’s face was a combination of amusement and concern. While Jack was really off his rocker and Shawn was worried about Chapin being able to get rid of Jack, he had to admit that just hearing the story was hilarious.

“Engaged!? We were NEVER engaged! He emails me a couple of times a week and will call every once in a while and that’s it. I send the emails directly to the trash and always tell him that there is nothing between us and he needs to move on!” She was getting mad again.

“Your first mistake was not calling the police when he broke in. Having that restraining order in place would be pretty handy right now, don’t cha think?” Shawn asked

Chapin stared at him. She was very frustrated with the whole situation and here was this guy she didn’t even really know making jokes about it. But she knew it was funny as hell from the outside. The thought of writing the whole thing down and turning it into a book had crossed her mind before. “Hind sight is twenty twenty, I guess. But hey, didn’t you say my first mistake was TRUSTING him?”

Shawn paused and grinned. “Oh touché madam. Touché!”

Chapter 7

Skeet sat in his living room close to the front door waiting for the limo to pick him up for the gig. Brian had already left in the van with his equipment. Normally, Skeet would just take the instruments in the trunk of the limo and use whatever amp and microphones were already there, but he had a full plate today and he wanted everything to be just right, plus he had decided to take one of his standup basses and those usually didn't fit in trunks, even of limos.

Skeet had been looking forward to this for days. While he really enjoyed the normal playing he did backing up high profile acts, his favorite thing to do usually involved loose, unrehearsed jams. He had told Chapin in their interview, "I know what I am going to get from a well rehearsed, well presented show. It'll be great, just like it was last night and the night before. But unrehearsed, total improvisation? That's where it's at. It's like walking the high wire without a net. If you crash, it's gonna be really bad, but if it works, it's better than sex!"

And there was going to be numerous opportunities for improvisation at this gig. Tons of his friends, some of the best in the business were going to be there and everyone always wanted to jam with Skeet.

Skeet's cell phone went off. "Money! Get back! I'm all right jack keep your hands off of my stack."

"Hmm," he thought. "I wonder why Dave's calling?" He picked up the phone. "Dave! What's up?"

"What's up? The record! That's what's up!" Dave Schwartz' voice bellowed from the other end of the phone. Dave was the A&R representative from the record company that worked with Skeet on his solo stuff. Dave and Skeet had never really talked much so he was surprised to hear from him. The record company didn't see Skeet and a huge profit maker from his solo efforts but kept a solo contract with him to help entice him to play and tour with their artists when opportunities arose.

"Oh you got a chance to listen to it? Excellent!" Skeet said, still somewhat confused as to why he was getting this phone call.

“That thing is smoking, Skeet! We need to get together and talk about promotion, touring. We wanna do a big radio push too. We hear a couple of singles just jumping out at us.”

Skeet was speechless.

“And the guitar! Who’s playing with you? The guy is on fire! We’ve got to have him on the tour. ‘Sweet Magnolia Blossom’ has bullet written all over it.”

Skeet sat silent and completely puzzled. He had been the one who had laid down the guitar tracks and thought they were rather rudimentary. He wondered if this was some kind of bad joke. Could some of his buddies had gotten Dave to call on a lark, but who would do that? It was pretty cruel and nobody seemed to have it in for Skeet.

“Skeet?” Dave paused but heard nothing. “Skeet?”

“Oh yea, I’m sorry Dave. The...umm...dog...uhhh..needed to go out. So...yea. I’m glad you guys are diggin’ it.” He was still in shock but trying to recover a little professionalism.

“Oh we’re crazy about it! Look, we need to get together to work out some details. How’s your schedule today?”

Skeet paused again. “Ummm...I’m doing this benefit at the Metro so I’m pretty booked up today. Maybe we can get together sometime early next week.”

“Next week? Oh we want to really move on this. Can you squeeze me in earlier?” Dave asked in an almost desperate tone.

“On Saturday?” Skeet was sure this was a joke now. No record executive was going to meet with an artist one the weekend. Maybe Clapton or Pete Townsend or the like, but not lil ol Skeet Seaton.

“Absolutely! We can meet anywhere you want. I can come over there if you want?” This was sounding even more suspicious to Skeet and couldn’t get the ‘guitar on fire’ part of the conversation out of his head.

“Oh, it’s ok. No need to go to any trouble. How about if I just meet you at your office tomorrow afternoon. Maybe around 3 or 4? It’s gonna be a long night tonight.” Skeet figured if he was going to get punked, they at least were not going to do it in his own house.

“That’s great! I’ll see ya then!” Dave hung up the phone. Skeet just stared at his cell, still dumbfounded.

“The guitar is hot?” he repeated out loud.

Just then, he heard a car door shut. Sure enough, his limo was out front. He grabbed his iPod and headed to the door.

“I don’t remember any especially ‘hot’ guitar. He mumbled.

Chapter 8

Chapin and Shawn were just getting ready to go in the stage entrance at Metro when a voice called out from behind them.

“Shawno!”

They both turned around to see Skeet emerging from the limo. He was dressed in his usual black jeans, and a dark blue wool sailor’s coat he had picked up on a tour of Scandinavia. The hint of a yellow shirt poked out around the collar and he was wearing black leather boots.

“Skeets!” Shawn shouted back. Skeet approached Shawn and they gave each other a big hug. “Man, I am jonesin’ for some poker! Does the game start back up this week?”

“You know it! Tuesday night as usual.” Skeet said, although his eyes were on Chapin the entire time.

“Oh, I’m sorry. I should introduce....” Skeet cut him off.

“Ms. Hannigan. It’s great to see you again,” Skeet said in an almost shy voice.

“Wait. You two know each other?”

“I was just about to ask you the same thing, Shawno,” Skeet said turning his attention temporarily away from Chapin.

“Hello again! But please, don’t call me ‘Ms.’. It’s like puttin’ and elevator in an outhouse. Just don’t belong. I’m just Chapin.” Skeet and Chapin’s eyes met, then they both burst into laughter. “Now you’re not gonna hold my fumbling over obscure lines from old movies against me, are you?” Again they roared with laughter but the joke completely escaped Shawn which was starting to bother him. He prided himself on his sense of humor and if a joke escaped him, he took it personally.

Skeet noticed Shawn’s confusion and winked at him and smiled. They turned and headed toward to stage door. “This is a great surprise,” Skeet said to Chapin. “I’d expected to see this old road

dog here,” he said, slapping Shawn on the back. “but I didn’t know you were working this gig. How do you know Shawno?”

“Well, short acquaintance, long story.” Chapin said.

“I helped her hide a body!” Shawno burst out with pride.

Skeet glanced back and forth between them with a puzzled look on his face.

“Part of that long story thing I was talking about.”

Shawn knocked on the door, which opened after what seemed to Chapin to be an abnormally long time. A very large man with more piercings than Chapin could count stood blocking the doorway. He wore a leather jacket and a Sex Pistols t-shirt that had obviously seen better days.

“Shawn Gordon,” he said. “I’m hosting this shindig!”

The door guard checked his list, handed him a badge to hang around his neck, and allowed Shawn through the door.

“Skeet!” he said. “Go on in, man.”

Chapin began to walk through the door way but the burly man blocked her.

“And you would be...?” He looked down at her quite menacingly and she took a step back.

“Chapin Hannigan. Jazz Journal magazine. I should be on the press list.”

“No press allowed until an hour before show time. Sorry. You’ll have to wait.” He seemed to grow even larger in the door way.

“It’s cool. She’s with me, Carl,” Skeet spoke up. The guard looked at Chapin then looked back at Skeet.

“You sure, man? You know how Barney gets if I let in folks before the appointed time.” He looked at Chapin with a slight grin. He seemed oddly proud of himself that he had actually used a three syllable word in a sentence.

Skeet reached over and took Chapin’s hand. He smiled at her shyly. She met his eyes and smiled back.

“Yup. Definitely sure.”

“A’ight then.” He fished out a blue badge for Skeet. He began trying to fish a yellow badge out of the web of lanyards that hung next to him.

“Come on, Carl,” Skeet said, his voice trailing off. “Give her the musician’s creds.”

The guard paused, scratched his head and eyed both of them somewhat suspiciously. He returned to the badges, fished out a blue one and reluctantly handed it to her. She put it around her neck, grabbed Skeet’s hand again and they almost skipped through the door.

The hallway was dark and it took a few minutes for their eyes to adjust. The only thought in Chapin’s head was that Skeet was still holding her hand, and she really hoped it wasn’t just part of the ruse to get her in a little early. She had been smitten with him when she first laid eyes on him at the interview and the more they had talked, the more attracted she had become, but she had tried to remain professional. And now he was holding her hand!

Skeet glanced over at Chapin. “Let’s see what kind of trouble we can get into,” he said with a wry grin.

They passed a doorway with the door about three fourths closed with some wonderful acoustic guitar and harmony vocals pouring out. Skeet paused to listen.

“Five years and there’s no doubt that I’m burnt out, I’ve had enough... So now boss man, here’s my two weeks, I’ll make it short and sweet, so listen up,” Skeet began to harmonize with the voices coming out of the room. He heard the voices swell with excitement.

“I could work my life away, but why? I’ve got things to do before I die.” Skeet smiled at Chapin and burst the door open just as the chorus rolled around and drug her in behind him.

“There’s got to be something more, got to be more than this. I need a little less hard times. I need a little more bliss.” Two women sat on chairs in the middle of the room, each playing a guitar and now, suddenly, with huge smiles on their faces. The blonde had a very girl next door look and sported a pair of overalls while the brunette had a real rebel look with a tattoo visible on her left forearm. Skeet sat down on the end of the couch situated just across from them and pulled Chapin down beside him. An acoustic guitar was sitting on a stand in arms reach. He grabbed it and immediately began to play, still harmonizing perfectly.

She was a little disappointed that he had replaced her hand with the guitar but she was amazed at the beautiful music that they were producing. She noticed her foot beginning to tap along. They finished out the song and they all erupted with laughter, Chapin clapping in approval. The brunette jumped up and gave him a huge hug.

“Skeet! It has been too damn long!” she exclaimed. The blonde stood up and gave him a hug too.

“Oh man, have I missed that kinda stuff!”

“Well come back on the road with us and you’ll get it every night again!”, the blonde said with a giggle. “The music, I mean, of course.”

Skeet giggled and looked back at Chapin. It dawned on him that his manners were eluding him.

“Oh man! I’m sorry. He pointed gently at the blonde and began with introductions. “Emily Sailiers,” he pointed to the brunette. “Amy Ray,” he then turned his hand to Chapin in much the same motion that “Barkers Beauties” had introduced a showcase on the “Price Is Right.”

“Chapin Hannigan.”

“Howdy!” Emily remarked, followed by a “Pleasure” from Amy.

“Chapin,” he said finishing the introductions. “The Indigo Girls”

“The pleasure is mine!” remarked Chapin.

“So Skeet, this one is finally making an honest man outta ya?” Amy joked.

“Naw, but the nights still young!”, Skeet said with a huge smile, glancing back at Chapin. She began to blush. “Where is everyone? The jamming usually centers around where ever you guys decide to light.” He turned to Chapin. “Wherever these two are is usually the center of activity.” He turned back to Amy and Emily. “Where’s the boys?”

“We’re doing this one solo. The band’s getting a night off in Charlotte tonight. We’re catching a flight back in the morning,” Emily said, steadily noodling on the guitar as she spoke.

“The first time I saw you guys...I don’t think I ever told you this story.... it was just the two of you. I was on tour with Belinda Carlisle and Pat Torpey and I were out carousing after a show in Atlanta and somehow we ended up in Athens, quite a bit lit...” Skeet paused and looked at Chapin. “This is all off the record, right?” he said with a grin.

“I think this whole day is gonna be off the record. Now finish your story!” she said, touching his shoulder lightly.

“So we were wandering around after a show in Atlanta and wandered in to a little joint called the ‘Uptown Lounge’ where you guys were playing.”

“Wait a minute,” Amy said as if a light bulb had just turned on in her brain. “Y’all are the drum and bass guy!” Emily and Amy sat up straight and exchanged surprised looks. They leaned back in their chairs and simultaneously, in very mock slurred drunken speech said “Ju guys are greeaaaaat! But chewed beeeee eeeeeeven better wit drums and a bass.”

Skeet placed his face in his palm. “Yea...that was us.”

“You know, that still comes up every once and a while and we just chuckle like hell over it. You played with us for 6 months and I never realized that was you!” Emily said.

Skeet made an overt attempt to change the subject. “And on that note, let’s play one more, then we gotta go find Brian.”

“Brian’s running around here somewhere. I saw him a few minutes before y’all walked in. He was talking to a bald guy,” Amy remarked.

“Shawn?” Chapin asked.

“Didn’t know him. Maybe,” Amy responded.

“You know, Amy. I’m not supposed to tell you but Brian has the biggest crush on you.”

“Damn, girl! You get all the good ones fawning over you!” Emily giggled.

“Skeet, he knows I’m a lesbian, right? I mean...” Amy asked with a hint of concern.

“Yea. I’m pretty sure he does. He just has a thing for cool chicks with tattoos.” Skeet chuckled.

They jammed on one more song and Skeet put the guitar back on the stand, gave each one a hug and promised he’d be back later. He offered his hand to Chapin to politely help her up off the couch which she accepted and refused to relinquish.

They headed out the door and proceeded down the hall. Skeet stopped and spoke to numerous people and had to introduce Chapin on at least eight separate occasions. As they walked along Chapin could see they were approaching another crowd of people. She glanced to her right and noticed a large room that appeared not to be occupied. As they passed, she pulled Skeet’s arm hard and forced him into the room. Before he could even regain his balance, she pushed the door closed, sandwiched his face between her palms and kissed him. The kiss caught Skeet completely off guard, but he responded almost instantly which made her kiss him even more passionately.

Slowly their lips parted and their eyes began to open. She looked in his eyes and then dropped her gaze. “I’m sorry. I...I...don’t know why I did that, but...” She couldn’t find the words. She looked up at him and he smiled which gave her the courage to continue. “I...I’ve been wanting to do that since about half way through our interview. “

“Well, I hope you figure it out soon so we can do it again,” Skeet said with a wry smile. She leaned in and kissed him again, but this time it was much gentler. As their lips parted, he leaned in and kissed her yet again wrapping his arms around her waist and holding on as if his life depended on it.

The door swung open and Brian flew in the room. “Skeet, the guys from...” He stopped cold as he took in the scene. “Umm...yea...well...come find me when you guys are done, ok?”

“You got it,B,” Skeet said almost without removing his lips from Chapin’s. “I’ll be right there.”

“Ummm....yea....ok....” Brian closed the door behind him and was very careful not to let it slam.

Chapin turned away from Skeet and began to walk away. A flirty, almost devilish smile crossed her face. “You know, I’m not normally this easy.” She said, walking toward the center of the room where a grand piano sat.

“Oh...I didn’t think you’re EASY. I think I would have said ‘a confident woman who goes for what she wants’?”

“Ok, let’s go with that one,” she said as she sat down at the piano. Skeet sat next to her and much to his surprise, she placed her hands on the keys and a beautiful version of “Georgia On My Mind” filled the room, as if it had been trapped in the piano and Chapin was somehow magically able to release it.

Skeet sat stunned, listening to the music and watching the beautiful woman who was producing it, and remembering how wonderful it was to kiss her only a minute before. As she played, a magnificently high, soulful, soprano voice came from the hallway behind the closed door.

“Georgia! Geooooogggggiaaaa! The whole day long. It’s that old sweet soooooong. That keeps Georgiiaaaa on my miiiiiiind!”

Chapin and Skeet had been in their own little world together, but both looked up and saw the outline of a slightly heavy set black woman enter the room. They both recognized her instantly and goose bumps covered their arms, as well as any arms of any people in ear shot. And ear shot would be a long way. Chapin marveled at the volume the woman was putting out.

As they approached the end of the verse, Chapin’s mind all of a sudden reminded her that she was sitting there accompanying Patti LaBelle and the nerves grabbed her. At the end of the verse, she played a simple ending and stopped. She had hoped she wouldn’t hyperventilate before she could bring the piece to some logical confusion and not have to face the embarrassment.

“Patti Golden Pipes!” Skeet exclaimed.

“Now Skeeter boy, I ain’t seen you in forever and a day. Let mamma take a look at ya.” She looked him up and down. “Nope...nope...ain’t right. “ Skeet’s face showed the surprise. Patti walked over to Chapin and stood her up from the piano bench and moved her next to Skeet. Chapin was speechless and became a rag doll in Patti’s hands. She stood stiffly next to Skeet, but Patti let out a “hmmppph” and walked over, put their hands together, looked again, then gently leaned Chapin’s head onto Skeet’s shoulder. She looked one last time. “That’s it. Now it’s right. I swear, mama got to do everything around here.”

Skeet and Patti burst out laughing and hugged. Chapin stood like a statue.

“Ok Skeeter. Who is she? I can already tell she’s something special but you know you should introduce us!”

“Yes Maam, Miss Patti!” Skeet said with a mock salute. “Miss Patti LaBelle, Miss Chapin Hannigan”

“Well it’s nice to meet you, baby. Y’all together, right? If ya not, ya should be and that’s what I got to say about that.”

“Umm...let’s just say things are looking promising?” Skeet said, glancing at Chapin who was still rigidly in awe.

Chapin suddenly became very aware that she wasn’t saying anything and she probably should be. “It’s nice to meet you! I’m Chapin.”

“Yea, I just told her that.” Skeet said with a grin.

“Ain’t no need to be nervous around me, baby. Miss Patti is just Miss Patti and that’s all there is to it. You play some good piano girl. But can you make it swing a little more for me?”

Chapin again became suddenly aware that there was conversation going on that she was somehow supposed to be a part of. “Umm...swing?”

“Let mama show ya, baby,” Patti said as she settled down on the bench. She began playing the same song with a much more swing vibe to it. “Now you try it, baby.”

Chapin swallowed hard. She was about to sit down and play in front of PATTI FREAKING LaBELLE! At the direction of PATTI FREAKING LaBELLE! It was all she could do to move away from Skeet’s arms but one foot went in front of the other and she made it to the bench. Her fears of hyperventilation set in again. It was all too much of a roller coaster for one day. First her mom, then Jack, then Shawn, then Skeet and the kiss and now PATTI FREAKING LaBELLE.

Skeet leaned in close and whispered softly in her ear. “Just go with it. You’re fine.”

She looked down at the keys and began to play trying to ‘swing it more’ as Patti had instructed. Patti began to snap her finger with the beat. “Yea, that’s it, baby. I can work with THAT.” Patti began to sing again. Skeet thought the sound was angelic, although maybe he was a little biased. He had known Patti for a number of years and even though he had toured with her, they had more of a big sister, little brother relationship. He thought she had one of the prettiest, and yet most powerful voices in the business. On top of that, she was being accompanied by the beautiful woman that he had just been kissing and he had no idea until 5 minutes ago that she could play an instrument.

The door opened quietly and Brian slipped in, followed by Amy and Emily and a whole host of musicians, roadies and anyone else who could hear the magic sound. They all listened in amazement at the performance Patti and Chapin gave. The air was electric!

Patti hit the last note, Chapin hit a little ending flourish and the room erupted with applause. Chapin turned more shades of red than she cared to count.

Amy leaned into Skeet. “You didn’t tell us she could play! We would have had her jamming with us before. “

Skeet leaned back. “Would you believe I didn’t know she could play until five minutes ago?”

“Son, no wonder you never got married. You need to pay a little more attention to the details of your ladies life,” Amy said and slugged him in the arm.

“But she’s...I mean, I...” He relented. “You’re right. I’ll remember from now on. Scout’s honor,” he said and raised three fingers into a Boy Scout sign. He set his eyes on Chapin, who was still awestruck from being in Patti’s presence and said quietly. “I think I need to learn everything I can.”

As for Chapin, she was having the afternoon of her life. She had reconnected with a guy she thought was the most interesting, handsome man she thought she had ever met. She had kissed him more passionately than she had kissed anyone in recent memory and he had returned her affections. She was getting to spend the day and the evening with him while meeting a veritable plethora of music legends. The fact that she didn’t know much about some of them didn’t make a whole lot of difference to her. On top of all that, she had just accompanied the great Patti LaBelle and received a standing ovation from a group of the most talented musicians in the industry. All this before three o’clock. How could this day get any better?

“I think you should go make sure that WWLH is going to be properly represented at this event. I don’t think I should have to do everything myself. And I TOLD you to change that t-shirt. If you value your job you will stop bucking me!” The voice whispered softly into Shawn’s ear. He hadn’t expected Jack to be attending nor had he noticed him entering the room. It took him for a complete start, but he tried to play it off.

“Jack!” he said mockingly. “Wasn’t expecting to see you here. Are you sure the station will be able to get along without you? I mean, Britney may show her ‘giner on the internets again and who would be there to make sure “Hit Me Baby One More Time” was played back to back for 12 hours? By the way, I was talking to Chapin and, I gotta tell ya, you are one sick bastard!”

Jack’s tone turned quiet, serious and cold. He grabbed Shawn by the shoulder, squeezing firmly and leaned in close. “You don’t need to worry about the station. I’ve got it handled. My advice to you is to keep your nose out of my personal life. It could lead, at the very least, to unemployment.”

A look of concern crossed Chapin’s face. She had noticed Jack across the room and he had shot her a big, toothy grin. She thought he always looked like he was stoned when he tried to smile. She paused for a moment, not sure what to do, but decided that moving toward Skeet was the best bet so she began heading in his direction. Simultaneously, Jack made his way across the room and stepped in front of her.

“I’m sorry you had to leave before we finished talking. Maybe we can find a quiet place and finish talking now,” Jack said.

“I’m pretty sure I was done. I thought I made things pretty clear. Now I would appreciate it if you would just leave me alone. “ Jack put his arm around Chapin’s back and squeezed firmly.

“Well it would only be polite to finish our conversation, now wouldn’t it?” Jack said in a much lower, forceful tone.

Skeet walked over, somewhat oblivious to what was going on. “Hi! Skeet Seaton. Not sure I’ve had the pleasure,” he said, offering a hand. “You’re a friend of Chapin’s?”

Chapin attempted to move away, but Jack pulled her in tight. The smile left Skeet’s face and he looked back and forth between Chapin and Jack.

“Why yes! “She’s my girlfriend,” Jack announced with a proud smile.

Skeet looked at Chapin not knowing what to say. His mind was running on overload. Could the girl that he had been so smitten with, who seemed to have really been into him too, have a boyfriend?

“That’s bullshit Jack and you know it! Chapin sparked. She looked at Skeet with a pleading in her eyes that echoed in her voice. “We’ve been broken up for eight months.”

She tried again to move away but Jack pulled her even closer and smiled at Skeet. “Our schedules have been keeping us apart. Something we have decided to work on. It will take some commitment, but we both know we can work through it.

A meaty hand fell over Jack’s shoulder from the opposite side that Chapin was standing on. The hand firmly grabbed his neck and pulled him away from Chapin’s side. Jack turned with a start and looked down and was staring straight at a Black Sabbath t-shirt.

“Now Jack,” Shawn started with a condescending smile. “Aren’t you playing in your own little dream world a bit too much these days? I was at the office when Chapin told you, apparently not for the first time, that you are pimple on the rear end of progress, the boil in her life that just won’t go away. Shawn tightened his grasp and Brian slowly but firmly wedged himself between Jack and Chapin, crossed his arms and stared at Jack. While Jack was taller than Shawn, Brian stood six foot three and could be very intimidating when he wanted to.

“Don’t make me fucking lance you right here, Mr. Boil,” Brian said. Shawn had given Brian a real quick run down on Jack.

“Now Brian, I’m sure Mr. Palero is fairly reasonable...for a psychopath. I think he’s probably bored with this place by now and would much rather be at home playing with his Troll Doll collection. Right Jack?” said Shawn.

“You see Skeet, Mr. Palero has spent the last eight months harassing Ms. Hannigan in some...” Brian turned his gaze to Jack. “...really, really sick ways,” his tone becoming more disgusted as he talked. Chapin took this opportunity to move closer to Skeet and he, stepped slightly in front of her as if he was positioning himself, if only symbolically, between Jack and Chapin.

“Well, if Ms. Hannigan would prefer that you leave,” he said and looked at Chapin, who nodded in agreement. “Then it would probably be best if you leave.”

“Translation: Beat it, Jackass,” Shawn piped in.

“Look, I AM the manager of the radio station that is helping to sponsor this event and I won’t...” Brian cut him off.

“I believe you need to beat it, Tito.”

“The name is Jack Palero and I will not be treated in such...” Brian looked across the room to see Carl, the doorman, enter the room, walking with a purpose. “...a manner by a bunch of low life slugs!” Jack finished.

Carl walked up to them and towered over everyone, including Brian. He looked down menacingly at Jack then turned to Brian. “Is there a problem here Bri? I was told there might be a problem.” Carl glanced back at Jack. “I LOVE to fix problems.”

“Mr. Palero need some help finding the door,” said Brian.

“He missed his nappy time and that gets him really confused and grumpy. He needs to leave but he seems lost. Can you help him out, big guy?” Shawn said, his neck craned almost straight up to see Carl’s face.

“Oh I’d be happy to!” Carl said, his grin widening with each passing syllable. “All right, come on, little fella.”

“Chapin! Tell him you want me to stay! For God’s sake! Hasn’t this little rouse gone on long enough?” Jack pleaded. “Thorpe! Tell him who I am. I’ll have your job for this. I will make sure none of you ever work in music again.” Jack began to bellow louder and louder.

Carl grabbed Jack by the collar and an arm, lifted him onto his tip toes and began to move him toward the stage door. “Come on, little fella,” Carl repeated as if he had never uttered the words before, but his laughter becoming more and more audible as they moved.

Skeet surveyed Shawn, Brian and Chapin. “Somebody wanna tell me what’s going on?” He fixed his gaze on Chapin. “You have a boyfriend? I don’t understand.”

“No, no,” Chapin exclaimed.

“I can vouch for that, Skeet. He’s my boss and he has this...ummm...psycho thing for her. Really! I don’t think he’s all there upstairs, you know what I mean?”

Skeet looked confused.

“Let me explain...” Chapin began, and with that she launched into a short history of the relationship, the break up, Jack’s pestering since then, Thanksgiving at her parents and the incident at the radio station earlier in the day, with Shawn adding his usual colorful commentary to the final incident that had occurred earlier in the day.

When she finished, Skeet stood there, mouth agape, stunned. “Wow.” It was all he could muster. “Are you ok?”

She looked at him and smiled softly. I hope I am now.” She reached across and took his hand.

“All right you two. Get a room for the mushy crap!” Shawn joked.

Skeet squeezed her hand tight and leaned in a little closer.

“Do you think he’s really gonna fire you?”Chapin asked Shawn.

“I doubt it, but I hope he does. I’m getting tired of that shit anyway!” he said with a smile.

“Hot damn!” Skeet exclaimed. Chapin shot him a confused look. “I keep telling you to come and be the lead engineer at the studio. You are wasting away as a DJ. With your talent, I could keep my place booked constantly.” Skeet meant it too. He was always on Shawn to come work for him. He thought then he might actually be able to turn his studio into a profitable enterprise instead of a basically self sufficient play ground.

“At this rate, I may have to take you up on that, Skeet.

“Whenever you want, just say the word. We can do this!” Skeet turned to Chapin. “This guy is a genius in the studio. He’s been the engineer on all of my solo albums!” he said with an exuberant, proud smile, but then a puzzled look crossed his face. “He broke into your apartment and rearranged your closet?”

“Dude, seriously!” Shawn began, then placed his index finger by his temple spun it and began to whistle. “Sometimes his synapses really don’t fire quite right.”

Brian brought the conversation back to the event at hand. “Skeet we gotta sound check you and Pat and the guys pretty soon. They wanna sound check some other acts and they gotta get you slackers done first.”

“Two seconds and I’m there. Wait. I tell you what.” He turned to Chapin. “Just come with me. It won’t take long.”

“You think I wasn’t following you? Lead on. I’m not going far,” Chapin said, squeezing his hand gently.

Chapter 9

Chapin and Skeet followed Brian down the hall and made a right turn into the stage area. They snaked their way through multiple layers of curtains until they arrived at the center of the main stage. There were guitar and bass amps lined up as if on display in front of several drum sets stacked two by two on rolling platforms. Wires and cables ran all through the area duct taped to the floor.

Skeet greeted Pat, Paul and Billy as Brian handed him his Fender Precision bass, one of the five basses that had been lined up on the side of the stage for him. Paul already had a pink Ibanez guitar strapped on and ready. Skeet tossed the bass across his shoulder as Brian plugged a cord that had been run from his old Fender Bassman amp into a jack on the P-Bass. He turned up the volume knob and struck a note then went to the amp to make some final adjustments.

Pat banged on the drums in an irregular rhythm resembling some sort of morse code test pattern. Paul ran generic scale patterns while roadies wandered from mic to mic saying "Test. Test." After the mayhem subsided, they all looked at each other as Billy asked the sound engineer if he was ready.

"Give it a shot," came a voice over the house PA system. The soundman sat in the middle of the floor in front of the stage but was hardly visible to the guys on the stage because of the lights. They could almost make out the pair of small lights that hovered low over the sound board.

Pat counted off and they launched into "30 days In The Hole" just as they had done at practice two days before. The harmony was dead on, just as it had been.

Chapin was amazed at the sound that came out. She had never been much of a fan of hard rock music which this definitely was. Her tastes ran a bit higher brow but seeing Skeet play anything, at this point, was thrilling to her. When the first drum hit and guitar chord had sounded, she jumped slightly, which made Brian snicker. She knew that Skeet was considered a master of more musical genres than most people could list and had learned how much he was respected during the research she had done for the article. But she had never actually seen him play live, much less, rock out like this. He bounced around the stage like a man half his age, never missing a note. It was hard for her to believe that this was the same guy that she had so loved listening to on Wynton Marsalis albums.

The song wound down and they all stood there silently, looking out over where the audience would be. Paul put his hand above his eyes in an effort to block the stage lighting and see what was going on with the sound engineer.

“That’s great guys. We got it,” the same cryptic voice said over the PA.

Skeet and Paul thanked the sound engineer and took off their instruments, Skeet handing his to Brian and Paul placing his gently on a stand. Pat and Skeet exchanged high fives. “I think we might actually pull this off,” said Billy.

“Yea, but I think the whole thing is running a little behind.” Skeet glanced at his watch. “It’s already past four.”

Skeet was heading for the side of the stage where Chapin had been while Billy headed behind the drum risers when Skeet’s world went black. He couldn’t see anything and stopped in his tracks. The room erupted with various gasps and confusion. Slowly, he began to make out a small red light that glowed at a distance in front of him. It began to sink in throughout the hall that the power was out. He thought for a minute, not sure what to do. He had a small flashlight on his key ring but his keys weren’t in his pocket. He knew that Brian always had a flashlight at the gigs but there was no sign of him, of course, at this point there was no sign of much of anything. He began to see some small, blue glowing lights come on throughout the hall. “Cell phones,” he said as the solution materialized in front of him. He reached in his pocket, dug out his phone and flipped it open. It wasn’t much light, but it would do. He aimed the light in front of him and continued moving in the same direction.

Apparently, Chapin had come up with the same idea as she appeared in front of him, cell phone in hand.

“What the hell happened?” Skeet asked her.

“I have no idea,” she said. “There was a loud crack, then everything went black. “

“Well, let’s head for the back door. Maybe we can figure out what happened when we can see a little bit.” He held out his hand. He would have just reached out for her but he couldn’t make out exactly where her hand was.

She reached out and took his hand as he moved toward the glowing, red exit sign over the door leaving the main stage. They walked slowly, being careful of the long lumps made by the tape covered cables on the floor. They breached the door into the hallway. More blue, glowing cell phones floated around like little spaceships and a few flashlights were being used to help guide people, mostly by the roadies.

Skeet could begin to make out a bright light in front of them which appeared to be the door outside. Their pace quickened as they approached.

“Skeet, you guys ok?” a familiar voice asked from behind them. It was Brian. He had his little mag light flashlight shining in the general direction their feet. He broke in to a jog for the short distance to catch up.

“Yea, we’re fine, B. Just heading for the door. What happened?”

“Building lost power,” Brian said in a very matter of fact tone.

“Thanks captain obvious!” Skeet jokingly jabbed.

“That’s all I know. I’ll ask around once I get you outside.”

“Oh don’t worry about us. We can see the door from here. Do what you need to do,” Skeet said in a mockingly reassuring tone.

“You don’t think I wanna stay in here in the dark with these people, do you? Damn musicians are pervs!” he giggled.

They emerged through the door into the alleyway and shielded their eyes until they had time to adjust. People were milling around, some in a state of slight panic, others mildly amused at the whole situation.

Skeet searched around for Shawn, Chapin still in tow. He sometimes worried about him a little more than he needed to and Chapin was wondering why he was getting a little frantic.

“He doesn’t see real well. I just don’t want him getting hurt,” Skeet told her.

“Well if it’s dark in there, isn’t he more likely to handle it better than anybody?” she wondered.

He stopped and looked at her quite puzzled. “You know you’re right. I never thought of it like that. HE should have been looking for US, the follicly challenged bastard!” he joked. “So what could happen next?”

“Don’t tempt anything. At this rate, it may be something fantastic or it may be something horrible,” she said.

“I vote for the ‘something fantastic’ thing,” he joked.

She snuggled up next to him and looked up into his eyes. “Me too.” He pulled her in a little closer and they began to take a look around. They saw Amy and Emily hanging out up against the wall to the right, both still strumming on their guitars. Skeet wondered if somehow they would be able to wring a song out of this. Pat and Paul were standing in the middle of the alley joking, Pat constantly twirling a pair of drumsticks and drumming on anything that would sit still long enough, including Paul. Patti was fanning herself with her assistant trying to help and hold a phone conversation at the same time trying to find out what the problem was. They finally saw Shawn by the stage door talking on his cell phone. Even though he knew Chapin was right, he

was relieved that he was now sure that Shawn was ok. Brian rushed in and out the door, trying to see what had happened and come up with a plan for what to do next. It was one of the things Brian did best.

“Hey, check it out,” Skeet said, motioning down the alleyway. He had noticed Niles Rogers standing next to a dumpster just calmly taking everything in. “That’s...” Chapin interrupted him.

“Niles Rogers!” she said.

“Yea. He’s the other guy I’m supposed to be playing with today, but at the rate things are going...Let’s go say hi.” They made their way down the alley toward the dumpster. When Niles noticed them, he got a big smile on his face and walked over to meet them.

“Skeet! How ya doing? This is an interesting turn of events, huh?” he said motioning his hand toward the crowd of people.

“Seems that way,” he said and then introduced Chapin to him. “You have any idea what’s going on?”

“The power’s out in the building,” Niles said very calmly

Chapin and Skeet exchanged amused glances. “Yea, we got that far,” Skeet said in a slightly sarcastic tone.

“Rumor is someone was messing with something on the pole. Not sure what, but apparently he wasn’t someone who was SUPPOSED to be messing with the stuff on the pole,” Niles said. “At any rate, they’ve called the power company, but they aren’t even here yet so we don’t really know what’s going on.” Skeet glanced at Chapin who was shivering from the cold. “Girl, you’re freezin’!” he said. He took off the white leather jacket he was wearing and laid it across her shoulders.

“Oh, I’m ok. You really don’t have to...” Niles interrupted her.

“Nonsense! I’m actually kind of warm. Besides, they’ll get the jackets and stuff out of there in a bit.”

“What about me, Niles?” Skeet asked. “I’m cold too!” he said mockingly.

“When you get this cute, you can have my jacket. Until then, suck it up bass boy!” Niles laughed.

Skeet glanced down at Chapin and then back at Niles. “Point taken.”

“Hey Niles, did he show up yet?” Skeet asked.

“He’s at the hotel, but I called and told him to hold off coming down here until they figure this thing out. Can you imagine if he was just standing out here with us right now? There would be a riot.

“Who?” Chapin wondered aloud.

“Big secret...can’t tell....have to keep it under wraps,” Niles replied with a grin.

“How about a hint?” she asked with a giggle.

“Oh, sorry. No hints on this one,” Niles said.

Chapin turned to Skeet and worked up the sexiest look she could muster and in a real soft voice she said, “Not even a little one?”

Skeet stared at her and then looked at Niles. His look said it all. He leaned over and whispered in her ear and she turned her head with a start. Skeet raised his index finger to his mouth.

“Ssshhhh”

Chapter 10

While everyone waited around in the cold to see what would happen next, Chapin and Skeet decided to head across the street to the coffee shop to grab a cup of joe and try to warm up. They grabbed a booth in the corner, both hoping for a little privacy.

A blonde woman, who appeared to be in her mid forties, appeared beside them. She wore ear rings that were obviously larger than any human being should attempt to wear, but somehow, she pulled the look off. “Hi! I’m Jaque, your waitress. Can I start you off with some...” Jaque gasped. “Aren’t you...” Her smile became almost painfully huge. “Skeet Seaton?” she said in an accent with a strangely southern drawl, something that was not all that common in Chicago.

Skeet was somewhat taken aback. He used to get recognized somewhat back in the days when he and Stan were together, but since he worked as a sideman now, it was usually just the occasional diehard music fan that would recognize him.

“Yes maam, nice to meet you,” he said.

“I remember I saw you and Stan Balch in...’85, I think.” You guys were fabulous! What happened?” Chapin felt this was a rather personal question to ask a stranger, plus she was feeling a little possessive about her time with Skeet, but she sat there silent.

“Oh that’s just how it goes sometimes. We just went in different directions,” he said in a somewhat veiled attempt to avoid the question. He was hoping she would take their order so he and Chapin could talk some more, just the two of them.

“Oh yea, sugar. I know. Don’t I know. Well, what are you up to...and where is Stan?”

Chapin and Skeet exchanged looks, the irritation showing in both of their faces. But Skeet was cordial, if not forthcoming.

“I’m not sure what’s he’s up to. You know how you lose touch with old friends sometimes.” He hadn’t considered Stan a friend in years, but this was the easiest answer to try and placate Jaque with.

“Oh yea, sugar. I know. Don’t I know,” she said in an odd moment of déjà vu. “But...I’m sorry. Here I am, yakkin’ y’alls ears off and haven’t even been doin’ my job. What can I get for you folks?”

He looked at Chapin and nodded for her to order. “I’d love a big mug of coca, please.”

“Marshmallows?” Jaque asked.

“No thanks. Straight up!” she said with a giggle.

“And for you...,” Jaque asked Skeet.

“Large coffee, please. Hot and black. I’m freezin’,” he said.

“I’ll have it out for you in a jiffy! Oh, and uh...,” her voice lowered dramatically. “Don’t worry about the bill. This one’s on me,” she said with a smile.

“You don’t have to...” Jaque interrupted him.

“Oh hush now!”

Before he could say anything else, she headed for the kitchen. Chapin and Skeet watched her silently for a moment then looked back at each other and smiled awkwardly. He felt her two feet gently wrap around his right foot under the table.

“I just can’t get over Slash showing up for this gig!” Chapin said.

Skeet shushed her and looked around. “You would be amazed at who will hear that and it could get really messy over there if that got out.” He paused. “But you’re right. I’m really excited! Everyone wants to play with Niles.”

“Seems like a lot of them want to play with you, too,” she said, flashing him a little smirk.

“I just made a bunch of friends over the years, that’s all.” Skeet truly didn’t think he was that big of a deal. He was a good, maybe better than good, bass player and he was pretty easy to work with.

That’s all he saw, but Chapin knew better. First, she had heard the way he played, with such passion, heart and soul. Plus she had done the research. For the interview she poured over the comments of so many greats in the industry. He was not only one of the most technically gifted bass players in decades, what he brought to a show or a session was indescribable. His mere presence brought a vibe that few others could match. But she knew the modesty, almost to the point of self deprecation, was part of who he was.

Jaque appeared again with their drinks, as well as a little bowl on the side full of marshmallows “just in case you change your mind.” They sipped their beverages and both enjoyed the feeling of starting to warm up.

Brian appeared and sat down next to Skeet. “Well, they’ve cancelled the show. It’s gonna take four or five hours for them to get the power back on so they are gonna try to reschedule in a couple of weeks. They asked if you were still in and I told them you probably were. Just gotta check the schedule. Pat and the guys are still in and Niles. Amy and Emily are checking schedules to see and, well, you can’t have the show without Patti. How’s the coffee here? Good? I’m freezing!” Brian caught Jaque’s attention. “Could I get a cup of coffee and a piece of that apple pie?”

“You want that ala mode?” she asked.

“As cold as I am? No thank ya. In fact, if you could give it a little zap to heat it up, I’d really appreciate it.”

“You got it, doll” she said and headed for the kitchen again.

“Did you hear that some guy was messing with the transformer? That’s what happened to the power. He did a real number on it. They’re gonna have to replace the whole thing. That’s what’s gonna take so long. It’s a damn shame. This was gonna be a great gig. So...what have you guys been up to?”

Chapin and Skeet just stared at him. Brian was normally a quiet, reserved guy, but when he got excited, he talked ad nauseam. Skeet had seen it before, but in Chapin’s limited experience, he had been quiet, dry and gruff.

“B, did you take a breath?” Skeet asked.

Chapin broke up laughing and Skeet joined in.

“Huh? What’s so funny? I don’t get it?” Brian lamented.

“Nothing, man. Nothing at all.” Skeet said with a giggle.

They continued giggling and warming up on cocoa and coffee and Brian even shared a bite or two of his pie with Chapin. As she was chewing the last piece of pie, the cell phone in her pocket began to ring. Chapin pulled out the phone and looked at the caller id. “What the hell?” she said.

Skeet and Brian looked at her curiously.

“It says Chicago Police Department.”

“Well it’s best not to keep the fuzz waiting. Answer it,” said Brian.

“Hello?” Chapin listened intently and her looked turned much more serious.

“Why in the hell are you calling me?” she asked. “You did what? Whatever. You did, they SAY you did. Just stop calling me.”

Brian and Skeet exchanged confused looks.

“I’m not going to. You’re on your own. Don’t call this number again.” And with that, she shut the phone.

“Is everything ok? Why would the cops be calling your cell phone?” Skeet asked.

“It wasn’t actually the police...” She didn’t even know how to say it. “It...it was Jack.”

“I thought you said it was the cops?” said Brian.

“Jack’s in jail,” she said. “And he wants me to come bail him out.”

“In jail? What for?” Skeet asked.

“Umm...” she paused. “Criminal mischief and destruction of property. He’s the one who blew up the transformer.”

Brian broke into uproarious laughter and had to grab his stomach with one hand and hold on to the table with the other. Skeet couldn’t hold back a snicker but he could see that Chapin was upset and tried to. He gritted his teeth and turned his head away from her. He knew if he looked at her he would not be able to hold it together.

“Geez Brian, it’s not funny!” she scolded.

Brian grit his teeth and tried to hold it, but he just couldn’t. “YES IT IS!” He almost screamed it. “Psycho boy tried to kill a transformer to keep you and Skeet apart. Now THAT’S funny! Shawn is gonna piss himself!”

Chapter 11

Three a.m. had snuck up on Chapin and Skeet. When the benefit concert had been cancelled, Brian had headed back to load the equipment while Skeet and Chapin had gone to grab a bite to eat. Skeet took her to his favorite steak house, Ruth's Chris, and they had a wonderful dinner, followed by a fabulous desert with much talking and flirting thrown in for good measure. Before they knew it, the manager was telling them that the restaurant was closing. Skeet still had the limousine that had been carting him to and from the charity gig and had slipped the driver some extra cash to keep him for the evening.

After the meal, they thought about going to an afterhours club and taking in some atmosphere, but ultimately decided to just have the driver take them around the city. It was really just an excuse to be alone. They talked about music, journalism, their childhoods and even Skeet's soon to be released new solo album. Skeet had offered to let her hear it which really excited her. She felt flattered that he would want to allow her in on something that was still, technically, a secret.

They asked the driver to drop them off at Skeet's place but on the drive, they flirted, kissed some more and even began getting a little more physical. Ultimately, they put the brakes on because they weren't sure exactly how far this was going to go and, after all, there was a guy sitting just 8 feet away.

They had really only been together for about 12 hours in a day that was completely filled with drama. With Chapin's conflict with Jack, playing piano with Patti LaBelle, Skeet's odd phone call about the solo album, the whole show getting shut down and apparently Jack being the cause, it was astounding that they truly felt that they were in a much deeper relationship than 12 hours would allow.

They arrived at Skeet's place and headed straight for the studio. He opened the door to the basement studio and turned on the light. It wasn't really much of a light. He really liked the whole place pretty dark. He entered in the room and Chapin followed close behind. "Well, here it is." Skeet said with a big sigh

"It's amazing!" Chapin said as she looked around the room in awe. The dull glow of the ambient lighting was offset by the three tiny bright led lights that sat low over the mixing board and the various green, yellow and red LEDs on equipment bolted in to racks on either side. A dim light shown through a large glass window behind the board. Various guitars, basses, and keyboards, as well as a full set of drums were visible through the glass. A large computer screen was seated on the right side of the console.

"Well, let me get it cued up for you," he said, as he began flipping switches and turning knobs. "No reporting on it, k?" he said, smiling at her.

"Nope. No reports tonight except to my diary," she said.

“Now I don’t know if it’s diary worthy.”

“This whole day is diary worthy, especially you.”

He smiled shyly then pressed the play button on the console. Music began to fill the studio. It was a jazzy groove featuring the piano taking point on the song.

“Glass of wine?” Skeet asked.

“Wine, huh? I thought you were more a ‘beer and whiskey’ kinda guy,” she said.

He reached behind the little bar in the corner of the room and produced two crystal wine glasses. He reached into the wine cooler by the bar and pulled out a bottle, popped the cork and poured. He re-corked the bottle and headed for the couch where Chapin had already made herself comfortable. He handed Chapin a glass and then sat down in the middle of the couch. He felt he should keep a ‘respectful’ distance but Chapin immediately slid in next to him, took his arm and placed it around her shoulders and leaned in with her head on his chest. She looked up at him and he offered his glass for a toast. He pondered for a minute.

“To the potential of new beginnings.” They clinked glasses and each sipped. She stared deep into his eyes and raised her glass.

“To the immediacy of new beginnings,” she said and they clinked glasses. Before Skeet could take a drink, Chapin had pressed her lips against his, her tongue exploring his mouth. Slowly the positions reversed and his tongue was doing the exploring. When their lips parted, she moved on to his neck slowly kissing him and noticing the goose bumps that were rising all over his arms. Considering where she was sitting, it was clear to her how excited he was getting.

Suddenly he stopped her. “Can we talk about this for a minute before we get carried away, please?” Chapin was caught completely off guard. She was here in this man’s home and was trying, quite obviously to seduce him. And judging by his reactions, it was working. So what had she done wrong? Could she have completely misread the situation?

“Look, it’s been a long day for you. You’ve had quite the ordeal, 3 times, with your ex boyfriend. You’ve done things you’ve never done in your life and now you’re here. I just don’t want you doing anything you aren’t real sure you want to do.”

“Skeet I am sure I want to do what I want to do. I have been thinking about you ever since we met. I know it seems like we are moving a bit fast, but nothing about it feels wrong, so yea, I am right where I want to be, doing exactly what I want to do. And I really hope you feel the same way.” She said.

“I have gotten very serious about this very quickly. I just didn’t want to jeopardize any of this long term for something short term, if you know what I mean.”

“I know what you mean. I definitely want the long term...and I want the short term too.” A grin crossed her lips. “I’m greedy that way!”

“Greed is good,” he said. She was sitting across his lap and he pulled her close, leaned her back slightly and continued where they left off.

Chapter 12

“Skeet do you know what time it is? You’ve got to meet with...” Brian not only tripped over his words he tripped over his own feet and went crashing head first onto the foot of the bed. He had walked into Skeet’s bedroom to get him up for his meeting with Dave about the new album, but had not expected to find Chapin sharing his bed, her naked breasts not quite covered by the sheets. Chapin shot up with a scream and Skeet tumbled out of bed. “Oh.. uh... sorry”, Brian said scrambling to his feet while simultaneously covering his eyes. “I...uh...didn’t see any...uh...I mean....I...um...didn’t know...”

Chapin pulled the sheet up and covered herself as Brian turned his back. “Skeet, you um...got that meeting with Dave in about an hour. I thought you were already up or...anyway...oh and don’t forget the poker game tonight. The guys are really looking forward to it.”

Skeet shook the cobwebs from his head. His mind was filled with Chapin and the passionate night they had just shared. As his head cleared, he remembered the meeting he had scheduled with Dave and his remarks about the phenomenal guitar playing. Had it not been for Chapin, he would probably have obsessed about the comment until the meeting today. The more he had thought about it, he had decided he must have just misread the comment. Maybe Dave was just kissing his ass a bit and picked out one thing to do it with. He had experienced this before, but it always freaked him out a bit when it happened.

“Ok...well...let me know when you’re ready. Umm...I’ll be in the living room.” Brian said. He exited the room as quickly as possible, still partially covering his eyes and closing the door behind him.

“Well THAT was embarrassing,” said Chapin as she reached for her bra.

“Oh don’t worry about Brian. He’ll get over it.” He reached over and took her arm and kissed her. She slowed her pace and returned the kiss, but then gently pushed him away.

“We better get going. You’ve got a meeting and a poker game and I’ve got to get caught up on work before Monday.” She put on the bra and panties, pulled on her shirt and jeans. She was almost done before Skeet was even out of bed.

“I guess you’re right. But after the meeting, I can cancel the game and we can...”

“No, no! You have your game. The guys are counting on you. I’ve really got to get caught up on some work, plus try to explain to my parents about psycho Jack,” she said.

Skeet paused and looked down. He had really wanted to see her again that night, but he didn’t want to push too hard or move too fast. His thoughts began to run wild. Did she just use him as a one night stand or was it really something more? He pulled on a pair of jeans and sat on the edge of the bed.

“Can I ask you something?” he said.

“Sure! Anything you want,” she said as she began putting her ear rings back in.

“This wasn’t just a...ummm...fling or something was it? I mean...”

She turned and looked at him hard. She looked almost hurt.

“I mean...I’m not sayin’ that you...but...” he said. She continued to stare at him.

“What I’m trying to say is that I don’t want it to be just a fling. “ The words began to magically appear. “I know we’ve just known each other for a short time and that this is unusual, but I really don’t want this to just be...” he lost the courage and tapered off. Skeet was used to putting himself on the line with music, but the one on one relationship thing was something he had never really mastered.

She sat down beside him and took his hand. “I would never have come here if I didn’t think this was something special. I can’t explain it. I have never felt this way about anyone, especially this fast. I can’t say where it will lead. Neither of us can. But I know that I don’t want it to end here. Not by a long shot.”

He looked up and smiled and kissed her again.

“C’mon Skeet. We gotta go! It’s a 45 minute drive!” Brian’s voice echoed through the door.

“Call him and tell him we are gonna run a little late. We have to drop Chapin off at her place on the way,” he hollered back. “I gotta grab a quick shower and then I’ll be ready.”

“I’ll call him, but don’t take too long, k?” Brian boomed through the door.

“You got it, B.”

“You don’t have to do that. I can call a cab. It’s no big deal.” Chapin said.

“Not on your life. How would it look having to tell the grandkids that I made grandma get a cab after we did it on our first date?” A smile almost swallowed his face.

She threw his shirt at him and laughed. “Hopefully we won’t be telling the grandkids about the ‘doing it’ part, grandpa!”

He caught the shirt, grabbed a towel and then turned back around. “You’ll be here when I get out, right?” he said, fishing for reassurance.

“Baby, I’m not going anywhere. Now go get your shower!”

He turned and took a couple of steps and turned back. He sported a very mischievous smile.

“Care to join me?”

“Yea, I would. But you would NEVER make your meeting on time then. And I’m not ready to start settling for quickies yet.”

Chapter 13

Skeet walked into the office of Lexicon recordings, his current record company. He had started out with Stan at Atlantic and recorded two solo albums there but because of his lackluster solo success and the breakup with Stan, they subsequently dropped him. He had gone shopping for a solo deal when he had met Dave Schwartz, president of Lexicon, at an after party when he was backing up Wynton Marsalis. Dave was a bass player of some renown in his own right but had decided to start Lexicon so he could stay off the road. The company had moderate success but, like Skeet's solo career, had never really taken off.

When they first met, Dave was a little in awe of Skeet. He had offered him a lucrative deal very quickly, and some days he regretted it, but he liked Skeet and really wanted him to succeed. Dave just felt Skeet was missing the fire and passion in his own work that he was putting into everyone else's and Dave hadn't figured out a way to break that cycle. That is, until now.

Skeet checked in with the secretary who asked him to have a seat then she picked up the phone to let Dave know Skeet had arrived. Almost before she hung up the phone Dave emerged from the office. He was tall with an odd smile.

"Skeet! How are you doin', man? Come on in," he said, escorting Skeet into his office. I'm really excited about this record! I think you may have a winner here." Dave walked over to a bar in the corner of the room. "Drink?" he asked.

"Just some water would be great." Dave tossed a bottle of water across the room and poured himself a glass of bourbon. He made his way back over to the desk and took his seat.

"It's a shame about what happened to Patti's benefit yesterday. I know you were playing with Niles. You gotta be disappointed."

"Yea. Yesterday was a long one. I was also supposed to play with Pat Torpey in a little reformed Mr. Big."

"Mr. Big? Didn't Billy Sheehan used to play with them? What happened to him?" If any other record executive had asked this, Skeet would have assumed it was small talk but being a bass player, he knew Dave's interest was genuine.

"Oh he's still with 'em. He hurt his wrist a couple of days ago and I was just fillin' in. He was doing the singing though."

"Really? I thought Eric Martin was the singer," Dave said.

"He was. You know how bands are. I'm sure somebody's feelings got hurt about something and... at any rate. Eric's not playing with them right now, and I'm disappointed I didn't get to either. It sounded really great and I was wanting to jam," Skeet replied with a hint of disappointment in his voice.

“It was in the Tribune this morning that some guy blew up the transformer. They claim it was the station manager over at WWLH. Not sure why though. Sounded kinda psycho.” Dave said.

“He is,” said Skeet.

“You know him, Skeet?”

“Oh, not well. Just met him yesterday. It’s a long story. Anyway, I don’t want to waste your time with this stuff.”

“Oh I gotcha. Time to get down to business,” Dave said with a smirk. He reached back and pushed a button on the sound system. The familiar sounds of the lead off song, “Velvet Paradise” from Skeet’s album started. “I’ve had a copy of this in my car playing non-stop ever since I got it. I think you’ve really done it this time.”

“I’m glad you dig it man. I wasn’t one hundred percent sure I had the right formula, but if you say it worked, then it must have worked.”

“And the guitar work right....” Dave paused, waiting for a particular spot in the song to arrive. “...is incredible! Who the hell did you get to play with you on this? It’s fantastic? The only guy I could think of was Derek Trucks or maybe Sonny Landreth.”

Skeet sat and listened intently. It was as if he was hearing the guitar runs for the first time. It suddenly dawned on him that it’s because he WAS hearing them for the first time. It was his album, but the guitar was not the same! It was some of the most fantastic SLIDE guitar playing he ever heard. He was speechless. The sound was phenomenal but Skeet didn’t know where it came from.

“Am I right? Is it Trucks or Landreth?” Dave asked.

Skeet still sat speechless. Slide guitar is not a style that many people had mastered and especially not at the level he was hearing. Slide guitar involves using a piece of glass or metal to control the notes on the guitar instead of pressing the frets with the fingers. For any but the most gifted player, it would sound like cat with its tail caught in a screen door. But this obviously was a gifted player, but how did it end up on the album that Dave had received? Skeet’s mind raced. Could Brian be playing a joke on him, or Dave? And if so, who the hell did they get to play it? And how was it so perfectly mixed without having the master files which were tucked away in Skeet’s studio.

“Skeet? You ok buddy?” Dave’s voice snapped him back into reality. He knew he had to say something, but what? How could he tell him that this incredible guitar was not something he had anything to do with or knew anything about? Skeet panicked.

“No, not either of ‘em,” Skeet said.

“Well who then? Please tell me he’s not tied up in another deal. We are gonna need him for a tour and promotion and everything. Your playing with that playing is gonna put all of us on the map!”

“Umm...I’m not sure of his status. I’ll check and get back with you though,” Skeet said, trying to buy him some time to think.

“Well is he from Chicago? We should get him on the phone and start negotiating now.” Dave was very anxious to get started.

“He’s... um...touring in Europe right now. But I’ll talk to him in the next couple of days and see what the situation is like.”

“You’ve got to. I want to get this rolling as quick as possible,” Dave said. He pointed to spindle that looked like it had about 40 CDs stacked on it. “I’ve already made a whole stack of duplicates. I’ve sent them out to all parts of the company. This is our top priority. I’ve got several design artists listening to it so they can get some ideas for a cover design for the album and if it’s ok with you, I’m gonna contact Wynton to see if he’ll contribute to the liner notes. Our mastering guru Tom Perkins is gonna do the final mix and master.”

Skeet cut him off. “Yea, um. I’d really like to get Shawn Thorpe to do the final mix and master. I really respect his ability and I want to give him a shot at this.”

“I don’t know, Skeet. We are banking on this one pretty heavy. I wanna make sure it’s done right,” Dave said. The hesitation sounded in his voice.

“I tell ya what. Give him a couple of weeks. If you don’t like what he does, get your guy to do it.” Skeet was having trouble concentrating. The music playing was familiar but brand new to him at the same time. He was trying to listen to Dave, listen to the music, figure out how the hell this happened and what he was going to do about it.

“Ok. How about this. I’ll have Tom mix it and you have your guy mix it. When they’re done, we’ll just see which one we like best and go with it.”

“Sounds fair. Thanks Dave. Look, I really gotta run,” Skeet said as he stood up and slowly began making his way toward the door. “Hey, can I take one of those copies. I don’t have copy with me and I’d like it for my drive.”

“Sure,” said Dave. He pulled one off the spindle, grabbed a sleeve from a box out his drawer and handed it to Skeet. “But we need to get the distribution worked out. And a photo shoot. We’re gonna need a photo shoot.”

“I’m sure you got it covered, Dave. Now I really gotta run. I’ll call ya in a couple of days.” Skeet almost bolted for the door.

“Um...yea...ok,” said Dave.

Skeet left the office and headed for the elevator as quick as he could. He had to get away. He was having trouble answering the questions Dave was having now and he knew he would get more flustered if he kept trying to dodge.

The elevator doors opened and he jumped in and pushed '1'. As the doors closed, he felt a sense of relief. He thought if he could think for just a minute he could figure this out. The elevator reached the bottom and the door opened. His mind raced with thoughts and he couldn't calm down.

He was relieved when he saw Brian waiting for him out front. He jumped in the car, startling Brian.

"Damn! That was fast. So he liked the album, right?" Brian asked.

"Yea...um...he liked the album." Skeet fell silent. Brian had known him for so long he was pretty good at telling when something was wrong.

"What's up then? What's the problem?"

"Just drive and I'll tell ya," Skeet said. Brian didn't ask any questions. He just threw the car in drive and pulled away.

"Ok. What's going on?" Brian's voiced betrayed his concern. This wasn't like easy going Skeet. He could tell he was spooked.

"Let me ask you something, and be honest with me." Brian nodded in agreement and Skeet paused and took a deep breath.

"The master that you sent to Dave. Did you do anything to it before you sent it?"

"No. Just put the copy you made into a mailer and gave it to the courier. Why?" Brian asked.

"You have heard the album, right?" Skeet asked. Brian gave him a puzzled look.

"Of course. I was there with you for the whole process. You know that. What's wrong, man? Stop beating around the bush and spit it out." Brian was growing concerned. This was really not like Skeet at all.

"Listen to this." Skeet pulled the CD out of the sleeve and slipped it into the player. The opening lines of "Velvet Paradise" began. Brian listened for a couple of seconds and looked at Skeet.

"Yea. Velvet Paradise. It's a great tune. What's wrong with it?" Brian asked.

“Just listen, B. Just listen.” Skeet looked down at the CD player and raised his finger. As the main line approached, he held it just a little higher and when it started, he dropped it dramatically, pointing to the CD player and looking at Brian expectantly.

“Where the hell did that come from? That’s amazing! When’d you do that? I know I wasn’t around. Who’d you get?” Brian hadn’t put all the pieces to the puzzle together just yet.

“THAT’S what I’m talking about!” Skeet exclaimed. “I didn’t! I have no idea who it is or how it got there. It wasn’t on the master when I did the rough mix to send to Dave. There was a very generic guitar line and the piano was the focal point. You sure you aren’t punkin’ me, man?”

“If I knew someone who could play like THAT, I wouldn’t be fuckin’ around about it. That’s truly fucking amazing.” And Brian would know. While his musical skills at playing and singing were rudimentary at best, his ear and knowledge were unparalleled. “You think Thorpe may be messin’ with ya?”

Shawn was the only one besides Brian who would be able to pull this off. He was a master engineer and had helped Skeet record the album so he had access to all the original tracks.

“Could be, but I doubt it. We’ve been friends for so long. Plus it seems an awful long way to go for a joke.”

“But it’s not too far for me to go? Geez man? What the fuck?” Brian was insulted. His best friend thought he would have pulled this kinda joke on him?

“Man, of course not! I’m graspin’ at straws here! I was just trying to think of who had access to the recordings.”

“Pat and Billy and the guys were there right before I sent it out. But even if they had wanted to, that’s definitely not Paul. I’m not real sure Paul has ever picked up a slide.” Brian pondered the whole situation, but quickly drifted back to the amazing sounds coming out of the stereo. Whoever it is, he’s a monster.”

“Dave wanted to know if I got Trucks or Landreth. It’s obviously not Landreth and doesn’t sound enough like Trucks either.”

“Nope...too jazzy for Sonny. Derek? Maybe, but it’d be a stretch. And why the hell would either of those guys work so far out of their style just to play on a demo version of your album for a practical joke. It would be way more work than the laugh they could get was worth.” Brian said.

“I don’t know what’s going on, but now Dave wants this guy for the tour and promotion with me. Wants him bad. Hell, I want him too!” Skeet was getting panicky again.

Brian tried to calm him down. “Look, we got the guys coming over for poker tonight. Shawn will be there. And Pat, and probably the rest of his crew. We can talk to them and see if they

know anything about this.”

Chapter 14

Skeet's poker games were legendary in the music community, especially around Chicago. Not that the stakes were particularly high or the play was particularly spectacular, but Skeet really knew how to put on the dog every time he hosted one. There was the mandatory supreme selection of adult beverages. The Bulls, Bears or Cubs were always on the big screen and the best tunes were always on the stereo. But still none of this was the thing that separated Skeet's games from the average. It was the food.

Skeet did two things really well. Music and food. He had learned the basics of cooking in the orphanage and one of his foster care families was with a very talented restaurant chef who taught Skeet all the tricks of the trade. He had a real knack for it. Going to a poker game at Skeet's place was like going to the best buffet one can imagine. If you were lucky enough to actually get invited to dinner, it was 5 star cuisine, all the way. No matter what the occasion, he made everything from scratch. Brian had always said that Skeet's life was inspired by wanting to make people happy, and what made people happier than food and entertainment.

Skeet found cooking strangely therapeutic. To him, it was almost a meditation experience. As he prepared the food, there was nothing else but the food and him. To watch him cook was like watching him play bass, a masterful display of exactly what was required and nothing more.

Skeet was busy in the kitchen and running behind. He couldn't get his mind wrapped around preparing the food because all he could concentrate on was the recording and how he was going to handle it.

The door bell rang and it was Shawn. Brian greeted him and before he could get his coat off, Skeet was yelling from the kitchen. "Shawn! Come here a minute." Shawn looked at Brian. It was unusual for Skeet to be in the kitchen and carry on a conversation. Shawn finished taking his coat off and shrugged and headed for the kitchen.

"Skeets! What's up?" he said, grabbing a deviled egg off a tray. "Look if this is about me and Chapin, I know she wants me, but I'm bowing out to you. I'm happily married and I don't think Jen will let me keep her as a pet." He giggled and popped the egg in his mouth.

"Naw Shawno." Skeet said in a very serious tone. "I wanna ask you something."

"Sounds serious, man. Whadda ya need?"

"First, who's the best slide guitar player there is? Who's the baddest man on the planet?" Skeet asked.

Shawn cocked his head sideways and paused. "Ummm...OK...active player?"

"Yea"

“Easy. Derek Trucks. Hands down. Sonny Landreth is right up there, but best guy playing? Trucks.” Shawn said with confidence. “Why?”

“Let me ask you something else. And I’m being serious here. Did you get Trucks to play on the album I recorded?”

“No. Why would I do that? Well, I mean if I could get Derek Trucks I would have. But I’ve only met him once. What’s this about, man? I’m confused.” Shawn said.

Skeet wiped his hands off on a towel and reached over and pressed play on a portable CD player. The music started and they stood there and listened. The mysterious guitar came in and Shawn, who had been leaning on the counter, stood up straight and turned his ear toward the music, as if he was straining to hear. “That’s not Trucks or Landreth.”

“I got that far. But who the fuck is it?” he asked.

Shawn just looked at him. “If anybody should know, you should.”

“What do you mean?”

“That’s Stan Balch. I’d recognize that guy anywhere. Ok. I thought you guys haven’t spoke in years. How’d you get him to play with you again? And more importantly, why wasn’t I there doing the recording?”

Skeet felt like his heart stopped. How the hell could it be Stan? They hadn’t spoken in over 15 years, and the last time they had, it wasn’t very pleasant. Stan had completely disappeared from the scene soon after. He hadn’t even heard anything about Stan in years and years. And why the hell would just magically show up on the track.

“I have no idea. None at all. And what’s even stranger, it’s only on the disc we sent out. I checked the master downstairs and there is nothing on that. Someone did this without remixing,” Skeet said.

“Can’t be,” said Shawn. “I can hear it, man. It was mixed in, not mixed on top. You sure that’s not on the master?”

“I checked it myself, but you did most of the work on it and I’m no techno-guru. Would you take a look just to make sure I’m not...or maybe am...losing my mind?” Skeet asked.

“Sure. I’ll go right now,” Shawn said as he headed out of the kitchen.

“I’m coming with you. I need to make sure for myself,” Skeet said and followed Shawn, leaving all his food preparation on the counter.

Skeet and Shawn burst through the studio door, hit the light and started turning all the power on. “The system is booting. This shouldn’t take long,” Shawn said. He tapped on the computer’s

keyboard and adjusted some of the faders on the mixing board. Shawn leaned back in his chair and the music began. There was no sign of the mystery track. Shawn grabbed the mouse and scrolled around, clicking here and there. “Nothing. I don’t see any sign of anything we didn’t do together. This is damn spooky.”

“Hey. The guys are here, and they want food. Ju gots work to do, Lucy!” Brian said. He had just arrived in the doorway.

“Ok, I’m comin’,” Skeet said.

Brian glanced at Shawn. “No sign of it?”

“None,” he replied.

“Let’s go. I got some cooking to do.”

Chapter 15

Skeet's phone began to sing once again. This time, Joe Cocker emerged from the speaker. "You can leave your hat on....You can leave your hat on..." Skeet flipped open the phone.

"Hello?" he said. He knew it was Chapin, but he didn't want to seem too eager.

"Hiya, Frisky!" Chapin replied playfully. "Sorry I missed you earlier. I was in a staff meeting at work so the phone was off. What's up?"

"It's been awhile since I talked to you so I wanted to catch up? What's going on with you?" She detected in his voice that something wasn't quite right.

"Just working and thinking how I'd rather be hanging out with you. How are you?" she asked.

"No problems here. I wanted to see if you wanted to go to dinner tonight. Any place you wanna go. Just name it." His voice still showed hints of trouble so she decided to try to lighten the mood.

"How about bed? I'll bring the whipped crème?" she said in the sexist tone she could produce.

"Don't think I'm not tempted, but I meant a real dinner."

"You're turning down sleeping with me after one date? Hmm... What does that say?" she said in her most flirtatious tone.

"Oh no! no...not at all. But I wanted to talk to you so I thought maybe, you know, we could go to dinner or something first?" he said.

She was beginning to get concerned. They had had a wonderful day and subsequently night and they had talked about how this wasn't meant to be just a one night stand. But this was beginning to sound like a break up call. But it was only one date. If he didn't want to see her anymore would he have even called at all? "Sounds serious. Are you ok? Are WE ok?"

"We are definitely ok! Wait. Aren't we? I mean...I want us to be ok."

"Hold on. It sounds like we are both getting a little confused and panicked here. So let's both take a deep breath. Now, what's wrong?"

How did he explain this over the phone? Should he just say that he thought he might be going out of his mind? That would probably end this relationship rather quickly. He decided not to

even try. “It’s hard to talk about over the phone. I’ll talk to you about it tonight. Pick you up at 7:00?” he said.

“6:30? I’m anxious!” she said. She really wanted to relax him and what relaxes a man more than sex. And if she can’t have sex with him right now, flirting would have to do.

“6:30 it is. I’ll see you then,” he said and started to hang up the phone. “Oh wait?,” he said, his tone still serious. “Can I ask you something?”

“Anything you want,” she said.

“We haven’t seen in other in over 24 hours. Did you miss me?” he said with a chuckle.

Her voice dropped in tone and became very serious and sexy. Not the reaction he had expected. “More than you know.” She perked back up. “Now I gotta go get ready. I’ve got a date with this really hot guy.”

Chapin hung up the phone and thought for a minute. “Wants to talk to me about something? Hmm...,” she pressed her finger to her lips and pondered aloud. “Well, if it’s good, I want to look good. If it’s bad, I need to look even better.” She glanced around the room. “I’ve got two hours. I better get moving.”

She opened the closet door and gave the contents a long, hard look. As she glanced at the clothes on the hangers, she noticed the blue bins, carefully stacked and labeled in either corner. “Crap. Why haven’t I gotten rid of those damn things. They do make things neat, but if Skeet comes over here and sees them, what’s he gonna say.” She knew he wouldn’t say anything, but he was sure to think something. She decided that she would at least change them out with another color as soon as she could, but she just couldn’t worry about it now.

Her cell phone began to ring. She glanced at the ID and discovered it was her parents calling. She started to answer, but she knew her mom was going to talk her ear off, probably about Jack, and she really didn’t want to deal with it right now. She let the call go to her voice mail. She had tried to convince her parents on several occasions over the last two days that Jack in fact, wasn’t a part of her life, but they never seemed to get it. They thought she was just trying to be secretive about her love life, which she had to admit, she had a habit of doing.

She began thumbing through the hangers. “Ok, not too colorful, in case the talk is not good news, but sexy in case it is,” she thought. “You know it was easier when I was just running around in jeans and a shirt. Alright. Confidence! I am confident it’s good news and I’ll be in his arms later, soooo...,” She pulled a dress out. “Yes, a little black dress! That’s the way to go.”

This wasn’t just any little black dress. It was THE little black dress. It was short and fit her like a glove. If he wanted to break it off, this would at least make him think twice. She hung the dress on a hook by her makeup table and looked around the room again. “Ok..that’s dinner...now to pick out desert!” She opened a drawer full of neatly folded underwear in a variety of colors, patterns and styles. She thought she looked best in the white lace thong, but it

just didn't seem right to be in the short black dress with the white underwear on so she went with the black lace then turned her attention to the shoes. Once that decision was made, she was set. She ran a shower and grabbed a towel.

The shower was relaxing to her, the shower massage pulsating on her neck and back. She stretched and arched, enjoying the heat and thinking of Skeet. Was she rushing in too fast? Her last relationship, Jack, had been a complete disaster and was still coming back to haunt her. Hadn't she learned anything from this? She had only been with Skeet one day that wasn't part of work, but everything just seemed to click so well. He was nothing like Jack. Jack had been controlling and deceptive from the time they met, although she wouldn't find this out until a couple of months later.

With Jack, she had followed everyone's advice. She had taken it slow and careful and what had it gotten her? She decided the next time she fell for someone she was going to make it completely different. Instead of following a roadmap, she would follow her heart and see where it took her. She felt so lucky that it had led her to Skeet.

"Skeet!? Oh my God!" she exclaimed! She turned off the shower, jumped out and grabbed her towel. She ran out into the bedroom and looked at the clock on the wall. "Fifteen minutes? I've got fifteen minutes? Oh God!" She grabbed a second towel and tried to dry her hair and her body at the same time, almost tripping on the wet bathroom floor during the effort.

She wrapped the towel around her head and began to dry off as quickly as possible. She was glad she had shaved that morning, because there wasn't going to be time now. As soon as she was more or less dry, she began to towel dry her hair. She grabbed that panties, slid them on and sat down in front of her makeup mirror. She really hoped that he was fashionably late, because this was going to be a race.

Her phone began to ring again and she really hoped it was Skeet saying he was running late. Unfortunately, it was her mother again. "I don't have time for this!" she mumbled and let the call go to voice mail. "I'll deal with her tomorrow."

She quickly got her hair done and did a quick makeup job. She had wanted to make it all really special, but at this point, she was just hoping for presentable. She slipped on the rest of her clothes and was heading for her shoes when the door bell rang. She slipped on the heels, grabbed a bottle of perfume and applied some, then headed toward her living room. She glanced back at the bedroom. She was usually quite tidy, but the room looked like a cyclone had hit it. She just hoped that if they ended up in bed together again tonight that it was his bed.

Skeet stood at the door waiting for Chapin to appear. His mind flipped back and forth between the events of two nights before and the mystery surrounding the recordings. He remembered sitting with Shawn in the studio listening and hoping he would hear the mystery sound on the master. Then he remembered Chapin, naked in the same studio, the two of them making love. The thoughts criss crossed back and forth so fast that, at one point, he scared himself by thinking he saw Shawn naked in the studio. He shook his head to make the thought go away just as Chapin opened the door.

“I thought you’d never get here!” she exclaimed, thinking if he only knew how close he had come to her still being in the shower.

“Sorry. I guess I’m running a little late,” he said in a confused fashion. He was pretty sure he was on time, but wasn’t going to argue.

“Oh, you’re fine. Come on in. I’m almost ready.” She swung the door aside and Skeet came in. “Make yourself at home and I’ll be right out.”

“You look absolutely gorgeous!” he said.

“I think it’s the company I keep that does it,” she replied. She went back in the bedroom and tried to use a minute or two just to tidy up a bit, just in case. “So where are we going?” she asked.

“I said anywhere you want to go. You mean you haven’t decided yet? I thought you would have made the reservations,” he said. In fact, he had already taken care of everything, but decided to have a little fun.

“Umm...you meant that? I mean...I Uhhhh ...” She wasn’t quite sure what to say. There was no way they could get a reservation now.

“You mean you didn’t make a reservation? Now what are we gonna do?”

Chapin touched up her hair and emerged from the bed room. “Eat in?” she said with a grin.

He took her in his arms and gave her a quick kiss. “As tempting as that is,” he said, glancing coyly at the ceiling. “I’ve actually taken care of it. You ready?”

She gave him a playful punch in the chest and pursed her lip. “Let me grab my purse.”

“Just don’t let me see where you hide your keys? You never know when I’ll be in the mood to clean and organize.”

“Not funny, Mr. Seaton!” she said as they left.

Chapter 16

Skeet's pulled his car into the parking lot, slid into a spot and turned off the engine. He had purposefully parked in the back, hoping Chapin wouldn't recognize where they were. He hopped out of the car and moved around to her door, offering her his hand in a half mocking fashion. She took his hand, stood up then gently straightened his tie. She looked in his eyes, smiled and gave him a light kiss.

He was stunned at just how beautiful she had looked tonight. His past experience was with her was jeans but the little black dress had definitely grabbed his attention. He offered his arm and she took it.

"Where are we going?" she asked.

"There you go, all reportin' like again, gettin' all up in somebody's business," he joked. "Just wait. See what happens when you don't make the decision?"

Skeet led her around to the back of the building.

"The alley?" she said. "Look. I'll do you, but not in the alley in this dress!" They both laughed.

Skeet led her up to the back door of the building and knocked. Low and behold, it was Carl, from the failed fund raiser show.

"Skeet!" Carl said. He looked at Chapin and a big grin crossed his face. "Sorry... press has to wait another hour," he laughed. "Come on in, folks. They've gotcha a table and they're waiting on you."

"Who's waiting on us?" Chapin asked.

Skeet and Carl winked at each other. "Oh, you'll see," said Skeet.

They entered the building and walked down the hall. Chapin began to hear the light sound of an electric piano with the volume turned way down. As she listened more intently, she could make out two distinct pianos. She recognized the tune, "Green Dolphin Street" as one of her favorites and the playing was incredible. "Who is that? It sounds so familiar!"

They came to a door that was slightly ajar and Skeet gave a light knock and walked in. "Chick?" he called.

"Skeet! Man, it has been forever! I'm so glad you called!" The man stood up from behind the small piano and he and Skeet hugged and slapped each other on the back. The man wore a red and orange Hawaiian shirt with a sports coat over it. He was sporting a Cubs baseball cap which

covered salt and pepper hair with a small pony tail. He wore John Lennon style granny glasses and a pair of white baggy pants. “What’s it been? Two years?”

“I think it’s closer to three. We played together at that Chivas Jazz Fest in Brazil. I think we played with Clark Terry.” Skeet responded.

The gentleman who had been playing the other piano had stood up and walked over when they entered, but had been silent. He was an older African American man with very similar glasses, just a little larger. He wore a red pull over sweater and a pair of dark slacks. His smile beamed wide as he looked back and forth between the three of them.

“Well, you gonna introduce us?” the gentleman said.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” said the first man. “Skeet Seaton, this is Herbie Hancock.” He said with a chuckle.

“Oh I know who HE is,” Herbie said with a grin. He reached out his hand to Chapin. She clasped it and he pulled it to his lips and kissed. “I meant this vivacious picture of beauty.”

“All right, Herbie. I’m laying claim to her right now,” Skeet said jokingly.

“Wait a minute now. Let the man talk,” Chapin said, flashing a huge smile.

Skeet shot her a look and giggled. “Chapin Hanigan, Chick Corea and Herbie Hancock. Herbie, Chick. This is my...umm..errr...”

“Man, if you don’t say ‘girlfriend’, ‘woman’, ‘lady’ or ‘wife’ right now, you aren’t near as bright as I took you for.” Herbie said.

Skeet looked at Chapin who gave him a wink. “Girlfriend?” he said, almost as if he was asking.

She took his hand and squeezed it. “I’m ok with that, if you are.”

“Oh stop askin’ HIM. Pretty as you are, you get to make the decisions here,” Herbie quipped.

Chick offered his hand. “It’s a pleasure. Chapin? That’s a beautiful name. Unusual.” Chick said.

“My mom was a huge Harry Chapin fan,” she said.

“Aren’t we all?” Chick responded.

“So I hear you play some keys?” Herbie asked.

Chapin looked at Skeet. “You play piano too? Who knew?”

“I’ve heard that boy try to play Chopsticks on the piano. Don’t even let him close to anything without a fretboard. I was talking to you, Ms. Chapin!” Herbie said as he moved around to the piano bench he had been playing before.

She continued to look at Skeet. It was as if the words had not truly sunk in. She moved her gaze across to Herbie. Then back to Skeet. “Wait? What?” She wasn’t sure she had heard him right.

“Don’t look at me. You’re the piano player,” Skeet said.

She looked at Chick, who was grinning ear to ear, almost to the point of laughter. She looked back at Skeet, displaying a look reminiscent of a deer caught in the headlights. Skeet leaned in and whispered in her ear.

“He’s waiting for you to play with him,” he said very softly.

Her eyes bulged and she shot a quick look back at Skeet. She had interviewed some relative big shots in the jazz world, but none of this caliber. And she had definitely never sat down and played the piano with one of them.

“That’s right! He is!” Herbie said in a whisper that bordered on a scream. He sat down and began playing lightly on the keys.

“Oh, I can’t...I mean...uhhh... But you’re Herbie Hancock!” she said.

“Last I checked,” Herbie quipped.

“And...and...you’re Chick Corea!”

“That’s what my parents told me, anyway.” Chick replied. He walked over, put his arm around her shoulder and gently guided her to the piano that he had been sitting at when they arrived. He guided her down to the piano bench.

“Now that’s better! What should we play?” Herbie asked.

“I ummm...I don’t know,” Chapin stuttered.

“She is pretty good with ‘Georgia On My Mind,’” Skeet interjected.

“Georgia it is! Key of B flat?” Herbie didn’t wait for an answer. He launched into the song and motioned for Chapin to join in. She took a deep breath, put her hands on the keyboard and began to play.

Chick and Herbie listened intently and exchanged looks, their eyes wide as saucers. Herbie took his hand away from the keyboard long enough to motion to Herbie to turn the volume up on her electric piano, emphasizing her playing.

It was just beginning to dawn on her that she was playing with Herbie Hancock, the man who played with Miles Davis and recorded the quintessential 'Bitches Brew' album, who had pop hits like 'Rockit' and had won more Grammy's than most artists had albums. The magnitude of the moment began to take over and she knew she would come apart if she thought about it anymore. She decided to treat this like she had her relationship with Skeet, she closed her eyes, threw her head back and went for it until the last note sounded. She opened her eyes to see all three musicians staring at her in amazement. Skeet beamed with pride.

"Good God woman! Where have you been hiding?" Chick said. "There at the end you took it to a whole other level!" He turned to Skeet. "Are you sure she's not backing you up or something?"

"Well let's play another!" Herbie suggested.

"Wait a minute, Herb. You had your turn. I think it's my turn now!" Chick said.

"You sure? You look kinda tired, old man. I can do it for ya!" Herbie joked.

"Not on your life!" Chick replied.

Herbie got up and Chick sat down at the keys. Chapin was still somewhat in shock. She had just played with Herbie Hancock and had managed to get through it. Now Chick Corea? Skeet walked up behind her, put his hands on her shoulders and gave a little rub.

"What do you want to play, Chapin. Just name it." Chick said.

She thought for a minute. She was a complete blank. She knew she had to come up with something. "Sophisticated Lady?" she asked.

Chick's eyes lit up. "A nice choice. Key of F?" he asked.

He immediately started into the first notes and Chapin quickly joined in. Her nerves were beginning to calm and she was settling in and enjoying the experience. Chapin and Chick meandered through the song, trading improvisational solos and just generally having a great time playing off each other. The last few notes of the song trickled off and Herbie began to clap.

"What do you do for a living?" Herbie asked.

"I'm a reporter for Jazz Journal magazine," she responded.

Girl, that's a quality publication, but I've been doing this for over 50 years, and you are in the wrong profession. Skeet, this girl has major chops," Herbie said.

"YOU realize that, and I realize that," Skeet began.

"And I realize that," Chick said.

“But SHE doesn’t realize that.” And Skeet meant it. He had heard her play with Patti and had been impressed, but he hadn’t known until now just how good she was. He had called in a favor from Chick to set up the meeting and he was sure that she wouldn’t embarrass herself, but it was only now, hearing her playing with two of the greatest jazz artists ever, that he heard just how good she was.

“Well,” Herbie began. “You have an open invitation to play with me anytime you want. I’m serious!” Chapin began to blush.

“Yea, but I’ll actually pay you!” Chick interjected with a smile.

There was a light knock at the door and one of the roadies stuck his head in.

“You’ve got about 15 minutes guys.”

“Thanks,” Herbie said.

“Well, we’re gonna go out and take our seats and let you guys get ready. I really appreciate this,” Skeet said.

“This has been a real honor! Thank you so much!” She paused. “You know, I would LOVE to interview you guys,” she said with a grin.

“First, I just told you you were in the wrong career!” Herbie snapped, but a big smile came across his face. “We’ve got an 8:00 flight in the morning, but we’ll be back through in about a month. Chick, is that cool?”

“Sounds great, unless, of course we can persuade you to come on the road with us.”

“As tempting as that is, I kinda got something keeping me here,” she said, looking up at Skeet.

“Lucky bastard!” Herbie smirked.

Chapin and Skeet settled into their table and ordered drinks. Chapin had a glass of wine while Skeet ordered a bourbon and coke. Their table was on the right side of the club, about halfway back, which is what Skeet had asked for. A great view of the stage, but far enough back that the stage lights wouldn’t ruin the intimacy.

Chapin was still reeling from her backstage adventure but it suddenly dawned on her that Skeet had said they needed to talk. She couldn’t decide whether to go ahead and ask about it or leave it

alone and enjoy the evening. She finally decided that she wouldn't enjoy the evening sitting there wondering what was going on.

"You said we needed to talk about something. So what's up?" she said, trying not to betray how afraid she was of the answer.

"It can wait. Let's just enjoy the show," he said.

"Look, I'm gonna lay my cards on the table here. I'm getting pretty attached to you and sitting here wondering what's going on for the next 45 minutes while I'm pretending to enjoy the show just isn't gonna work. So let's just get this over with. What's wrong? Have I done something? Are you having second thoughts? This is moving too fast for you? What?"

Skeet looked at her and broke into a little laugh. "This is not moving too fast for me. You haven't done anything wrong and I am definitely NOT having second thoughts." His face became more serious. "This is really about me, not you. It's a problem with the record."

In Chapin's mind, she breathed a huge sigh of relief, but on the outside, she tried not to let it show. "What's wrong with the record? I heard it in the studio just a few nights ago. It's sounded really great."

"Great? It's fantastic! That's the problem," he said. She was beginning to wonder if he was on some sort of an emotional roller coaster. First something is bad, then great, then a problem.

"Alright. You got my attention. The fact that it's fantastic is a problem?" she asked.

"No, no," he paused. "The album I recorded is a great album. The album the record company has is a fantastic album. I don't know really how to explain this, so bear with me while I spill it," and with that, he launched into the most fast and frantic explanation she had ever heard. She couldn't have gotten a word in edgewise even if she had wanted to and she wasn't entirely sure he had actually taken a breath at any point. He told her about the mystery guitar, what Dave had said, what Shawn had said and what he and Shawn had found when they had listened to the tape. "...and I think I am losing my mind." He inhaled deeply and looked to her for some reassurance. "This is the part where you say 'No Skeet! You're not using your mind. I know plenty of people this has happened to,'" he said.

"Oh...no, I'm not ignoring you. I'm just thinking. There HAS to be some logical explanation for it. We just have to figure it out. The only thing I can think of is someone is playing one hell of a prank on you."

"That's what I thought at first, but I can't come up with a who, a how OR a why?" he said desperately.

She sat silent again, trying to piece together a plausible explanation, when she realized he was still staring at her expectantly, almost afraid. "Now Skeet. You are NOT losing your mind. We just have to figure this out. When we get done here, let's go back to your place and listen to the

master and the copy again. Maybe you'll get lucky and find something you missed the first time. Or maybe you'll just get lucky," she said with a flirtatious grin.

The lights in the room went down and Herbie and Chick were introduced over the PA. Two spotlights hit the stage, the audience erupted and they launched into "Green Dolphin Street", just like they had backstage except with two grand pianos sitting end to end, instead of the small electric pianos they were warming up on backstage. They played fantastically and Chapin was in awe. This was her genre, her arena, her place to really feel at home musically.

She was amazed that she had gotten to play with these two, and Patti. Don't forget Patti. She had played piano all through high school and minored in music in college, but she had never really been in a jazz band. She had jammed at local piano bars with friends when they were all a bit buzzed on the adult beverage du jour and she had played at tons of recitals from the age of eight until she graduated college, but nothing even remotely compared to the past few days with Skeet. Being with him had allowed her to play with legends, not to mention how she just melted in his eyes. And the sex was pretty out of this world too. She shivered just from the thought, although Skeet tried to wrap his jacket around her shoulders, thinking she was cold.

They had played five or six songs and Chick was busy bantering with the crowd when Herbie walked over and whispered in his ear. Chick looked up, nodded and grinned. Herbie picked up a mic and joined the banter.

"You know, folks we have a special guest joining us in the audience this evening. The stupendous, world famous bass player from right here in Chicago, Mr. Skeet Seaton, ladies and gentlemen. Skeet, stand up and wave to the folks, huh?" Herbie goated him a little, a spotlight swung over their table and Skeet stood up and waved.

The audience roared with applause and whistles. Skeet sat back down and Chapin reached over and gently squeezed his thigh with her hand. She leaned in, kissed him on the cheek, smiled and put her head on his shoulder. It felt so good to be there with him. She closed her eyes and relaxed on his shoulder.

"You know folks, we have another guest in the audience tonight," Chick continued. "No we had never met this young lady before tonight, but we got to hang out with her backstage and she has some of the best jazz chops we've heard in a long time."

Chapin sat up and looked around the room, anxious to see what other jazz luminary was going to pop out of the woodwork. Diana Krall, maybe? She thought how great her luck would be if the great Diana Krall, her favorite artist, were in the house. Seeing her with Chick and Herbie would be magic.

"And she's not bad on the eyes either," said Herbie. "Ladies and Gentleman, Ms. Chapin Hannigan!"

Chapin's eyes got as big as poker chips and her head popped off of Skeet's shoulder. She looked around at the stage, feeling like something just pulled her breath out of her body and was now

standing on her chest so the air couldn't return. Skeet clapped mightily as the spotlight shown on them. He guided her up and she waved, and simultaneously turned six shades of red.

"You know, folks." Herbie continued. "Maybe with a little encouragement, we can get her up here to show us some of those jazz chops. Chick and I would love to play with her again. Come on Chapin!"

Chapin sat in shock. She tried to tell Skeet no, to make them stop, but no sound emerged. "Come on, Chapin. They want you to jam!" Skeet was so used to this kind of thing it never even dawned on him that she may NOT want to. He guided her to her feet again and started clapping furiously. She had no idea what to do, but she knew she had to move since everyone was looking at her. She had two choices, the stage or the exit. She thought about how she was approaching her relationship with Skeet and just going for it, rolling with it. She finally was able to take a deep breath and she headed for the stage. She could hear Skeet whistling behind her.

Chick met her at the edge, took her hand and led her up the steps. She smiled at him half heartedly and leaned into his ear. "I'm sorry, but I've only ever played at recitals and the occasional piano bar. I'm not sure I can pull this off."

"I just heard you. You can definitely pull this off. If you get nervous, just ride lightly and Herbie and I will bring you back. Just relax. Now, what do you want to play?"

"Well, what do you guys know?" She instantly wished she could bring the words back.

"What don't we know? Just tell us what you are comfortable with and we'll handle the rest," Chick said. He squeezed her hand and guided her to the piano.

"Well," she paused. "I played 'Birdland' at a recital in college." She almost followed with 'Can you guys do that?' but caught the words. She replaced them with "if that's cool with you."

"What key do you wanna play it in?"

"E flat?" she asked quietly.

"You askin me or tellin me?" Chick said with a grin.

She took another deep breath. "E flat!" she said convincingly.

"Herbie! Birdland in E flat," Chick said.

Herbie counted it off and began to play. At first she laid back, then Chick sat down beside her, put and arm around her shoulder and began playing with his other hand along side her.

Just as it had happened earlier, she just closed her eyes, leaned her head back and let the music flow. They were really tearing it up. Chick got up from beside Chapin and sat down by Herbie and began playing. Herbie smiled, got up and sat down by Chapin and began playing with her.

This happened several times in succession, with Chapin grinning ear to ear and the crowd going wild.

Skeet was almost ready to explode. He was riveted to the whole scene. Chapin, in her black dress, the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen banging out some furious chops sitting next to two jazz legends. He was totally in to it when he was interrupted.

"Mr. Seaton, could you step outside a minute please?" a voice came from over his shoulder.

"In a minute, buddy. Do you see this? She is wailing! My God! Who knew she could play like that?" he said, not even taking his eyes off her to turn around.

A hand landed firmly on his shoulder. "I'm afraid we need to talk to you now, sir."

Skeet turned around and was staring directly at a badge on the shirt of a somewhat sullen police officer. He was apparently not a jazz fan.

"What's the problem, officer?" he said.

"We'll talk to you outside, sir. If you could just step this way, please?" the policeman said in a very dry, monotone voice. As Skeet stood up, the officer grabbed him under the arm and began to guide him out to the door. He looked back up at the stage and saw Chapin was having a great time with Herbie and Chick. She was really cooking and he didn't want to miss it.

"This won't take long, will it?" he asked. "That's my girlfriend on stage up and I really want to be here for this."

"We'll talk when we get outside, sir," the cop replied in the same dry tone of voice.

They went through the door and Skeet turned to the cop. "Ok, so what's the problem, officer?"

"Would you turn around and put your hands on the wall please, sir," the cop replied. "We need to make sure you aren't carrying any weapons. It's for our protection."

Skeet reluctantly turned around and placed his hands on the wall. The officer kicked his ankles slightly, indicating for Skeet to spread them apart, to which he complied. "Would you place your hands on your head please, sir?"

He put his hands on his head and felt the cold snap of the handcuffs. "What's going on here? Am I being arrested?"

"Yes sir. We'll explain it all in a couple of minutes. First we need to read you your rights?" The officer began reading Skeet his Miranda rights while his partner, who had been largely silent up to this point, began talking on the radio that was attached to his shoulder.

“Sir, do you know a,” the officer began thumbing through a small notebook until he seemed to find what he was looking for. “Chapin Hannigan?”

“Of course! She’s my girlfriend.”

“And sir do you know Ms Hannigan’s whereabouts this evening?” he asked.

“Yea. She’s inside with me. What’s the problem here? I don’t understand.”

“Sir, you are being charged with the kidnapping of Chapin Hannigan. Now we’re gonna get in the car and head...” Skeet cut him off.

“She’s right inside! I didn’t kidnap anyone. Go ask her!” Skeet pleaded.

“Sir, there was nobody inside with you. You were at a table by yourself.”

“She was up on stage sitting in! My God! Just go ask her!”

“Sir, you’ll have a chance to tell us your side when we get downtown. Now lets...”

“Skeet? They’re looking for you. They want you to sit in.” Chapin suddenly noticed that Skeet wasn’t having a casual conversation. “What’s going on here? Why are you in handcuffs?” Chapin turned her attention to the policemen. “What are you arresting him for? There must be some mistake. “

“They’re arresting me for kidnapping YOU!” Skeet said, the desperation climbing in his voice.

“Kidnapping me? But I’m not kidnapped! What the hell is going on here?”

“Maam, what is your name?” the officer asked.

“Chapin Agnes Hannigan,” she said.

“Agnes?” Skeet asked, with a giggle. “Your middle name is ‘Agnes’?”

“Use your right to remain silent, Skeet!” she said, then turned her attention back to the police officer. “Obviously, I’m not kidnapped, so could you please let him go?”

“Just a minute, maam. What’s your birthday?” he asked.

“March 4”

“What year, maam?”

“You’re getting kinda personal there, aren’t you, Joe Friday?” Chapin snapped. She was not fond of revealing her age, especially to a stranger. It was just a quirk, but it still irritated her.

“Chapin!?” Skeet exclaimed.

“Maam, I’m trying to help you two out and give you a chance to clear this up here. We can always go to the station and clear it up if you prefer.”

“Chapin, tell the nice man the year you were born, please,” Skeet said straining hard to sound calm.

Chapin shot them all an irritated look, and actually thought for just a second about remaining silent. She finally relented. She could tell by the way he was looking at his tablet that he already knew, he was just checking.

“1972” she said reluctantly.

“Thank you!” Skeet exclaimed.

“Do you have any identification, maam?”

Chapin began digging through her purse. She had almost decided not to bring it, but was thinking now how glad she was that she did. She pulled out her driver’s license and gave it to the cop.

“Ok, maam. I’ve got to call the precinct on this one.”

“Officer? Can I ask a question? Who said I was kidnapped?”

The officer was already on his radio and ignored the question completely.

Skeet looked at the ground and kicked one foot with the other in disgust. “I am not fucking believing this,” he mumbled.

“We’ll get it taken care of. Just hold on for a sec,” she said.

“10-4,” the officer said into his radio. “Ok, Phil,” he said to the second officer. “It checks out. Let’s get the cuffs off him. Sorry for the inconvenience, sir.”

“How did this happen? What made you think I kidnapped her?” Skeet asked. He was relieved, but now curiosity was taking over. Was this another practical joke? Was someone trying to drive him insane? First the album and now this.

“Uhhh...,” the policeman said, thumbing back through his notebook. “Agnes Hannigan, the victim’s mother.”

“My mother!?” Chapin exclaimed.

“Yes maam. You might want to give her a call and let her know you are all right.”

“Oh I’ll give her a call, all right!”

“Sorry again for the inconvenience, Mr. Seaton. Just doing our job, sir,” the cop said, tipping his hat.

“Umm...yea.” Skeet was beginning to feel somewhat indignant. He looked over at the other officer. “What are you? The strong, silent type?” he snapped.

“Something like that, sir,” the other officer said with a grin.

“Just shut up and come on!” Chapin said grabbing Skeet by the hand and dragging him back toward the door.

The cops got back in the car and drove away as Skeet and Chapin stood by the door. Skeet was rubbing his wrists where the cuffs had bitten into him.

“I’m so sorry!” Chapin told him. “I’m not sure what’s going on, but I’ll find out.” She whipped out her cell phone and punched up her mother on speed dial.

“Well, I’m assuming I won’t be the honored guest at Thanksgiving dinner with your folks,” he said sarcastically.

She started to try to kiss him, but her mom answered the phone. “Mom! What in the...yes, I’m fine! No, I WASN’T kidnapped. Whatever gave you the idea that... No, he’s a really nice guy. We’ve been dating a short while now but why did you... NO! I told you! Jack and I are not together. We haven’t been together for almost nine months. Geez, mom! What’s it gonna take to... You talked to him? But why? No mom! Listen to me. I was NOT kidnapped. Stockholm what? Stockholm syndrome?”

Skeet looked at her and over exaggeratedly mouthed the word ‘WHAT?’.

She patted him on the arm. “No mom, I am not in love with my kidnapper!”

“Well, now I’m hurt,” Skeet said in a sarcastic tone. “I really didn’t want to find out this way!” he said playfully. She pursed her lips at him.

“No mom... Jack lied. I was not kidnapped.” She paused. “His name is Skeet and you just had him arrested! But mom, he DIDN’T kidnap me! Look mom, I’m on a date and...with Skeet. He’s actually a wonderful guy.”

Skeet straitened his tie in a mocking fashion.

“I know you liked Jack, mom. But he is not right in the head. No mom, we are NOT going to work it out. We WON’T all talk about it at Thanksgiving. I told you he is not invited! I don’t care if you already invited him. I told you to uninvited him. I TOLD YOU, if he’s there, I’m not

going to come. Look, I'll talk to you about it tomorrow. I gotta go... No, he didn't tell me to say that. I'll talk to you tomorrow. I love you too. Bye."

She closed the phone and stared at it for a second. She was so embarrassed. Her psychotic ex boyfriend had convinced her mother and father that the man she was now dating had kidnapped her and tried to have him arrested.

"Well, " she said with a sigh. "I'm a writer and supposed to be good with words, but I can't find anything other than I am so sorry."

"Wow, I fix it up where you can play with some jazz greats and you get me arrested." He was clearly going to have a little fun from this. "Now does that seem fair?"

"You're not gonna let me forget this one, are you? Well, I can't blame you. This is just plain crappy. I'm so sorry."

"And you know the worst part?" he continued. "I pictured you, me and handcuffs in a completely different way." They shared a giggle.

"You are soooo getting laid tonight!"

"On a serious note though, I am just wondering what your parents think of me. I mean, they think I kidnapped you? And what was that syndrome thing? Have I given you some terrible disease?"

"Oh, my mom is an amateur psychologist. Stockholm Syndrome is when a kidnap victim falls in love with the kidnapper. Unfortunately, she still kinda thinks that you kidnapped me and that's why I fell for you and if I would just come to my senses, Jack and I could work it out. It's pretty sad," she said.

"Hmmm...never heard of that. Anyway, I think I am gonna have to skip the 'Turkey day with the 'rents' gig. I think it would just be better if I didn't go," Skeet said. He really was disappointed. He had wanted to meet her parents, try to make a good impression and maybe the relationship could continue to grow. "I mean, not sure they are going to get over the whole kidnapping thing in two weeks."

"Look, let me work it out. It will be fine. Sometimes my mom is a bit stubborn. I'm sure I can get this straightened out."

"That's cool, but I still think it might be better for me to skip this particular holiday. I can meet them another time."

She crossed her arms and stood cocked with most of her weight on her right foot. "Look, buster. If you're not going, I'm not going. It's that simple."

Chapter 17

Chapin slouched down onto the couch in Skeet's studio as he began turning on power to several devices. It had been a whirlwind evening, which seemed to be a pattern when she was with Skeet. She had almost been late for their date, played jazz back stage with Herbie Hancock and Chick Corea and then actually got to play with them on stage. Her boyfriend thinks he's losing his mind, then was handcuffed and almost arrested by a couple of Chicago's finest because her ex-boyfriend convinced her parents that she had been kidnapped. It was really beginning to get to her, but she glanced over at him, while he was spinning dials and pushing faders. So far, it all seemed to be worth it. She was beginning to think he was her soul mate and they had only known each other a few days.

On the drive home, he had played the CD that he had brought back from the record company. It was fantastic, she thought but it definitely wasn't the same thing she had heard during their previous visit to the studio.

Skeet started the playback and turned to her. "Now you'll see that this one won't have that fantastic guitar. I don't know who's doing this or how but it's really freaking me out?" They listened to the track and were almost floored when, remarkably, the guitar that had been missing on the masters every time Skeet had listened to it, was magically there now. His eyes widened and he spun around in his chair. He was frantically muting tracks, trying to identify where the sound is coming from.

His original recording of 'Velvet Paradise' had used 26 tracks to record on the computer controlled digital system. He muted the 26th track and the guitar sound continued unaccompanied. "Where the hell is that coming from?" The desperation was clear in his voice.

Chapin got up and began looking over his shoulder. She worked with computers all the time and wanted to help. She looked at the screen where the tracks were displayed. "Scroll over to the right," she suggested. He obeyed and, low and behold, the 48th track on the system had the guitar. He turned it on and off a couple of times just to make sure then slumped backward in his chair.

"What the fuck is going on? That wasn't there yesterday!" he exclaimed.

"Are you sure you scrolled over here? Maybe you just didn't notice it."

"If it were just me, I'd say you're probably right, but Shawn did it. There's no way he would have missed something like that. He's one of the best I've ever known," Skeet said.

"Everyone misses stuff now and then. Maybe he just missed it."

"Maybe. I'll call him and find out." Skeet reached for his cell phone but Chapin gently closed it in his palm.

“Look, its one a.m. It can wait until tomorrow. Let Shawn sleep, or...whatever it is he does.” She took the phone and placed it on the console. “Besides, don’t you have some important business to attend to?” She sat on his lap and began kissing his neck. “Namely me?” she cooed in his ear.

He wrapped his arms around her and held her close. As things began to heat up, his hands began to move freely over her black dress. He caressed her breasts and kissed her gently. She stood up in front of him and pulled the dress over her head, revealing the black lace she had picked out for him earlier in the evening. She unhooked the bra, removed it and tossed it on Skeet’s head. She tucked her thumbs into the top of the black lace panties and slowly began to slide them down.

The door burst open. “Skeet, I’ve been talking to Shawn and we are sure...” Brian was in the center of the room before he realized anything was going on. “Ahh damnit!” he said, covering his eyes and turning around.

Chapin quickly pulled the panties back up, covered her bare breasts with one hand and grabbed her bra with the other. “I’m not sure if I’m pleased or insulted by that reaction, Brian,” she lamented. What else was she going to do but try to make a joke out of the awkward situation.

“I’m.... I’m sorry. I didn’t figure you were... I mean... I didn’t know,” Brian said, his face still planted in his hand so as to not take in the view. He had begun to turn a deep shade of red.

“It’s ok, B. It’s my fault,” Skeet said as he walked him out the door. As the door closed behind them, Skeet turned to Brian. “Ok, you and Shawn were talking, and...”

“Oh man, she must think I’m some kinda perv! I keep walking in when she’s naked. Skeet, you gotta know I’m not doing that on purpose.”

“I know, Brian. She knows too. Shit just happens. Don’t sweat it. I’ll take care of it. Now, you and Shawn were talking...”

“Well, Shawn and I have been listening to the album for hours. There is no doubt. That guitar is Stan Balch. We’re sure of it. No one else sounds like that.”

“But why would Stan... I mean...” Skeet paused and thought for a moment. “I haven’t seen Stan in years. Why would he do this? Why not just call me? Why try to drive me out of my mind?”

“I don’t know. But the playing has got to be Stan.” Brian paused not knowing how to proceed. “Maybe...you should...try to call him.”

Skeet’s head snapped up and looked Brian in the eye. “You know I can’t do that. Why would you even say that?”

“Look man, I know what’s going on. But I also know what the record company’s expecting now, and I know you can’t get anyone else who can play that way, and I know this whole thing is driving you crazy. I don’t know what else to tell you man. I think you should call him.

The door opened and Chapin emerged. “Call who?” she said as she pulled down on the dress to straighten it.

“Nothing. Brian and I were just thinking out loud.”

“I think he should call Stan Balch. That’s got to be who’s on the track,” Brian said.

“Did he tell you it’s on the master now?” Chapin asked.

Brian smirked. “No, the one with the track is a copy. The thing in there is the master.”, he said, point toward the studio door. “The guitar is just on the copy.”

“No, it WAS just on the copy. We just listened to the master. It’s on there now,” she said.

“If that was listening to the master, then I think Skeet and I never listened to the master,” Brian said with a grin.

“Oh you just want to see me naked. Admit it,” she said to Brian, being completely sarcastic. She turned to Skeet. “I think Brian’s right. You should call him. You’ve got to get to the bottom of this.”

“Look, I haven’t talked to him in so many years. I don’t even know how to begin to find him,” Skeet said. He was obviously looking for reasons not to try. “I doubt he’d take the call anyway.”

“Well you should try. It’s the only way you’re going to find out anything. I’ve got some sources at work. I can try to help you find him,” Chapin offered.

“And Shawn keeps up with everybody in the business. He may know something,” Brian offered.

“Ok, let’s talk about it in the morning, OK?” Skeet said.

They stood in an awkward silence. “Ummm...Ok?” Brian asked. There was more awkward silence. “Ohhhh! You guys want to ‘listen to the master’ some more.”

Skeet looked at Chapin. “Maybe we should go upstairs to... ummm... finish our discussion.”

“Is there a lock on that door?” Chapin asked.

Chapter 18

Chapin awoke in Skeet's arms and glanced around the room. The sunlight was just starting to stream in the window. She lay there listening to him breathe. She became conscious that she was lying naked and the sheet was at her feet and all she could think of was Brian walking in yet again. She tried to maneuver the sheet up without waking Skeet, but it wasn't to be. She covered herself and he began to stir.

"Good morning, beautiful!" Skeet said, kissing her. Even the morning breath didn't matter to the two of them. They held each other for several minutes then just relaxed in total bliss.

"I played with Herbie Hancock and Chick Corea last night. I can't believe it! It's like a dream and I have to keep reminding myself that it's true." She sighed and stared at the ceiling for a moment, then rolled on her side with her head on Skeet's chest. "Plus I made love to the most wonderful man in the world."

"Several times!" Skeet interjected.

"Well that makes it several times as great now doesn't it?"

He kissed her again. "I'm hungry," he announced. "Let's grab a shower and cook something to eat."

"Sounds good, but maybe we should go out for something to eat. I'm not really much of a cook," she said.

Skeet grinned. "I've got it covered. Let's hit the shower!" He hopped up and walked around the bed, took her hand and headed for the shower.

Once they were showered and dressed they headed to the kitchen. As Skeet bounded into the kitchen he saw a woman sitting there. She was in a blue robe that was clearly oversized. Skeet recognized it as Brian's. Her back was to the door and she sipped on a cup of coffee. She turned around as she heard them enter the room. She looked strangely familiar but Skeet couldn't seem to place where he knew her from.

"Hello?" Skeet asked.

"Oh hi, Skeet! I hope I didn't give you a start, sugar. I was here with Brian and it got really late so he said I could just stay here. I hope that's not a problem," the lady said.

"Wait... Jaque, right?" Chapin said.

“Why yes!” Jaque turned to Chapin. “I remember you were in the coffee shop with Brian and Skeet, but I don’t think I ever caught your name.”

“I’m Chapin,” she said with a smile.

Skeet suddenly realized that the woman had been their waitress in the coffee shop across the street from the Metro. She had seemed nice enough and Skeet trusted Brian. If he trusted her to be here, then Skeet did too.

“Well why don’t you girls have some coffee and I’ll get started on some breakfast,” Skeet suggested as he pulled out a chair for Chapin and kissed her on the forehead.

“Now why don’t you let me help, sugar?” Jaque said. She glanced at Chapin with a smile. “You know you can’t trust a man in the kitchen.

“I think you’d be surprised,” boomed Brian’s voice as he entered the room. “Skeet seems quite at home in the kitchen.”

Chapin looked at Skeet with amazement. “You’re quite the renaissance man!” She beamed with her feelings for him. He looked at her and smiled.

“You know, Brian was telling me about that strange thing that happened to your album, you know, with Stan playing on it and all.” Jaque said in a quite matter of fact tone that took a moment to register with both Chapin and Skeet. “And you know I’m on the internet all the time and I bet we can just google old Stan up and you can give him a call and find out what the hec’s goin’ on.”

Skeet shot Brian a look while Chapin bit her lip. Brian stared blankly at Skeet, not knowing what to say. Chapin swallowed hard and decided to interject before temperatures started to rise away from all the pans that Skeet had going on the stove. “You know,” she started. “She’s probably right. We could probably do a little research and find him, no problem.” She immediately wondered if this was the right thing to say to keep tempers down and decided it probably wasn’t, but it was already out there, so she decided she better roll with it.

“Yea, Skeet. I’m sure between us we can find him,” Brian agreed.

“But I’m not sure I want to find him. It’s been a long time and a lot of water has passed under the bridge,” Skeet said, while violently beating eggs in a large bowl.

“Well, he obviously wants something to do with you, for better or worse. He laid some guitar tracks down on tape and not crappy guitar either. He obviously wasn’t trying to mess it up,” Brian commented.

“How about if we eat a little breakfast before we get too heavy into this, cool?” Skeet said. His voiced betrayed both his stress and his irritation. He had planned to cook a small romantic

breakfast for just Chapin and himself and now he was cooking for four and talking about an issue that was truly disturbing to him.

“Sounds fair,” remarked Chapin. “So what’s on the menu in this greasy spoon?” she asked, attempting to change the subject to something a little less stressful.

Skeet’s face brightened up as his thoughts turned to his beloved food. “I’m trying not to go too complicated this morning, but I’m making some chocolate covered Belgian waffles topped with Crème fraîche, some maple cured bacon on the side. For those who want eggs, I’m doing a variation on an Indian Omelet. “

Both girls suddenly sat up straight and looked at each other.

“You’re kidding, right sugar?” Jaque asked.

“No, he’s not kidding,” Brian answered.

“I was just expecting some eggs and toast,” said Chapin.

Brian looked down at her mockingly. “Madam, Skeet doesn’t make…” he added just a bit of mock contempt to the words. “eggs and toast.” Brian and Skeet began to laugh as Skeet began pinching ingredients into a pan. The kitchen suddenly filled with a wonderful scent of Middle Eastern spices.

“My God, what is that? It smells wonderful!” Jaque asked.

“Onions, chili, garlic, ginger, turmeric, cumin, a little coriander, some mint, a dash of lime juice…”

“Ok, basically more than I want to know about,” Jaque said with a grin.

Skeet shook and rattled various pots and pans and then grabbed some plates and began to lay them out on the counter.

“Can I help with anything?” Chapin asked.

“I learned a long time ago just to stay out of his way. Every once and a while he lets me cut up something, but usually I have to stay out of the entire area,” Brian laughed.

Skeet emerged from the kitchen with a plate stacked with waffles, and a pot of what appeared to be melted chocolate. After setting it on the table, he raced back in the kitchen and brought a plate of bacon. He then grabbed individual plates, placed an omelet on each one and carefully placed it in front of each person.

The girls sat speechless. Skeet sat down and looked around the table. “Well, dig in!” he said and Brian started reaching for the waffles. The girls followed Brian’s lead and a chorus of “Ummms”, “Yums” and “Oh God” that sometimes bordered on orgasmic.

“You guys are really lucky, you know. Usually he just cooks for the poker buddies,” Brian said. He turned to Skeet. “You know Shawn is gonna be pissed! He loves your Indian Omelet,” Brian said.

“Well, might I suggest that we do this again tomorrow and invite him!?” announced Chapin to a chorus of laughs.

Chapter 19

When breakfast had been finished and they all felt stuffed, the girls insisted on clearing the table, over Skeet's objections. Chapin washed and Jaque dried while Brian and Skeet wiped down the table.

"You've got a real winner there, Chapin. Talented, cute as hell and on top of that, he can cook. That's a triple threat if I ever saw one." Jaque said under her breath.

"Don't I know it. I think I might have hit the jack pot this time," Chapin said, smiling.

"What do you think he's gonna do about Stan?"

"I don't know, but I think it's going to drive him crazy if he ignores it. I hope I can convince him," Chapin said.

"All right, what are you girls whispering about over there?" Skeet said wryly.

"Oh just about how cute you two are. Nothing more," Jaque said, then the two of them burst into laughter.

"Well, Skeet. What do you wanna do? Should we start looking for Stan?" Brian asked. Brian was not one to beat around the bush or be subtle. Chapin was actually pleased that Brian had brought it up instead of her.

Skeet took a deep breath and looked down at the table. "I don't really want to, but it seems like I should. So let's see what turns up. You know, Shawn is always up on where everyone is. Let's get him over here. Maybe he can help."

"Alright, but he's gonna be pissed. You might have to make more Indian Omelettes," Brian said and pulled his cell phone out of his robe and began to dial.

"Well, if it's all right, I'm gonna go grab a quick shower and put on some clothes. I'll be back in a few," Jaque announced as she headed out the kitchen door towards Brian's house.

"Shawn's on his way. He said Stan is going to be a tough one to find. He's pretty much dropped off the face of the earth. No one has heard from him publically in years."

"Looks like we've got our work cut out for us," Chapin said with a sigh. "I've got some contacts through the magazine I can call. We'll see what that turns up. You boys got a computer around here? I mean one connected to the net."

Skeet led her into the den and powered up a computer that sat by the fireplace. There was still a chill in the air so he started a fire while Chapin and Brian poured over the screen. Chapin tapped away at the keys and they were soon joined by Jaque. Skeet settled onto the couch and thumbed through a copy of 'Bon Appetite' while the other three continued the search. Skeet was halfway

through the magazine when the doorbell rang. Neither Chapin, Jaque or Brian stirred and Skeet made his way to the front door to let in Shawn.

“Hiya Skeets! Decided to track down your better half huh? Good move! I always said he was the talented one,” Shawn said with a grin as he slapped Skeet on the back. He was wearing a backpack and a thick blue coat and a red scarf, which he removed and handed to Skeet. They made their way back to the den and Shawn set his backpack down tossed his coat on the couch and warmed himself for a moment by the fire.

“You’re right, Shawn. He seems to have just dropped out of site in the early 90’s. I can’t even find a good lead. You have any ideas?” Chapin asked. She was getting exasperated and somewhat embarrassed. She was a reporter. Research was supposed to be one of her strong points and she really wanted to find some information to help.

“Well, let’s see. I was thinking back and the last thing I think I heard was a long time ago from Larry Mullen who said he had seen him on a trip home to Ireland. That may give us a place to start,” Shawn said.

“Do you have the name of a town or anything?” Chapin asked.

“Not really, but I know that Larry is from Artane, just outside of Dublin, but that’s been a really long time ago that I talked to him.”

Chapin began tapping at the keyboard again but with little success.

As Shawn stood there he began to sniff the air. His diminished site was obviously compensated by his sense of hearing, which is what made him such a great engineer, but he was no slouch in the smell department either, and he was picking up some unusual scents.

“Hey! You guys had Indian Omelets and didn’t invite me? I am thoroughly insulted!” Shawn announced. “Well can a guy at least get a cup of hot tea on a cold morning?”

“Food prep! That’s my department,” Skeet said as he headed off to the kitchen.

“I’m coming up empty. Did he say anything else? Maybe where in Artane he saw him or something?” Chapin asked.

“Not really. He said he saw him in a pub. Go figure. He didn’t really give a name or anything. “ Shawn paused and thought for a moment. “Although...”

“Yea?” said Chapin.

“He said he had been down paying respects to some friends who had died in a big nightclub fire. He said he wandered into a pub just after to have a beer and there was Stan.” Shawn said.

“So there was a fire in a town a long time ago and we are looking for a bar close by to find Stan who happened to be in there. Just great!” Brian sighed. He was becoming frustrated too. “I think this may be....”

“Wait!” Chapin cut him off. “It says here in the 80’s there was a fire at the Stardust Disco in Artane and 48 people died. It was pretty famous. Maybe that’s the one?”

“Stardust...yea, that sounds familiar!” Shawn exclaimed.

“How the hell did you find...” Brian started.

“No time to explain. Let’s see. It says that the Stardust was on the site now occupied by the Butterly Business Park. I’m not sure what to do with it, but we have a scrap. Let me see if I can find some bars in the area,” Chapin said.

“Pubs, missy. They call them pubs. You have to learn to sprechen zee right lingo!” Shawn joked.

“Yes sir!” Chapin said, firing off a mock salute. “But I’m not quite sure how to find bars errr, PUBS in the area.”

“Why don’t you just look up his name in the phone book?” Jaque asked. “I mean, that’s what we do here.”

They all exchanged glances in silence for a moment. “Can’t hurt to try,” Brian said.

Chapin tapped away at the keyboard. “There doesn’t seem to be a Balch listed in Artane,” she said. “But it was a good idea, Jaque. I wonder if we can try something similar for the pub. I mean, those iPhones can do it.”

Chapin tapped some more but to no avail. Other than the nightclub, which was a long shot, they had nothing.

Skeet came back in with a steaming cup of tea for Shawn along with a pastry. “Thought you might could use a little sustenance too,” he said, handing the mug and small plate to Shawn.

“Well, thanks,” he said half heartedly looking at the plate. “But it ain’t no Indian Omelet!” he said and took a big bite out of the pastry.

They continued the search for the next 3 hours with Chapin tapping away at the keyboard and Shawn, Brian and Jaque offering suggestions about what to look for and where they might find it.

“Wait, I may have found something here. I found a listing for a Holly Balch in a small town nearby called Harmonstown,” Chapin announced.

“Well we aren’t looking for Holly, we’re looking for Stan,” Brian protested.

“I know, but it’s the only Balch even close to there. There’s a good possibility that they may be related or at least know something about him. It’s our only lead so far,” said Chapin.

“So I guess we should call,” Jaque suggested.

They all stood around looking expectantly at each other.

“Oh get me the phone, I’ll do it,” Chapin said. Brian picked the phone up off the table and handed it to Chapin. She dialed the number on the screen and waited. “It says it’s been disconnected. Great. Now what?”

“Just keep looking, I guess,” remarked Brian.

“Look we need to solve this once and for all. I’m tired of this and I just want to find out the truth and be done. Brian, let’s just catch a flight to Ireland and find him, assuming he’s still there. Chapin, you stay here and keep working the internet.” Skeet was quite forceful.

“Look, I’ve got a laptop, I can search on the trip, but I’m going with you. I’ve got time off at work and I want to come,” Chapin declared.

“You don’t have to do that. Brian and I can handle...”

“I’m sure you can, but I want to go, so I can go with you or I can tag along on my own. Your choice, sport!”

“You’ve got work. You shouldn’t have to worry about my problems.”

“You announced that I was your girlfriend so now your problems are my problems. Let me make this simple for you. I can come and be in the hotel bed with you or I can come and be in a room by myself across the hall. It’s your choice.”

“Ummm, be careful with this one, Skeeter. If you make the wrong choice we are DEFINITELY gonna take away your man card!” Shawn announced.

“Well, I have no intention of arguing with a woman in my bed. Let’s book a flight and some rooms,” Skeet said, finally relenting.

“I’ve got some contacts around that might know something but it’ll take me a couple of days to track them down. You guys go and I’ll man the command post here and see what I can ferret out. By the way, Skeet. You SO owe me Indian Omelets now!” Shawn said.

Brian grabbed the phone and began to book the trip. It was a duty he was used to performing for Skeet and himself. But when he began making the hotel reservations, he became a little flustered. “Skeet, ummm... I am assuming one room with one bed for you and Chapin?”

“Well, I’m certainly not sleeping with you, Brian!” Chapin giggled.

“Don’t think I’d be too fond of that idea myself, sugar,” giggled Jaque.

“It’s settled then. I will be sleeping with Chapin,” Skeet said with a smile.

Brian turned a light shade of red and turned his attention back to making reservations on the phone. He jotted some information in a small notebook and hung up the phone.

“Ok, we leave from O’Hare in 4 hours, so we better get going. I’ll drop Jaque off at her place if you can drop Shawn off, then we can meet at O’Hare,” Brian suggested.

“I need to grab a few things first. At least a change of panties for God’s sake.” Chapin announced.

“Then we better haul ass. Brian and I pretty much keep a couple of bags ready to go so we don’t have much to pack. Let us just grab them and then we can head out.” Skeet and Brian headed off to their respective parts of the estate while Shawn, Chapin and Jaque stayed in the den and chatted. Within a few minutes, they reappeared, ready to go. They all headed out the front door. Shawn, Chapin and Skeet headed for the SUV parked in the drive way while Jaque waited at the front door while Brian locked up.

Suddenly a crack rang out, causing Chapin to jump. Startled, they all looked around for the source of the noise. Skeet saw a slight movement in the bushes but before he could say anything, a second crack rang out and Shawn winced and fell to the ground. Chapin rolled toward Shawn and began to assess his situation.

“Call 911!” Chapin screamed. Brian rolled on his side and reached for his cell phone. He and Jaque had dropped down in front of the door at the second crack and Brian had covered Jaque with his body to protect her. He dialed the phone and began to breathlessly try to tell the dispatcher about the situation.

Skeet placed himself between Chapin, Shawn and where he had seen the movement. He began scanning the bushes to see if he could catch a glimpse of anything. Just to his left, he saw someone trying to run. They were headed toward the back of the house. Skeet jumped up and began to run as fast as he could around the other side of the house.

He rounded the corner of the house and entered the backyard. He watched as the gate that was the entrance to the garden on the other side of the house, swung open. While Skeet was in decent shape because of all those long sweaty sets on the road, running was not something he did a lot, so he was winded. He began running an intercept course with the man. He could see a rifle in his hand, which was obviously slowing him down, so Skeet thought he stood a chance.

He ran behind a row of bushes and, as he saw the figure passing in front of him, dove at his knees. He hit the runner on the knees and heard a crunch. He pulled himself up and found himself looking into Jack Palero’s eyes, just as a bullet whizzed by his ear. Skeet pulled his arm

back, balled up his fist and punched Jack right in the jaw with his right hand and grabbed the rifle with his left. Jack tried to struggle underneath him.

Thoughts of all the trouble he had caused them, not to mention his stalking and abuse of Chapin ran through his mind and rage began to build. “Stop it, you fucker!” Skeet shouted, but Jack took a swing at him. Suddenly the rage overflowed and Skeet yanked the rifle away from Jack’s hand, spun it around and smacked him as hard as he could in the chin with the butt. Jack went limp.

“Oh my God! Did you kill him?” Chapin asked. The panic was evident in her voice.

Skeet, who very rarely lost his cool, stood up with a cold look in his eye. He spun the rifle around and aimed it directly at Jack’s head. “Now there’s a thought,” he said. “He did, after all, shoot my friend, torture my girlfriend, destroyed private property, trespassed on my place, tried to get me arrested for kidnapping and oh yea, by the way, TRIED TO KILL ME. I think shooting this delusional pile of horse shit would be justified and no court in the country would convict me of a thing.

The hair on the back of Chapin’s neck stood on end. She wasn’t sure what to make of Skeet at this point. It was a side of him she had never seen, but she tried to remain calm and talk him down.

“You’re right, baby. But he’s not worth the hassle. The cops are on their way and they’ll take care of him.” She tried to speak in a calming voice but inside, she was panicking.

“Or I could save them the trouble,” he said. He reached up and cocked the hammer on the rifle as Jack began to stir.

“Sweetie, how about if we let the cops worry with him and we worry about Shawn?”

Shawn. Skeet’s mind had been so consumed he had forgotten about Shawn. “Is...is he ok?” Skeet asked.

“I think so. We’re waiting on the ambulance, though. You should come check on him,” she said, inching slowly toward him.

“But what about him? We can’t just let him run away.”

“I don’t think he’s going anywhere, baby,” she said, her eyes moving slowly down Jack’s body. “Looks like he had an accident.”

Skeet looked down and saw that Jack’s left leg was broken in two at the knee. “It must have been when I tackled him.”

“You mean it must have been when he fell down.”

Skeet put his thumb on the hammer of the rifle and slowly lowered it.

Jack looked up at him. "I knew you didn't have the stones. Chapin wants somebody with guts, and you obviously don't have any. You can never take her away from me. Isn't that right Chapin? Tell him. TELL HIM!"

They both stared silently at him. It was finally dawning on them how messed up Jack really was.

"Sir, please put down the rifle and step away with your hands in the air."

Chapin and Skeet turned around and saw two police officers standing about 20 feet away, both with their pistols drawn.

Skeet put one hand in the air and put the rifle down with the other. One of the officers walked up and handcuffed Skeet. "Great. Just great. Here we go again," he lamented.

Chapter 20

Once everyone had explained what had happened, Skeet was released and Jack was taken into custody. They had to call a second ambulance because Shawn had been taken away in the first one on the scene. It had just been a flesh wound but the ambulance drivers wanted him checked out by a doctor just to be sure and they would need a doctor's statement for the police report anyway. Skeet and Chapin gave statements to the police then followed Shawn's ambulance to the hospital while Brian dropped off Jaque and rescheduled the flight that they were now late for. Shawn had called his wife, Jen who was meeting them at the hospital.

Shawn got patched up and was given a clean bill of health before Jen arrived. The bullet had just grazed his upper arm so just a good cleaning, a couple of stitches and a tetanus shot fixed him right up. Skeet and Chapin waited with him until Jen arrived to pick him up and stuck around for a few just to calm her down a little. Even though Shawn was ok, it's not every day you get a call telling you that your husband has been shot. "That settles it!" she had said. "We are so moving to California or Canada or Australia or SOMEWHERE!"

Once Jen and Shawn pulled away, Skeet and Chapin hopped in the car and headed for Chapin's apartment so she could pack. Brian had been able to reschedule the flights for four hours later, which bought them a little time, but not much. If they missed this one, they would have to wait until the next day to leave.

Chapin packed quickly, just grabbing a couple of pairs of jeans, a few shirts, some underwear and only the basics of makeup. She also grabbed a couple of baby doll nighties that she thought might come in handy. She grabbed her laptop computer bag and they headed for the airport.

They met Brian and boarded their plane. They had a connecting flight to catch in Philadelphia and hoped they wouldn't miss it, but on the flight they just tried to relax from the harrowing day.

"You should try to get some sleep. It's gonna be a long flight and getting through customs in Ireland can be a bitch," Skeet said. Chapin had been looking out the window but turned to meet his gaze. He reached out and took her hand and squeezed it. "I'm really glad you came, you know. I just not sure I could have done this whole thing alone." His eyes drifted off toward the ceiling of the plane. A dulling look came across his face. "I probably just would have tried to ignore the whole thing, which is probably the wrong thing to do."

"Well, I sure as hell wasn't going to let you go without me. I think you're stuck with me," she said.

“But why?” he asked.

“Why? What do you mean, ‘why’?”

“I mean why are you doing all this. Why are you going halfway around the world to watch me act like an idiot on a wild goose chase. You planning a big story from this? It’ll probably make you a mint.” His eyes suddenly turned a little colder.

“Don’t be an ass, Skeet. I’m not going to write about any of this. I’m here because I want to be here, but if that’s all you think I’m here for, then I underestimated what we had.” She let go of his hand and turned back to the window.

Skeet’s head dropped. “Look, I’m sorry. It’s been a really stressful day and I’m not used to all this.”

“Who of us is used to all this? I mean, psycho guy tries to kill you, hits your friend, mystery sounds on a tape driving you out of your mind. It’s not your everyday stress,” she said.

“Well, yea. That’s true too, But that’s not what I was talking about.”

She turned and gave him a puzzled look.

“Yea, you see, I meant the whole caring about someone and having someone care about me kinda thing. I don’t really have ‘relationships’ or anything. I mean, there have been women, but we usually hook up for a few dates and that’s about it. I am gone too much. I’m just not real sure how to do this.” he said. He hadn’t felt this vulnerable since his youth, and it showed.

She took his hand again. “You were doing just fine until the crack about the story part, but on that one lost you a couple of points,” she said with a soothing smile. “My track record isn’t great either. I have always been very calculating in relationships, but after the last one, I decided to go with the flow a little more. So far, I think it was the right decision, at least I hope so.” She paused and looked at her hand in his. “I’m gonna be straight with you here. I know we’ve only known each other a short time, but I’m falling for you. Hard. I hope that doesn’t scare you away or anything like that, but I want to be honest with you and I want you to be honest with me.” She was afraid to look up so she kept her eyes on their hands. He made no move to let go so she took that as a good sign. With his other hand, he reached under her chin and gently lifted her head so she was looking at him. He slowly leaned in and kissed her, a very soft gentle kiss. When their lips parted, he looked into her eyes.

“I’m falling for you too. It’s really hard for me to admit, but I am.”

“Geez, get a damn room!” Brian’s voice boomed from the seat behind them as he kicked the back of Skeet’s seat. “I mean, my God. You guys are so mushy, it sounds like you could shoot right through a screen door.”

“Oh Brian!” Chapin began. “I didn’t think you were even paying attention since I had my clothes on!” Skeet fell forward giggling and had to hold his stomach.

Brian fell silent.

Chapter 21

The flight finally landed in Dublin and it took them several hours to get their luggage, get through customs and get a taxi to their hotel. It was early in the morning when they finally got checked in and settled and they were all exhausted. They left wakeup calls for 9 and headed for bed. Much to their later surprise, Chapin and Skeet didn't make love, or get undressed or even turn down the bed. They just collapsed on top of the covers and fell asleep.

Chapin gasped and sat straight up when the phone rang. It took her a few seconds to realize where she was and what that disturbing buzz was to her left. She picked up the receiver.

"Hello?" she said groggily.

"This is you 9 a.m. wake up call," said a voice on the other end that was much to cheery considering the amount of sleep she had gotten.

"Ok, thanks," she said and hung up the phone. She rubbed her eyes and shook her head slightly to try and rid herself of the cobwebs that had taken over her ability to think straight. She stretched her eyes open wide, thinking that if she didn't, they would just close again and she would fall right back to sleep. She looked over and saw Skeet sleeping. He had barely stirred when the phone rang and she thought he could probably use another couple of hours. She decided to let him sleep just a little longer while she took a shower.

She hung her feet over the bed and drug herself up. She had travelled overseas occasionally but was not used to dealing with this amount of jet lag. She quietly placed her suitcase on the table and took out clothes to wear for the day. She had stripped down to just her panties and headed in to start the shower when the phone rang again and she almost jumped over the toilet. She moved as fast as she could back to the room, hoping to catch it before it woke Skeet.

"Hello?" she whispered.

"Morning!" As usual, Brian's voice boomed on the other end. She pulled the phone away from her ear slightly to lessen the effect. She looked down at her bare breasts and the thin strip of cloth that barely covered her girly bits and giggled slightly.

"Brian, why is it we always seem to start our conversations when I am wearing almost nothing?"

The phone was silent for a moment. "I uh...I don't know? Anyway," he continued. "Did you guys get the wake up call? Is Skeet up?" Brian asked, attempting to avoid the whole subject of Chapin naked.

"Yea, we got it, but Skeet is still out. I was gonna let him sleep while I grabbed a shower, then wake him up."

“Ok, how about we meet in the lobby in an hour. Then we can grab some breakfast and start the search.”

“Sounds good. See you in an hour.” She hung up the phone as quietly as possible, although she didn’t know why she bothered trying to be quiet. Nothing else had awakened him yet. She paused and watched him for a moment, telling herself how cute he was, but in reality, she was checking to see that he was still breathing. When she was satisfied that his lungs were working properly, she removed her panties, although she paused at the knee and looked at the phone, expecting Brian would call just as she was completely naked.

She hopped in the shower. It was quite cold so she didn’t stay in long at all. When she emerged, she was shivering slightly. She dried off, wrapped the towel around her and went and sat on the bed next to Skeet.

“Come on, baby. It’s time to get up,” she said softly. He didn’t budge. “Baby, come on,” she said, just a little louder. He still didn’t move. She leaned in close so she could speak directly into his ear. “Sweetie?” she said.

Skeet’s eyes opened wide and he sat straight up. He felt a sudden pain on the side of his head. He turned and saw Chapin holding her lip. She moved her hand and he saw a little bit of blood trickle from it.

“Are you ok?” he asked.

She nodded. “Ith my fault. I shouldnth av tridth to whithper inth your eart,” she said.

Suddenly it sunk in where the pain in his head came from. He rubbed the spot where the pain was emanating from. “I’m sorry, baby. Sometimes I wake up a little jumpy,” he said.

“Gotha. I’ll keepth that inth mindt. Noteth to selth,” she said trying to hold the spot on her lip to keep it from bleeding. He moved her hand away gently and winced slightly when he saw the damage.

“Yikes! I mean I am REALLY sorry.”

“The least you could do is kiss it and make it better, damnit!” she snarked.

“With pleasure.” He leaned in and kissed her slowly and gently. He gently pulled away and looked in her eyes, then bounded out of bed. “Gonna get a shower. Gotta get started.” He reminded her of Tigger, from Winnie the Pooh. She wondered what part in the menagerie from the hundred acre wood she would have played. She tried to think of someone who was tired and wanted to go back to bed. “Why don’t you jump on that computer of yours and see if you can find us a place to start.”

“Ok, ok...stop rushing me!” she said.

She heard the shower start and thought for a minute about just getting undressed and hopping in with him to enjoy the morning, but opted against it. They were here with a purpose and there would be plenty of time for fooling around. She really should try to find them a place to start.

She pulled her laptop from its bag and plugged it in. Luckily she had remembered the European power adapter, or to be more precise, Skeet had remembered it for her. He had traveled Europe enough to know that your standard US adapter wasn't going to cut it without some help. She did, however, struggle with getting a connection. It took her a good 15 minutes and a call to the front desk to get it all working.

Once she was rolling on the information superhighway, she decided to make a quick stop and check her email. She glanced at the in box. There was the usual spam, sprinkled with an email or two from Joe, her boss and another few from her mother. She smiled at the screen. It was nice to get email when she was so far away from home. Her smile soon turned to a frown, however. It began to dawn on her that it was Monday morning, she was in Dublin, fucking Ireland and no one except Shawn and Jaque knew where she was. She wasn't sure how many time zones Dublin was from Chicago, but she was sure she was now late for work and her mother was probably trying to call the police about Skeet kidnapping her again. She began to think of international authorities breaking down their door and arresting Skeet, yet again.

She grabbed her cell phone and tried to dial, but soon discovered she didn't have international coverage. Now what? She grabbed the hotel phone but an overseas call was going to be a royal pain. Maybe she could go to an AT&T store and just get the international feature added, but did they have AT&T stores in DUBLIN FUCKING IRELAND. She really hated to bother Skeet with any of this. She felt that she should be able to take care of her own life but, she didn't know what to do in DUBLIN FUCKING IRELAND.

She went to the bathroom door and heard the shower still running. She knocked lightly and slowly opened the door. "Skeet?"

"Hiya gorgeous! Come to join me?" he asked with a hint of hopefulness.

"As tempting as that sounds, I have a problem."

"Problem? What problem?"

"Well, my cell phone doesn't work over here and I just realized that neither my work nor my parents know where I am. My mom could call the cops and cause an international incident and I could be in some serious shit at work. I tried the hotel phone, but that was like pulling..." He cut her off.

"Just use my cell. It's got all that international hoo ha on it. Problem solved!"

"Perfect! Thanks" She began to close the door.

"Are you SURE you don't want to join me?" he asked.

“More than you know, but I gotta get this taken care of and then we have to get to work. But later? Definitely later!” she said and closed the door before she changed her mind.

She grabbed his phone and began dialing her parent’s number. Her mother answered.

“Mr. Seaton! I want to know where my daughter is right this minute. I will be calling the police as soon as we are through here and if you harm one hair on...”

“MOM!! It’s me! Calm down. Jesus!” Chapin said exasperated.

“Oh thank God! Chapin where are you? We have been worried sick! Has that...man...kidnapped you again? Just cough once and I’ll call the police right away.”

“Jesus mom, calm down. I am not nor have I ever been kidnapped. I tried to explain this to you earlier.”

“Well, where are you, child? We got a call from Jack looking for you. All we could get out of him was that something horrible had happened. That Seaton man had tried to kill him and now he was accusing Jack of horrible things. We mortgaged the house, but we bailed him out for you, sweetie.”

Chapin gasped. “You did what? Oh mom, no. Damn it!”

“Dear, we weren’t going to let your fiancé rot in jail on some trumped up false charges.” Her mother couldn’t understand why Chapin was being so ungrateful. They had gone into heavy debt to help her out and she just seemed irritated.

“Ok mom, one last time. I want you to turn off the TV so you don’t get distracted. Then go get dad and put this on speaker phone. I want you to both hear it so between you, you’ll understand.”

“I just don’t understand any of this. Could you please...”

“DO IT NOW!” Chapin screamed.

Her mother did as she asked and when the speaker phone was on and her father and mother were both listening on the other end, Chapin began the tale yet again. She explained the very short relationship with Jack, the breakup over the break in, the constant harassment, meeting Skeet, Jack’s sabotage of the charity concert, Jack’s manipulation of them to have Skeet arrested and finally Jacks attempted killing of Skeet but hitting Shawn instead. She only left out a few details, namely sleeping with Skeet, Brian’s obsession with her naked body, and the whole mystery guitar track.

The phone sat silent on the other end. “Mom? Dad? Are you still there?”

“Well Chapin if you just would have told us all this in the beginning, we wouldn’t be in such a pickle right now. You know you really should let us know what’s going on in your life, dear,” her mom said.

Chapin’s mouth sat agape and she slowly raised her hand and, making it into the shape of a fake pistol, pointed it at her temple and mimicked blowing her brains out. Skeet, who had finally emerged from the bathroom, giggled at her. She shot him a look to which he turned around to the mirror to brush his hair, hoping she wouldn’t see the big grin on his face in the reflection.

“Well where are you now dear? We have to call the bail bond place and find out what to do, but we would like to have you and this Seaton fellow over for dinner tonight.”

“Oh that could be a problem, you see, I’m in Ireland right now.”

“With Mr. Seaton?” her mother asked.

Chapin became confused. How did she know? “Yes, with Skeet. How did you know that?”

“Caller ID, silly. This is the twenty first century, you know.”

Chapin glanced down at the phone. She had completely forgotten she was using Skeet’s phone, not hers.

“Now why are you in Ireland with...umm...Skeet, is it?”

“We are...umm...working on a story for work, mom,” which reminded her that she need to call Joe Bailey, post haste or she may be unemployed. He was very understanding and easy to work with and, in fact, she thought she could convince him to let her do a story on the Irish jazz scene so the trip wouldn’t be a problem at all. However, he hated not knowing what was going on and the longer she delayed talking to him, the harder it would be.

“Look mom, I need to check in at work. I’ll call you later on today, ok?” Chapin asked.

“Yes dear. We’ll look forward to it.”

Chapin felt her confidence in their understanding of the whole situation waver just a bit. “Now mom, before I go, who is my boyfriend?” Skeet turned from the mirror and looked at her as if she had just questioned the existence of Big Ben.

“Mr. Seaton is dear. That’s what you said, right?”

“And who is Jack?”

“Why that vile man who tried to shoot your Mr. Seaton. We understand now, it’s just that you don’t keep us up on what’s going on with your life,” her mother said in a matter of fact tone.

Chapin mimicked shooting herself in the head again and, through gritting teeth, agreed with her mother and said goodbye. “Now to call Joe and hope I still have a job.”

“Joe Bailey, right?” Skeet asked.

“Yea,” she responded wondering where this left field question had come from.

“Joe’s an old friend of mine, one hell of a drummer too. Just tell him you’re working on a project with me. I’m sure he’ll be ok with it. If not, tell him he’s not invited to any more poker games! We can probably turn this whole thing into one hell of a story when it’s over.”

Chapin began to boil. “Skeet, I told you I am not over here with you for a story. If that’s all you think of me then I am....” Skeet picked her up off the bed and kissed her hard on the lips. He wrapped his arms around her tightly and continued kissing her.

He looked in her eyes. “I know you aren’t here for a story, but you have to admit, one way or the other, this is gonna make a great one. And if anyone is going to do it, I want it to be you. At any rate, just tell Joe that. It’ll buy you some time. We can work all that out later.”

She swooned slightly from the kiss and sat back down on the bed with a sigh. She picked up the phone and did as she asked. Joe had been worried about her more than anything and knowing she was with Skeet gave him some relief. The story of Jack and Skeet and Shawn had hit the paper so he had been very worried. The fact that she could be with Skeet in another country while this whole thing calmed down was a good idea. He didn’t even ask for details on the story, just when he could expect it.

“Maybe for the January issue?” she said.

“Great, that gives you plenty of time. Oh yea. I heard you gave quite a performance with Herbie Hancock and Chick Corea a couple of nights ago at the Astoria. I didn’t even know you could play and I must say if you impressed those two, I am automatically impressed. I will expect a full story on the experience for next month’s issue.”

“You got it, boss!” she said with a grin. “I’ll talk to you later.”

“Wait a minute! How do I get hold of you if I need to? I may just be the editor, but I do get worried about you, kiddo,” Joe said in a somewhat fatherly tone.

She explained about her cell phone problem but gave him the hotel information. She said goodbye, hung up the phone and lay flat back on the bed with a sigh.

“You know,” Skeet began, but hesitated.

“What?”

“Well...you...never mind. It’s no big deal.” Skeet turned back to the mirror

“Hey, open and honest, remember? Whatever you have to tell me, I can take it. So shoot.”
Chapin said.

“Really, it’s nothing.”

“Look, don’t worry about hurting my feelings. If there’s a problem, I want to know so we can work on it.”

He turned and looked at her with a big grin. “I was just going to say you could have gone to the AT&T web site and turned on the international service. It’s happened to Brian and me before. Like I said, it was no big deal.”

Chapin buried her face in her palm, breathed a sigh of relief and began to laugh hysterically. She grabbed her lap top and had AT&T turn on her international service, giggling the whole time.

Chapter 22

Chapin and Skeet met up with Brian and they had breakfast in a small café just a couple of blocks from their hotel and began to plan their strategy. Chapin had thought a picture of Stan might be helpful to show people and had gotten the front desk to print out three copies of the most recent one she could find, even if it was over 15 years old. Brian suggested that, since they had no real leads, they go to the site of the Stardust fire in Artane and start there. It was better than any other idea they had come up with so they decided to go with it.

Brian had rented a car and after breakfast they headed for Artane, Brian driving, Chapin navigating and Skeet offering useless advice.

“Brian you want to make a left up here,” Chapin instructed.

“I’m pretty sure it’s a right,” said Skeet.

“How do you know?” she asked.

“I’ve been to Ireland before, on tour,” Skeet announced proudly.

Chapin double checked the map, tapped Brian on the shoulder and pointed left, then turned her attention back to Skeet. “So because you have set foot in this country, you know we need to make a right here,” she asked, in quite a condescending tone.

“Right?” Brian asked.

“Right,” agreed Skeet.

“No left!” Chapin exclaimed. She poked Brian in the shoulder and pointed left again. He turned left.

“Well now we’re going the wrong way,” said Skeet.

“We’re going the wrong way? Should I turn around?” asked Brian.

“Yes,” said Skeet calmly.

“NO!” exclaimed Chapin. “You are going the right direction. Keep going where I tell you.” She looked at Skeet and squinted. “And you just hush! I am the one with the map and you’re confusing him.”

Skeet threw up his hands and began to watch the scenery go by outside the car. Chapin gave him a second glance then turned her attention back to the map. She looked out the window, peering at street signs, then, again, turned her attention back to the map.

“Make a right up here and the next round thingee and then find a place to park. We are pretty much there,” she said, obviously quite proud of herself.

“I told you it was a right,” Skeet said calmly.

She glared at him, then tried to help Brian find a parking garage. They found a suitable place, found their way to the sidewalk and just stood there looking up and down the street.

“So what now?” Brian asked.

“Where was the Stardust? We should just start from there and see if anyone knows Stan,” Skeet suggested.

Chapin pulled out the map and a little notebook she had jotted some information in. She checked the notebook, then the map, then the notebook, back and forth. She began to scan the street then looked at the map again. “I think it should be a couple of blocks that way,” She said, pointing north. “That’s the best I can figure.” She glanced wryly at Skeet. “Unless of course you have some divine, internal, Irish global positioning system that tells us something different.”

They started walking north until Chapin thought she had found the spot of the fire. They looked around to scout out the nearest pub. Skeet began to ponder exactly how big of a wild goose chase they were on, but he tried to shrug it off.

The nearest pub seemed to be one that was just across the street so they decided to try it. They walked in the front door of what appeared to be a classic Irish pub. They grabbed three stools at the bar and Brian ordered them three beers, which seemed to surprise no one except Chapin, who just couldn’t figure out why they were having a beer at ten in the morning.

“Hey, do you mind if I ask you a question?” Skeet said as the bartender poured their beers.

“Sure, that’s what I do. I serve booze and answer questions,” the curmudgeonly barkeep responded.

“I’m trying to find a friend of mine and I was wondering if you might know him. His name is Stan Balch,” Skeet continued while Chapin fished out one of the pictures she had printed out earlier.

“The name doesn’t sound familiar, but then again, I don’t really keep track of everyone. Much of the time, folks just want a drink and to be left alone.” Chapin showed him the picture, which he took and gave an honest look. “Looks like a pretty old photograph,” he said handing the picture back to Chapin.

“Yea, unfortunately, it’s the best we’ve got right now. Does he look familiar?” Chapin asked.

“Sorry folks. Can’t say I’ve ever laid eyes on the man. Wish I could help you yanks out.”

“It’s ok. We’ll just keep asking around. Thanks,” Brian said. As the barkeep walked away Brian turned and looked at Skeet and Chapin. “One pub down. Probably five hundred to go,” he said and took a drink of beer.

Chapter 23

They finished off their beers and went to the next pub they could find, ordered three more beers and got the same answers as before. They played the same scene again five times and were beginning to get tipsy. Finally, on the sixth stop they decided to have some lunch to try to counter the effects of the alcohol, not to mention the fact that breakfast had been very sparse and they had been tooling around for over 3 hours. They continued to comb pubs for the rest of the afternoon and into the evening. The trend continued for the next two days and Skeet was beginning to think it was a lost cause and that maybe they should head home, but Brian and Chapin insisted. At the end of the third day they returned to the hotel exhausted and dejected.

“I need to get some air. I’m gonna take a walk and try to clear my head,” Skeet told Chapin who was busy tapping away at the keys on her laptop computer.

“We’ve been walking around all day and you want to go for a walk? Are you ok?” Chapin asked.

“I’m just a bit burned out. I haven’t done anything except sleep and wander around asking about Stan, and with nothing to show for it. I’m glad we stopped early tonight, but I just need to get out of the hotel room and NOT wander around by the Stardust.” It had almost exploded out of him as if it had been building up the whole time.

Chapin was taken aback. She had been so tied up in the search and trying to keep up with work and her parents back in Chicago, she had apparently missed how much this was bothering him. “It’s ok, Skeet. Do you want me to go with you or do you want to be alone?”

“Oh it doesn’t have anything to do with you, Chapin. If you want to go, I’d love to have you. I just need to break this whole cycle of looking for just a couple of hours.”

She smiled at him, grabbed her shoes, coat and purse and they headed out the door. They had been walking hand in hand for about 15 minutes when Skeet stopped in his tracks and smiled. He was looking at a store front with brightly colored flags painted on the windows. The window also sported white letters in a script that Chapin didn’t understand but below the script, in English it read ‘White Lotus Meditation Center’.

“That’s what I need!” he exclaimed.

“What? You need what?” she asked.

“I need to sit!”

“You need to sit? Do you want to find a bench? Or we can go back to the hotel if you’re tired,” she said, somewhat confused by the whole line of conversation.

“No, no,” he said turning to her. “I need to meditate.” She could see the smile plastered across his face. “That’s what I need to clear my head.”

“Well, um, ok. How do you know you need to meditate?”

“I’ve meditated for years. I sit almost every day. I just haven’t done it since we’ve been here and I think that, along with all this other stuff, is why I can’t keep my head together. Come on. Let’s go in.”

“But, wait. I’ve never meditated before. Are you sure we can go in here?”

“Yes, I’m sure. I can teach you basic mediation. No problem. Come on!” He practically dragged her in the front door. He raised his index finger to his lips. “Shhh.”

An Asian gentleman appeared from around the corner wearing red and yellow robes and sporting a shaved head. Chapin was completely taken aback, but the man smiled very widely which gave her just a hint of ease.

“Welcome!” the man said. He bowed and extended his hand to Skeet, who returned the bow and shook the man’s hand. The man pulled him closer and patted him on the shoulder as if they were long lost friends. He turned to Chapin.

“Welcome!” he said and made an identical gesture. She looked at Skeet and bowed and shook the man’s hand also.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you. I would like to come and sit for a bit if that’s ok,” Skeet said to him, returning his smile.

“Sit? Yes! Welcome!” he said again.

“I’m not sure he understands you,” Chapin said softly.

Another gentleman emerged from around the same corner, also dressed in robes of red and yellow and his head shaved. He was slightly smaller and wore a pair of granny spectacles. He spoke to the taller man in a language that Chapin didn’t recognize. The man responded then the spectacled man began to speak in English.

“Rinpoche welcomes you to the center. He is honored by your presence,” he said. The taller man smiled and bowed. Skeet’s eyes lit up and he returned the bow quite deeply.

“The honor is all mine. My name is Skeet Seaton and this is Ms. Chapin Hannigan. “

“My name is Loden Jingpa. I am the interpreter for His Eminence Tharpa Lodro, Rinpoche,” he said using his hand in a sweeping motion as if the larger gentleman was a prize on The Price Is Right. “Would you care for some hot tea to warm you? The air is rather cold this evening.”

“That would be wonderful. Thank you,” Skeet said.

The smaller man said something to the larger man and they scurried off.

“His Eminance?” Chapin questioned.

“Yea. We are in luck. This man is a great Buddhist teacher. Just to sit and talk with him is such an honor. I’m all giddy!”

“Are you sure we are supposed to be here? I mean, I don’t know what I mean,” she said, becoming somewhat flustered. She tried to calm herself. “I mean, a couple of heathens like us? We’re not Buddhist. I don’t want to offend him or anything.”

“Umm, I actually AM a Buddhist. I have been a practicing Buddhist for years,” he said, matter of factly. “And anyway, they don’t care. Trust me.”

The taller man re-entered the room and took a seat on an elevated platform with a tall yellow cushion on it. He was soon followed by the smaller man who brought a tray with a tea pot and four small cups. He set them on a small table that sat in front of the larger man and then invited Chapin and Skeet to sit on cushions on the floor. While they were seating themselves, the smaller man took a seat next to the taller one, but his seat was lower. He very methodically began to make the tea as the larger man smiled. He handed the larger man his cup of tea, bowing and then handed Skeet and Chapin their cups. The smaller man took his cup and settled back on his cushion.

The larger man began to speak in the foreign language again. Chapin didn’t understand a word he was saying but she thought he was just cute as a button. His cheeks were very round and Chapin had a distinct urge to pinch them. When the man paused, the smaller man began to interpret. “Rinpoche says it’s most auspicious that you have come here tonight. He has just returned from six months in India and Tibet and this is only his second night back. He told me this morning we would have visitors, but didn’t elaborate.”

“Actually, we just kinda stumbled across this place. I was just trying to clear my head and as soon as I saw the window, I knew I needed to sit for awhile. We weren’t really expecting to have an audience, but we’re honored.”

Loden Jinpa translated and Rinpoche began to speak again. When he paused, Loden Jinpa began interpreting again. “You are always welcome to sit in this place.” Rinpoche began to speak again and Loden Jinpa followed again with the translation. “Rinpoche wants to make sure you have meditated before.”

“I’ve meditated for probably twenty years, but I don’t think Chapin ever has,” he said, glancing at Chapin. She shook her head.

Loden Jinpa translated for Rinpoche who smiled and responded. “Rinpoche says that you are welcome to sit as long as you want. The main shrine room is in there,” he said, pointing down a hallway to the left. “Rinpoche says that he would be happy to teach the young lady to meditate if she would like, or if she would prefer to sit quietly and wait on you, that’s fine too.”

All eyes turned to Chapin who had no idea what to say. “If you have ever even been curious about meditation, this is the time to learn. This is like learning about God from the Pope,” Skeet said. Chapin pondered for a few seconds and decided that going with her gut had been remarkably successful so far and there was no reason to stop now. She looked at Rinpoche and bowed. “I would be honored to learn from him, if he would teach me. But I am a complete novice. I have no idea about anything,” she said.

Loden Jinpa translated, then Rinpoche smiled widely at Chapin, bowed in return and said something else. “Rinpoche says the honor is his to be your guru.”

Chapin looked at Skeet. She wasn't quite sure about the whole 'guru' thing but Skeet just smiled at her and squeezed her hand.

“Rinpoche says you should go to the main shrine room and sit. He says you need to center yourself. He'll meet with you after he teaches Ms. Chapin.” Skeet bowed deeply, got up and headed for the main shrine room. “Rinpoche says to tell you there is nothing to be nervous about. He is just a simple monk and we are just going to talk about breathing. No big deal.”

Chapin smiled and nodded. Through Loden Jinpa, Rinpoche explained to Chapin the basic points of meditation. He told her about posture and sitting position, how to breathe and how to watch her breath and what to do with the mind's activity as it occurs. Within a few minutes, Chapin was sitting quietly with Rinpoche and Loden Jinpa, meditating. Exploring her mind calmed her, at least for the moment. Plus she was becoming comfortable with Rinpoche. After they had been sitting quietly for about 15 minutes, Rinpoche rang a little bell, indicating that the meditation was over. He smiled and bowed to Chapin who returned in kind. He began to speak again and Chapin waited for Loden Jinpa to translate.

“Rinpoche says you did very well. You should try sitting for at least 20 minutes each day and come back and see him in a couple of months.”

“I'll try,” said Chapin. While she was intrigued with this whole process, she wasn't planning on being in Ireland in a couple of months.

Rinpoche began to speak again. “Rinpoche would like to know why you came here.”

“Umm, just like Skeet said, we were out walking around and we happened upon this place,” she replied.

“Rinpoche wants to know why you've come to Ireland.”

“Well, we are here looking for a friend. His name is Stan Balch,” she said. She pulled out one of the pictures of Stan that she had printed and showed Rinpoche. He looked at the picture and said something to Loden Jinpa.

“Rinpoche says he knows this man. He lives in Harlowton, which is one town over. He can take you there tomorrow, if you'd like.”

Chapin's heart erupted. She couldn't believe what she had just heard. "Yes, please! That would be wonderful! I have to go get Skeet and tell him." She began to stand up.

Rinpoche held out his hands and spoke followed by more translation by Loden Jinpa. "Rinpoche says we should just wait and let him finish. Disturbing him now won't change anything. He'll be out when he's done. He says that you will have many years to tell him anything you want."

"What? What do you mean?" Chapin asked, but Rinpoche made it fairly clear that he was done talking. He just smiled, picked up his cup and began to drink his tea again.

Skeet emerged from the main shrine room where he had been sitting. He entered the room slowly and quietly in case Rinpoche was still teaching. Chapin saw him and her face lit up. She was filled with excitement. Skeet sat down beside her.

"Skeet," she began. "Rinpoche says he knows Stan. He says he lives in a little town not far from here and he'll take us there tomorrow."

"You're kidding, right? He knows Stan?"

"He says so. It can't hurt to go with him. The worst he can be is wrong." Suddenly she realized that he was right in the room with them. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean..."

"It's fine. Nothing to worry about," said Joden Linpa. "So please come by in the morning and we will go to Harlowton."

Chapter 24

Chapin and Skeet could barely contain their excitement the next morning. They felt like two children who had just awoke on the morning they were going to Disneyland. They dressed a little nicer than they had been on previous outings because they truly felt that this mad search was finally coming to an end.

They went to have breakfast with Brian and told him of their meeting the night before with Rinpoche and him instantly recognizing Stan from the picture and his offer to escort them this morning.

“Wow, that Eastern hooley of yours is finally paying off for something.” Brian cracked.

They sipped tea and nibbled on crescents but were too excited to have a big meal. They spent much of breakfast glancing at their watches, each wondering to themselves if it was late enough to go meet Rinpoche and Loden Jinpa without seeming too eager.

Of course, they were eager and finally, at about 9:30, Skeet couldn't stand it anymore. “Well whaddya say we get going?” he asked. Neither Chapin nor Brian needed any further prodding. Brian dropped a tip on the table and they headed out for the White Lotus Meditation Center.

When they arrived, they saw Loden Jinpa waiting for them. He greeted them politely and they introduced Brian. Soon, Rinpoche appeared dressed in similar robes to the night before. Again they greeted and introduced Brian.

“If you're ready, our car is right outside,” Skeet suggested, not wanting to waste any more time.

“Rinpoche would prefer to walk if that's all right. He has been in India and Tibet for the last several months and just returned a couple of days ago and would really like to see the neighborhood again, if you wouldn't mind,” said Loden Jinpa.

“Oh no, that's fine,” Chapin said half heartedly, glancing down at the heels she had worn in an attempt to dress up. She was now thinking the jeans and sneakers idea would have been much better, but she was game. If it found Stan, it was worth the discomfort.

“Shall we go?” asked Loden Jinpa. Everyone nodded and Rinpoche grabbed a wooden cane. Both Loden Jinpa and Rinpoche donned English Driving hats. Chapin looked at them oddly. Something about the flowing robes with the English riding hats just didn't fit. Loden Jinpa looked at her and smirked. “Well we must keep our heads warm. It's cold out there you know!” They all laughed and headed out the door and began their walk.

“How far is it?” Skeet asked.

“Just a few miles,” Loden Jinpa responded. “It should take more than a couple of hours.”

Chapin immediately began scanning the shops for a shoe store. She didn't care how it would look. If they were going to walk miles, she was gonna find some more comfortable shoes.

Chapin watched Rinpoche shuffle down the street for a few blocks and finally, she leaned into Loden Jinpa and asked “Is he going to be ok to walk that far?”

Loden Jinpa giggled at her and then began translating for Rinpoche. Chapin was terribly embarrassed as she thought the question was obviously only for Loden Jinpa's ears. Rinpoche looked at and began to laugh a guttural laugh that seemed almost out of place. He leaned into Chapin, giving her a big hug and said something in Tibetan.

“Rinpoche says it's very nice of you to be concerned, but this is just a little stretch of the legs for him,” Loden Jinpa said.

As they walked, Rinpoche began telling them, through Loden Jinpa, about his fleeing from Tibet after the Chinese had invaded many years before. He had walked for months over the Himilayas to reach India. His stories were riveting and he had such a matter of fact way of telling them that Chapin completely forgot about her feet and was glued to his side listening.

Brian on the other hand, was much more aware of walking such a great distance and he wasn't pleased. He expressed his displeasure subtly with the occasional sigh, groan or cough. He was very strong, but only in short bursts. He wasn't used to walking what he saw as a great distance.

Finally, they approached a sign that said ‘Harlowton’ which excited all three of them. Chapin began to realize how far they had walked and that her feet were not handling it all that well. She also noticed that Rinpoche, walking with his cane, was fresh as a daisy. He laughed and joked and continued telling stories.

“Well it's about time!” Brian said in his usual gruff tone. Rinpoche leaned over and grabbed Brian's left arm with his right hand and slapped him affectionately on the back and again said something in Tibetan.

“Rinpoche says you should join a gym. You need to work out more.”

Brian gave a half hearted smile then appeared to ponder for a moment. “If you're translating everything for him, how did he know what I said?” Brian asked.

“He understands a lot more than most people think he does.” Loden Jinpa's voiced lowered. “He understands what he hears very well, it's SPEAKING English that he has problems with. That's why I'm here. He also thinks it's a pretty neat prank to play.” They all laughed.

They rounded a corner onto a narrow tree lined street with houses on either side. There were children playing in some of the front yards and a couple of dogs could be heard barking in the distance. It looked like a typical middle class neighborhood.

“Rinpoche says it’s just up here,” Loden Jinpa said. Mentally, all three of them sighed with relief, but only Brian let it be obvious on the outside.

They approached the sidewalk of a medium sized brick house, that was quite skinny but multiple stories. Rinpoche led the way and reached up and punched the buzzer with his cane. After what seemed like an eternity, the door slowly opened and a small woman who appeared to be in her mid forties poked her head around. She had long, straight black hair that was tied back in a pony tail and was wearing a house coat. Her eyes met Rinpoche’s and she straightened slightly. She glanced behind Rinpoche and saw what may have appeared to be an invading army. A puzzled look crossed her face. “Rinpoche. It’s good to see you. I’ve missed you while you were away. Please, come in,” she said, although she eyed the newcomers warily.

They entered the house and she politely offered tea which Rinpoche accepted on everyone’s behalf. Brian would have preferred a beer or a shot of whiskey after their long walk, but he was polite and let it go.

The inside of the house appeared a little disheveled. It was obvious that she wasn’t expecting company. While she prepared the tea, a concerned look crossed Rinpoche’s face and he and Loden Jinpa exchanged words back and forth in Tibetan.

As Skeet glanced around the room he noticed a picture on a piano on the far wall. It was of the woman and what appeared to be Stan on a beach. His excitement grew and he took Chapin’s hand, squeezed it and sent her attention to the picture with a slight head jog. Chapin’s eyes lit up and she squeezed his hand back. They could both barely contain their glee.

The woman came back in carrying a pot and several mugs. She served Rinpoche first, and then began serving everyone else. “I must apologize, Rinpoche,” she said in a soft, Irish voice. “I was not expecting company so I haven’t had a chance to tidy up. But I was sure you would come as soon as you returned and heard the news.” She glanced around at the other three. “I’m sorry, I don’t believe I have met any of you. I’m Holly Balch. “

Skeet looked at her and paused. Just hearing her say the name, he knew he was in the right place. “It’s such a pleasure to meet you. My name is Skeet Seaton. This is Chapin Hannigan and Brian Shaw.” I played with Stan way back in the day and Brian helped us manage the shows. I haven’t seen him in forever and we have come all this way just to find him. Is he here?” Skeet asked, the excitement building in his voice.

Holly just stared at him for a moment then she looked back to Rinpoche. Loden Jinpa reached over and patted Skeet lightly on the knee. “Oh my. Rinpoche. I thought you knew. I thought that was why you were here,” she said, the tears beginning to run down her cheek. Rinpoche stood up and gently guided Holly to his seat and hugged her. Loden Jinpa stood and gave Rinpoche his seat where he sat holding her hand.

Holly looked around the room, the majority of which she considered strangers. “Stan passed away from a heart attack four months ago,” she said and burst into tears. Rinpoche began to

comfort her and Loden Jinpa turned to Skeet, Chapin and Brian and suggested they step outside to give Rinpoche and Holly some privacy.

They all exited the front door as quietly as possible and gathered in the front yard.

“Doesn’t Rinpoche need you to translate for him?” Chapin asked Loden Jinpa.

“If he does, he will send for me. Like I said, he understands most of what he hears, plus, Holly speaks a little Tibetan. I don’t think there will be much talking anyway,” he said.

“Well, this was a big wasted trip,” Brian said in a gruff tone. Chapin punched him in the arm.

“A man has died, you creaton!” she exclaimed. “Show a little respect.” Brian hung his head low and muttered a little apology.

Chapin glanced over and saw Skeet with his back to the group leaning against a tree. He stared straight down at the ground. She walked over to him slowly and took his hand. He didn’t look up, but she could see tears dripping from his cheeks.

“I’m so sorry, baby,” she said trying to comfort him. “This has got to be tough. Just remember I’m here for you.” She leaned in to kiss him on the cheek and he almost collapsed in her arms, fighting back the tears as best he could but without much success. They held each other tight for what seemed like many minutes while Brian and Loden Jinpa stood across the sidewalk, trying to give them some privacy and exchanging idle conversation that neither one felt entirely comfortable with.

The door to the little cottage opened and Rinpoche motioned to everyone to come back inside. Chapin helped Skeet dry his eyes and cheeks and make him a little more presentable. He truly didn’t want to add any more difficulty to Holly’s current situation. He righted himself and they all made their way back into the house.

“I’m so sorry you traveled all this way for nothing,” Holly began. “I’m sure Stan would have loved to have seen old friends. He talked about Skeet regularly and I recognize him from some of the albums he kept stored in the other room. He used to tell me that you two were quite the team,” she said.

“He really got me started in the music business. I’m not sure where I would be if it weren’t for Stan. I’m just sorry I didn’t get to tell him in person.”

“Tell me, what made you come all this way to see him?” Holly asked.

They all looked at each other. “Umm…” Skeet began. He wasn’t sure how to begin the story in such a delicate situation. “It seems kinda silly, now. But, I thought he had… I mean…” Chapin patted him on his thigh for reassurance. Rinpoche smiled at him and nodded, as if telling him it was ok to tell the story. “This is kinda weird, so let me just start from the beginning.”

Skeet recounted the tale of the album and the mysterious track, how they couldn't think of anyone else who played that way except Stan and how they were trying to figure out if Stan was maybe trying to get back in touch with them.

"You see, it all seems kind of silly now. I mean, Stan had already passed before any of this happened. So now we are back at square one, although I'm beginning to think it doesn't matter a hill of beans anymore," Skeet said, his voice becoming more and more dejected.

Rinpoche leaned toward Loden Jinpa and began speaking in Tibetan again. Loden Jinpa said something back and Rinpoche got a calming smile on his face. He looked at Loden Jinpa and motioned his hand toward the others in the room as if he was saying, "Go ahead. Tell them."

"Rinpoche says this is all beginning to make sense now. When he was in Tibet about three weeks ago, he had a vision that Stan was taming a beautiful songbird. He said that in his vision, every time Stan would put the bird back in its cage and walk away, it became very agitated. When Stan would go back to the cage and work with taming the songbird again, he would calm."

They all stared at him blankly. "Ummm...ok...so?" Brian finally offered, to which he was met by glares from everyone in the room with the exception of Rinpoche, who just smiled at him.

Loden Jinpa glanced back at Rinpoche as if he were waiting for him to make things more clear for everyone, but Rinpoche just sat there smiling. He motioned his hand again indicating that Loden Jinpa should continue.

"According to Buddhist thought, when someone dies, their consciousness passes through a set of states called the Bardo. This is the 'in between time' between this life and the next, so to say."

"Oh! The whole reincarnation thing!" Chapin exclaimed.

"Yes, rebirth." Loden Jinpa continued. "In this process, the consciousness of the deceased would move slowly from this life to the next. Had he been here, Rinpoche could have helped it along, but in rare cases, like this one, there is a problem."

"Problem?" Holly asked.

"Yes, you see, sometimes the consciousness is very attached to the life he just left and doesn't want to let go. His attachment is great enough that he doesn't completely understand that he's died and is somewhat stuck in limbo. That seems to be what is happening with Stan."

Rinpoche poked Loden Jinpa and spoke. Loden Jinpa turned back to the group. "Rinpoche says that IS what is happening with Stan."

They all sat in astonishment. Finally Skeet broke the silence. "I'm confused. I've read a little about the concept of rebirth, but what does this have to do with the dream or the music on my album. I don't quite get it."

Rinpoche giggled slightly and began to speak again and Loden Jinpa began to interpret as he spoke instead of waiting until he was finished. “You see, part of what Stan’s consciousness is attached to in this life is issues with Skeet. He is basically interacting with Skeet the only way he can figure out from where he is, which is with this music. I have never heard of it happening quite like this but I have heard of similar situations, in theory.”

“So that’s what the songbird dream means?” Brian asked.

“Yes,” Rinpoche said, through Loden Jinpa. “The musical connection is basically his attachment to this life. If he lets it go, it forces his consciousness to confront the fact that he must move on to the next life, so he clings to it more strongly so he doesn’t have to let go. Had I been here and known, I would have helped him at the moment of his death, but since I wasn’t...”

“So, Stan is still around? He’s like a ghost or something?” Brian asked.

Rinpoche laughed uproariously and spoke.

“Something like that, from a Western point of view anyway.” He continued laughing.

“So what does this mean? I mean, can Stan keep ‘playing’ with Skeet?” Brian asked.

Rinpoche’s laughter subsided. “Unfortunately, no. We have to help him move on. He must move on to his next life,” he said through Loden Jinpa.

“No, wait,” Holly spoke up. “I don’t want him to go. If he can stay around, even without a physical body, then I want him to stay.”

“Yea,” Skeet agreed. I mean, if he and I can still make music together, even if it’s this kinda weird way, then I wanna keep doing it. I’ve missed so many years not playing with him, I don’t wanna give this up.”

“I understand your attachment to him, but he has to be allowed to continue on his path. Attaching ourselves in this way will not be beneficial for us or him.” Rinpoche said.

“No! I said I don’t want him to go!” Holly exclaimed. There was a sudden fire in her eyes that hadn’t been there before. “I’ve been feeling his presence around here ever since he passed away. I thought it was just me, but now that I know it’s not. I’m not having him run off and that’s final!”

Rinpoche recoiled slightly and sat silent. All of them sat silent.

“Look, Holly. We don’t know each other, but let me ask you something, please,” Brian said. Four sets of eyes widened and looked at him, wondering if he was just about to make a bad situation even worse.

“She took a deep breath and raised her head so she could look down on him slightly. “I’m listening,” she said.

“You obviously love Stan very much.”

“More than anything,” she replied.

“And you would do anything to hold on to him?”

“Yea.”

“You’d lie to him?”

“Of course not! We were always honest with each other!”

“Well, according to this guy,” he said pointing at Rinpoche. “And we all seem to believe him, Stan doesn’t understand that he needs to move on. So we’re just lying to him if we hold on to him.”

Skeet’s mind raced. Either Brian had just made a very good point or he had just alienated Stan’s widow completely. He was really hoping for the former, but thought the latter was probably closer to reality.

Holly sat silent for a moment. “I don’t know. I just don’t want to lose him again.”

“I understand. I really do. I’ve been there. But sometimes we have to love someone enough to let them move on to something that’s much better for them than where we want to keep them.”

“Look, just let me think. This is an awful lot of stuff to take in at once,” Holly replied.

Rinpoche leaned and to Loden Jinpa and mumbled. “Rinpoche says come tomorrow evening to the center. Everyone should come,” Loden Jinpa said.

“But, I don’t know yet just let me think,” Holly reiterated.

“Rinpoche says you should come, all of you. He has much preparation to do. We need to call a cab. It’s too late to walk back now.”

Chapter 25

Chapin, Skeet and Brian had spent their first relaxed day since they had come to Ireland. They had no pub owners to cross examine, no phone books to peruse and no hikes to take looking for Stan. They had all slept in, had wonderful meals, gone shopping and, in the case of Chapin and Skeet, engaged in some particularly naughty activities for a good part of the afternoon.

Chapin walked in the door of the White Lotus Center at eight p.m. with Skeet and Brian. The relaxation of the day gave way to a tension of not really knowing what was going to happen. Chapin detected the distinct smell of incense as she entered. The distinct sandalwood odor relaxed her just a touch.

She had wanted to dress up for the evening since it seemed like it deserved the respect of some formal attire, but Skeet reminded her that trying to sit on a cushion on the floor in a little black dress may be more disrespectful than just wearing jeans. She decided he was right and had simply worn jeans with a black shirt. She had to go shopping for a shirt for Brian as she felt the Pink Floyd t-shirt he had planned to wear wasn't quite appropriate.

They were greeted by Loden Jinpa when they entered. He offered them a seat and made them tea.

“Rinpoche has been in retreat all day. I haven't seen him at all,” he said. “Have any of you heard from Holly?”

“No, not a word. I really hope she shows up,” Chapin said. “I mean, what do we do if she doesn't?”

“In all honesty, Rinpoche can do this without her, or any of us for that matter. It's just easier this way,” Loden Jinpa said, sipping his tea.

Chapin stared at him blankly. “What do you mean? Then why are we here?”

“Rinpoche can easily help Stan move forward. The reason you and hopefully Holly are here, is to help YOU move forward.”

The front door opened and Holly appeared. As she walked toward them, they all stood up.

“Rinpoche will be so glad you have come,” Loden Jinpa said.

“I wasn't sure you were going to make it,” Brian said. “I know this must be very difficult for you.”

Holly flashed half a smile. “I wasn’t sure I was going to come. But I thought about what you said Brian, and you’re right. I love him enough to want to help him, no matter how much it hurts.”

“Stan was a lucky man to have met you,” Skeet said, choking back a tear.

Rinpoche appeared with Loden Jinpa. No one saw him enter, he just seemed to have materialized. He instructed everyone to take a seat and began to explain some basics of what would occur.

“When we are performing the ceremony, you must attempt to maintain your composure. Stan will know what is happening and if any of you are not composed, his moving on will be more difficult for him. “

“As I have said, his inability to move on is based on a lack of focus or misunderstanding of what is happening. Now, did you each bring the pictures I asked for?” Everyone nodded.

“Good, please give them to me now,” he said. They all handed him pictures of Stan.

“This could be a bit more difficult than normal, I just want to warn you. This ceremony is usually done 45 days after the death, but it has been over 90 now, so Stan’s consciousness has probably become quite used to the place he is in at the moment. Convincing him to move on may prove to be a challenge.”

Rinpoche invited everyone into the main shrine room where he lit more incense. He took a seat and invited everyone else to do the same. Rinpoche sat on a raised yellow cushion with a small wooden table in front of him. On the table was a metal bowl filled with sand, a oddly shaped stack of neatly prepared papers that resembled really wide note cards and a small bic lighter. To his right sat a beautiful, large, metal bowl perched on a brocade pillow with a wooden mallet leaning against the inside.

“Rinpoche says it would be best if we meditate first.” Rinpoche picked up the rubber covered wooden mallet and gently struck the edge of the bowl three times. Chapin was amazed at how soothing the sound was. When the sustain from the bowl had all but subsided, Rinpoche returned the mallet, deadened the slight remaining ringing in the bowl and placed his hands gently on his thighs and just sat.

Brian was quite uncomfortable with the whole meditation thing. He might be able to buy the reincarnation thing, the stuck between this life and the next thing and the needing to let go thing. But the sitting cross legged on the floor thing was almost more than he could stand. His body wasn’t built for it and his mind wasn’t prepared for it, but he did his best to at least sit quietly.

Rinpoche sat immobile for almost 20 minutes, then slowly his hand rose, grasped the mallet again and struck the bowl. He let it ring until it had almost stopped naturally, then, again, replaced the mallet. Loden Jinpa began to translate as he talked.

“I would like each of you to tell the story of how you met Stan, please.” He looked at Chapin.

Chapin’s face became flush. “I... uh.... Never met Stan. I’m sorry.” She hung her head.

“That’s fine.” Rinpoche said in a consoling manner through Loden Jinpa. “There is nothing to be upset about.”

She took his cue, righted herself and put her game face back on.

Rinpoche motioned to Skeet. He cleared his throat and swallowed hard. It was going to be difficult to tell his story without losing it, but he was going to give it a shot.

“I met Stan when I was living in an orphanage in Mississippi. I snuck into a club to see him play one evening and was just blown away. I mean, he was incredible. Luckily I got to sit in with him that night and I was really able to discover what musical chemistry was. We had it in spades and it was something I had never experienced before.” Skeet paused and took a deep breath before continuing. “He asked me to go on the road with him that night and we were together for years.”

“Thank you,” Rinpoche said, then motioned to Brian.

“Well let’s see. When I was a kid, I was friends with Skeet. We grew up in the same area but I was a couple of years older than him and I kinda took care of him, nothing major, I just kinda watched out for him. When he got the gig with Stan, he was nervous and wanted me there with him. I was pretty good with my hands, you know, woodworking and electrical and stuff, so I kinda signed on to keep his basses in good shape, but it was more to keep him outta trouble. That’s where I met Stan. It was getting on the tour bus the first night and Skeet was dragging me along. He asked Skeet who in the hell I was and Skeet told him I was his bass tech. I remember Stan smiled and looked at me and said ‘Cool’ and then invited us to join the rolling poker game that was going on in the back. That’s where we started having poker games every week and we still do to this day.”

“Very good. Thank you,” Rinpoche said and motioned to Holly. She dabbed her eyes with a tissue she was holding and took a deep breath before she began.

“I met him on Kilakee in November, I think it was. I remember it was cold out. I was an avid photographer and my friend Sara and I went to Kilakee to take pictures of the wild life. We were about halfway through our hike when I spotted this man in the distance playing a little acoustic guitar. Just sitting in the middle of nowhere, playing and singing. I wanted to take his picture playing the guitar with the stark background so we walked over and he obliged us. We began talking and before any of us realized, it began to get dark, so we quickly packed up and headed back. About halfway through our hike back, he reached out and gently took my hand. I fell for him right there.”

Chapin wiped away a tear. She had tried to hold her decorum, but hearing Holly’s romantic story reminded her of her own story with Skeet. She couldn’t imagine what she would

do if he passed away. She looked at him and thought how grateful she was to be with him and hoping she wouldn't have to go through what Holly was any time soon.

Suddenly, two metal bowls that had been sitting on the shrine in the front of the room tumbled to the floor with a loud clang. Holly, Chapin, Brian and Skeet jumped. Rinpoche calmed them. Loden Jinpa translated. "It's all right. He's expressing his desire to stay. He still doesn't quite realize he has passed on." Rinpoche began to speak calmly in Tibetan and Loden Jinpa offered no more translation. Two more bowls fell to the floor. Rinpoche slowly closed his eyes and began to chant in a very low, guttural tone. Loden Jinpa sat quietly. A metal bowl that sat across the room that seemed to be a smaller version of the one that Rinpoche had hit with the mallet, began to hum and an incense holder fell from its perch at the front of the room. A bell that had been sitting with the water bowls began to ring spontaneously. Rinpoche continued to chant.

Loden Jinpa picked up the pictures and placed them next to Rinpoche. Rinpoche opened his eyes but continued to chant. He picked up the first picture and the little bic lighter and ceremoniously set the picture on fire. He started the flame at the lower corner and only when the flame was almost nipping at his fingers did he set the burning paper into the bowl of sand in front of him. As the flames rose, the activity in the room seemed to slowly subside. He repeated the same procedure with the remaining five photographs and with each, the room became more and more calm.

Chapin noticed that a very fine mist seemed to appear in the room. She wondered if this was somehow representative of crying, but she kept silent. A wave of peace and calm passed over all of them and Rinpoche picked up the mallet and struck the bowl lightly three more times. He allowed the ringing to almost subside completely before replacing the mallet and deadening what little sound remained. He sat silently for about a minute afterwards.

"We should have some tea now," Rinpoche said suddenly, without any interpretation from Loden Jinpa. He stood up and began to walk away.

"That's it? We're done?" Brian asked.

"Yes, we are done. It's time for tea," Rinpoche said, again without interpretation.

"Umm...ok...tea time then, I guess."

They all stood and began to leave with the exception of Chapin, whose gaze seemed to be affixed to something in the front of the room.

"Come on, Chapin," Skeet said. "It's tea time." She didn't respond. "Chapin?" he said again. She slowly raised her hand and pointed to the front of the room where she had been staring. Skeet followed where she was pointing and drew a slight gasp.

"Rinpoche?" he called. Rinpoche and Loden Jinpa turned around and stood beside them. Like Chapin, Skeet pointed toward the front of the room. Loden Jinpa caught his breath.

“Very auspicious! Very auspicious indeed! It is as I thought! This is wonderful,” Rinpoche exclaimed and turned again to leave.

They all continued to stand in silence, finally being broken by Brian. “Am I the only one who sees a double rainbow **INSIDE THE FREAKING ROOM?** How do you get a double rainbow **INSIDE THE FREAKING ROOM?**”

Chapter 26

Chapin sat in their hotel room, typing an email to her mother. To be honest, the email was already typed, but she wanted to attach some pictures of Ireland that she had taken. Unfortunately, she was having no luck. She poured over directory after directory but wasn't having any luck. Suddenly she came across a file with an odd name. It said "Stan's Lullaby" with a file extension she didn't recognize.

"Skeet? Can you come take a look at this sweetie?" she called. Skeet got up off the bed where he had been perusing a local newspaper and glanced over her shoulder.

"Hmmm...where did that come from?" he asked.

"I don't know. I don't even know what that file extension means."

Skeet looked again. It's a multitrack music file. A primitive version. Your computer should be able to play it. Just double click."

She did as he asked and the track began to play. It was a wonderfully, soft soothing song, but it seemed a little off.

Skeet stood up. "There's no bass in it," he said. It's completely done but has no bass.

"You don't think that Stan somehow did this right before he left do you?" Chapin asked.

"I bet he did." Skeet said as if the idea was forming in his mind as he spoke. "Stan's Lullaby, huh? It's like he's going to sleep and this is the last thing he left for us before he did." Skeet stared off into space and got a little misty eyed. "I just can't believe he's gone. I can't believe that I'm never going to get to play with him again."

Skeet opened the door to the balcony of their hotel room and stepped outside. He leaned up against the railing and began to watch the sunset. Chapin joined him, taking his hand.

"You know, I was at my best when I was with Stan," he began. "Everything since then hasn't been able to approach what I did with him. I really wanted to be able to play more with him. I wanted to go farther. Now I'm kinda reduced to working with his memory."

"You can't live in the past, Skeet. The past is gone. There's tons of great stuff for you in the future, for us, I know it," Chapin said.

"Yea, I hope you're right, but right now I can't see the future, but the past looked pretty cool. I miss him you know. I really do."

“I know, baby. I know. But really, you have to look forward, not back. There are a lot of things coming up that we have to take care of.”

Skeet got quite a confused look on his face. “What do you mean? What’s coming up?”

“Well, I’m not quite sure how to tell you this, baby.” She paused and looked at the ground. She took his hands in hers and stood in front of him so they were face to face. “Skeet, I’m pregnant.”

Skeet stood silent, mouth slightly agape for what seemed like hours to Chapin. Suddenly he wrapped both arms around her picked her up and kissed her deeply. “I’m going to be a father?” he asked, breathlessly.

“Yes, you are,” she replied.

“And you’re going to be a mother?”

“That’s usually the way it works.”

He beamed. He looked like he was about to explode when a look of worry passed his face. He looked down at her. “Are you happy about this, I mean, having a baby, with me?”

“If you’re happy, I’m ecstatic!” she gushed.

“But if you’re going to be a mother and I’m going to be a father, there’s still one thing missing.”

She stepped back and stared at him with a surprised look on her face. “What? What’s missing?” she stuttered.

“Well I need to be a husband and you need to be a wife.” He looked deeply into her eyes.

“Chapin, will you marry me?”

“Yes!” she said without hesitation. He kissed her again then held her close.

“You don’t think, I mean, with all this talk of reincarnation and rebirth.” Chapin trailed off.

“Maybe Stan’s lullaby isn’t about him leaving. Maybe it’s about him coming back.”