

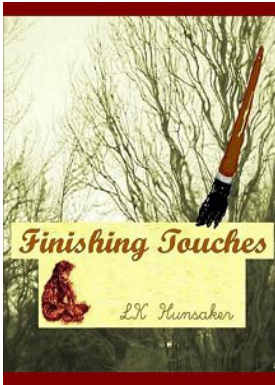
LK Hunsaker

Novel Excerpts

8/12/2009

Opening chapters of published works, plus a
preview of the next to come.

www.LKHunsaker.com



Finishing Touches LK Hunsaker

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book site for more info:

<http://www.lkhunsaker.com/FT/main.htm>

Jenna Rhodes escaped her mother's idea of a successful, elite life with an early marriage to an unknown artist, but her husband's eventual success has catapulted her into the midst of another world in which she feels she doesn't belong. Now, in her early twenties, she finds herself alone with a young baby and fighting against her overwhelming artistic desires. With memories of the past and the rekindling of an old friendship, Jenna struggles to find her own world. Rejecting her impulses becomes impossible, though, when a handsome magnetic force begins to pull at her spirit.

One

Jenna inhaled deeply, allowing crisp fall air to invade her body. Feeling a nip of winter creep further through her open window, she pulled the plush blanket higher around her baby's shoulders. Jenna loved the precious time spent rocking her child to sleep while he snuggled into her breast. At these moments, she felt the most connected to her only love. She also missed him the most vividly.

Lightly running her fingertips over Aaron's tiny head, Jenna studied the perfect little features, so like his father's. Daniel had never tried to conceal the pride he had felt whenever someone mentioned how much his son resembled him. He considered the child his greatest work of art, and his most important. Jenna's husband had been many things, but humble was never one of them. She couldn't help grinning, recalling his admission of knowing he was a very good-looking guy. And he really was, or had been. Even after he had gotten sick and lost too much

weight, his features had still been perfect and his eyes absolutely beautiful.

She snuggled her baby closer and returned her gaze to beyond the window. The view from their loft was breathtaking at this time of the year, with hundreds of maple trees along the banks of the Illinois River boasting their shades of red and yellow and green and brown. The *Spirit of Peoria*, a reproduction of the beloved old riverboats, often sailed by with passengers walking the decks or standing at the rails. Six years earlier, Jenna and Daniel had watched the *Julia Belle Swain* together whenever they caught it floating along the river. Once, covered only with a sheet pulled from their bed, they had stood before the large window and talked of taking the short cruise on the old paddle-wheel. Some day.

“Some day” had never come. Neither had so many other days they had planned. Their time together had centered around his painting, but then, he had told her to expect that. She hadn’t argued when he refused to go out because he was working or when she had to go to bed alone. She had been warned and willingly accepted his terms. The naivete of youth, Jenna mused sullenly. Now, there was no later for them. The *Julia Belle* and Daniel were both gone.

His baby stirred in her arms and Jenna coerced herself to rise slowly, moving across the loft to settle Aaron in his crib. Convinced he was still slumbering, she wandered into the kitchen to pour a cup of mint tea, a habit she had developed while carrying her first child. Daniel’s mother had suggested it might help settle her stomach and it seemed to work. Even well after the morning sickness was gone, Jenna continued the routine and joked with her husband that maybe he should try it as well, to calm his nerves. He didn’t like mint tea. He didn’t like boats either, except at a distance. Alan once said Daniel’s work was the only interest they shared. Jenna quickly pointed out her advanced pregnancy proved him wrong. Her best friend hadn’t been amused.

Not sure what to do with herself while Aaron slept, Jenna returned to the beautifully carved oak rocking chair, a gift from her mother-in-law. Joan had been nearly as excited as her son after hearing he and Jenna were expecting their first child, and wasted no time making sure they had everything they needed for the baby. Jenna hadn’t heard from Joan recently. She considered trying to call, but knew she would have to talk to two or three other people just to get through to Daniel’s mother and then most likely have to leave a message. She wasn’t up to that. A fleeting thought of calling her own mother surfaced, then dissipated. She would only try again to invite Jenna to some social gathering. And Jenna’s sister-in-law would insist on coming over and staying the day, with the kids. She wasn’t up to that, either.

Alan. He would be at work, but she could talk to Cheryl for a few minutes, until her twins interrupted, and ask her to say hello. Jenna didn't want to talk to him, anyway. She only needed to feel the connection – to know he was there.

She dialed his number without stopping to think about it. She knew it better than her own.

His voice startled her.

After another prompt, she gathered herself enough to answer, grimacing at the shakiness of her voice.

“Jenna, what’s wrong? Are you okay?”

She hesitated again. No, she wasn't, but she wouldn't tell him that. “Yeah, I'm fine.”

“You don't sound fine.”

Trying to maintain composure, she fumbled for something to say to him now that he was on the phone. “I ... I'm surprised you answered. I figured you'd be at work.”

“We just finished a big job. I gave everyone the day off.”

“Oh? How'd it go?”

“Another Nicklaus project.”

Jenna half-grinned at the term. Nicklaus had been one of her friend's first clients, never satisfied and constantly insisting on changes. When she had still been meeting Alan on Sundays for dessert and coffee, Jenna would hear about all of the complaints and revisions of the week and make jokes to put him in a better mood. It always worked.

“Jenna?” Alan's voice called her back.

“Sorry, I thought maybe you'd heard enough complaining recently and I should stay quiet.”

“Do you want me to come over?”

Yes, she very much wanted him to come over. “Oh, no, I'm fine. I was just checking in to see how you guys are doing. Is Justin over the flu?”

“Jenna, that was two weeks ago.”

She paused, holding her breath a moment and wishing she hadn't called.

“I'm coming over.”

“No. Alan, it's your day off. You should spend it with your family.”

“My family is fine; you're not. I'll be right there.” He didn't give her time to respond before she heard the click from his end.

Oh, hell. She wasn't ready for company. She hadn't gone out in nearly a week or showered in two days, and there were dishes in the sink and baby toys and blankets on the floor. Not having time to shower and clean both, Jenna decided her own cleanliness would be more noticeable.

So she checked on her sleeping son and jumped into the warm water.

The doorbell found her almost presentable while slipping into one of Daniel's shirts, and Jenna rolled the sleeves while heading to the door. A slow, deep breath prepared her for her friend's visit.

Alan glanced at her wet locks. "Hey, Jenna. You didn't have to shower for me." He gave her a small kiss on the cheek in his usual casual style and waited to be asked in further.

"You didn't have to come over." She studied her friend admiringly. All the work he did outside was so good for him. He always had a beautiful tan and his muscles were well-toned. Daniel had been very pale-skinned and burned easily.

"It sounded like you need company. Has your sister-in-law been over recently?"

"No, her kids have been sick, too, and she didn't want to give it to us. I guess that's what I was thinking when I asked about Justin." She motioned for him to step in and closed the door softly, having learned to keep everything as quiet as possible while Aaron was asleep. He even slept as lightly as his father had.

Alan scanned the area as he strode easily to the small couch. Everything in the loft was small, except the space still reserved for Daniel's easels and canvases and large paint-stained work table.

Jenna only half-followed her friend, wishing she had cleaned up earlier. "Do you want a drink? I think all I have is juice, but I can make some iced tea."

"No, Jen, I'm fine. Come sit down."

Sitting alone with him was the last thing she wanted. She could hide her emotions well from everyone else but had never been able to keep anything from Alan. They had been friends since his family moved in across the street when Jenna was eleven, and she had spent more of her teenage years with him and his family than with her own parents.

As a distraction, she went to the sink and began running water into the metal basin. Alan moved to her side and took the dishes from her hands to dry, talking easily of his kids and his job. He never brought up his wife unless Jenna asked about her. She knew they got along well. They always had. Cheryl was a wonderful person, very devoted to her family and especially to her husband. And she was a neat freak. Her house was always immaculate. How she did it with three kids, Jenna couldn't begin to imagine. But Cheryl completely adored Alan and he never did anything to upset her.

A quiet fussing from the opposite end of the room drew her out of her thoughts and she went to collect her baby, gently pulling him from the

crib which had claimed part of Daniel's studio space. Alan set to work putting the dishes away as she sat down to nurse Aaron. She knew it made her friend uncomfortable when she nursed in front of him, although she kept herself covered and Cheryl had nursed all three of their babies. But there was no such thing as privacy in the loft, unless she wanted to disappear behind the curtain that hid their bed ... her bed ... from the living area. And she didn't want to sit back there right now. She often slept curled up on the couch instead of going to the bed alone.

Her mother had tried to convince her to move since Jenna had no further reason to live in an art studio, but she couldn't bring herself to sell it and couldn't move out and leave it empty. Maybe she would get around to redecorating some day, make it presentable for company. A useless idea, Jenna laughed to herself, since she was out of the habit of entertaining and was content letting it match her memory of the first time she had stepped inside. She still thought of that moment as the rebirth into her new life – the life of her own choosing.

Her parents had worked everything out for her from the beginning. Their only child would graduate with honors from the school close to where they had carefully chosen to live, then attend the University of Illinois, as they both had. After getting to know Alan and his family well, her mother had decided they would be the perfect match. Alan was two years older than Jenna, a very good student, responsible, hard working and well-mannered. His parents weren't in the same social class as Jenna's parents, but Alan could get there with his career plans. He would also graduate from U of I and work on building a foundation for a family the following two years that Jenna would need to finish school. Then they could marry and Jenna could start on her own career.

There had only been two major problems with the plan. Alan had been intent on getting a job after earning his associates degree in horticulture from Illinois Central College, possibly continuing school after building his bank account. And Jenna had never had any interest in marrying Alan. He was her friend, nothing more.

Illinois Central. The junior college in East Peoria hadn't entered her mind in a long while. She wondered if any of its students could possibly have memories of the school that would come even close to equaling her own. Alan tried to talk her into going there after high school. He'd said it was the perfect place to start deciding what she wanted to do. She could take some basic classes as well as some that sounded interesting and would eventually find something to hold her easily-distracted attention. He even took her with him during spring break of her senior year to check it out. That was where she met Daniel.

She did like art. So Alan had asked his art professor to let her sit in on

his basic drawing class. Jenna could still see it clearly.

The students intently studied an elegant round vase that sat atop an old, weathered crate. The vase held a large handful of wildflowers. Jenna loved the mixture of old and new, of smooth and rough, of splintering grayness and soft pastels. And the flowers were fresh. Their scent mingled with the dampness of the basement classroom.

She felt out of place being the only person, other than the professor, not trying to capture the objects with charcoal and newsprint. The quiet was disarming, broken only by the soft scratches made by budding artists and the occasional creak of metal stools or tapping of a nervous foot against the concrete floor.

The professor, a man who looked like he had been teaching a good many years, crept silently around the circle of art tables, stopping occasionally to study a student's technique but not interfering in his work. Until he came to an intense-looking male sitting directly across from Jenna. She had noticed the guy immediately upon entering, first because he was the only one with the initiative to begin working before class officially started, and then, because he seemed totally unaware of anyone else in the room. He had the darkest hair she had ever seen on someone so pale, and had strong, but small, features. She thought he had occasionally looked over at her while drawing the still life but scorned herself for even thinking that he would. She just happened to be behind the object he was studying.

The professor stood over his shoulder. "Mr. Rhodes, you seem to have overshot the still life I so carefully set up this morning."

The young artist didn't bother to stop sketching. "I wasn't interested in drawing flowers, so I found something I was interested in."

Jenna waited for the reaction as a couple of others snickered. Surprisingly, the older man threw a crooked grin behind the artist's head and began moving on to the next student. "This must be why Einstein received poor marks in school."

There was no response. The interruption hadn't stopped his work. Jenna had a hard time keeping her eyes from him. He still seemed to be watching her.

With twenty minutes left of the hour, it was time for critiques. The students, all in turn, set their drawings up on an easel and listened to comments from the others. The defiant, but good-natured, young man found something constructive to say about each, and was the last to place his work up for review.

Jenna gasped. She sat for a moment staring at her own face, feeling the increasing warmth of her cheeks. He had taken the liberty of drawing her shoulders uncovered, luckily not getting any further than her

shoulders, but the likeness was incredible. He received plenty of compliments from the class and the professor finally asked for her opinion.

“What?” She couldn’t look at the artist who had made her blush.

The teacher smirked. “I think he should hear what you think of his work.”

She felt Alan watching her. He would not be happy about this. But the class was waiting. Jenna focused on the drawing. “It’s ... it’s better than real life.” Catching a glimpse of the artist’s grin, she looked away quickly. He packed his things and left the room.

“Jenna? Jenna, what are you thinking so hard about?”

Alan’s voice drew her from her memories, and she took a deep, quick breath, answering evasively. “College.”

“Oh? Are you thinking about going?” He sat back against the couch, keeping his eyes away from the feeding baby.

“Going? Me?”

“Why not?”

“To do what?”

“Didn’t you just say you were thinking about college?”

“Yeah, but...” She stopped short, not about to admit where her thoughts had been.

He slowly stood and moved to the chair on the opposite side of the small end table. “Jen, I know the baby is still young enough that you want to stay home with him, but you should at least start thinking about what you’re going to do.”

“The baby has a name. His name is Aaron, after his father, Daniel Aaron. I know you never liked him, but I loved him and I still love him and I can’t even think about the future. All I can handle now is day to day and sometimes I’m *not* sure I can handle *that*.” She lowered her voice as her baby objected and adjusted herself to raise him to her shoulder.

Rubbing his back softly helped her relax and she apologized to her friend. “Alan, you know I had no idea what I wanted before Daniel, and I sure as hell don’t know what to do now.”

“I know.” He had lowered his eyes while she was refastening her nursing bra but now faced her directly. “Jenna, I never disliked Daniel.”

“Then why did you stop coming over?”

“Because he didn’t want me here.”

“I wanted you here.”

“You could have come over any time. Cheryl loves visiting with you. You didn’t have to isolate yourself because Daniel wanted to be isolated.”

“He didn’t want to be isolated, he just...”

“Wanted to be left alone to work. I know, but he did isolate you. You always had a bunch of friends in school you never see anymore. Have you even talked with Karla recently?”

She shook her head. He was right. She missed running around with her cousin and chatting about anything and everything.

“I didn’t dislike him; I just didn’t like what he was doing to you.”

“It was my choice and I loved being with him.”

“But you lost yourself...”

“No. Alan, I found myself with Daniel. I was lost before him and I’m even more lost without him now.”

He began to argue but decided against it. “Jen, come spend the day with us.”

With the happy couple and their three kids? “No, thank you. I don’t really feel like going out.”

“Maybe not, but you need to. There’s a new art exhibition at Lakeview. Why don’t we go see it?”

Art? “No.”

“Jenna.”

“No. Alan, I can’t...”

“Okay, what about the zoo? The kids have been bugging us to take them again...”

“Then you should do that. We’re fine right here.”

Her tone made it clear he wouldn’t be able to change her mind and he gave in with a nod. “Well, I’m going to go. Cheryl didn’t mind me coming over, but I think she was looking forward to having the day together, so...”

“So, you should go spend time with your family, like I told you over the phone.”

She hadn’t meant it as harshly as the look in his eyes said it had sounded. Well, she couldn’t help that. She had asked him not to come.

Aaron started fussing for the rest of his meal and Alan insisted she not get up to see him out. Jenna refused to watch him leave, but the click of the door nearly changed her mind. The rest of the day would be just her and her baby, again.

Cradling Aaron in the other arm, she appreciated the grateful expression he threw her for allowing him to finish nursing.

At least she had him. And he was strong and healthy. How could Alan have expected that she would visit him and his pregnant wife after she lost Daniel’s first child? Her friend wouldn’t have had to stop coming over because Daniel didn’t want to visit. She had wanted to see Alan, not his wife who reminded her of what she had lost. Her husband hadn’t

isolated her. Losing his baby had isolated her. He wanted children. He had wanted children maybe even more than he wanted her. They were the link to the future he somehow knew he wouldn't have of his own. And she couldn't have handled walking around watching all of the families laughing and talking and making her feel like such a failure for not being able to carry her baby full-term.

But Daniel had loved her, even if she had failed him.

The time he had given her always felt too limited, but it had been complete ... and intense. Nothing distracted him from what he chose as his focus, and he focused on her often enough to keep her from feeling neglected, except for their bad time. She wouldn't let herself think about that. There was no point. Instead, she chose to remember how he picked her out from the crowds of girls around the campus.

After the art class, Alan left her sitting in the center area of the college. The main building of Illinois Central formed a nearly complete oval around a large open area paved with the same red brick. It reminded Jenna of an old amphitheater, the way the oval dropped into different levels. She could still clearly see the picnic tables scattered around the upper level, with students propped on their seats. A few were studying, but most were chatting with others who were between classes. The narrow mid level was interrupted by short, wide columns of brick holding small trees, providing additional seats for loungers who wanted slight shade. The lowest level, only several inches from the highest, was free of obstacles and Jenna watched three males use it as a Frisbee court. *She kept her eyes averted from the guy who had removed his shirt and shoes and was lying on a towel in his shorts with his head propped on his backpack. She thought it was still a little cool for tanning, but the sky was absolutely cloudless and the air was fresh following last night's spring shower.*

She had chosen to sit just below the highest step and nearly against one of the tree columns. She didn't need it for support, preferring to sit with her legs crossed in front, but she didn't want to be too much in the open. Pulling her eyes from the Frisbee game, Jenna went back to her book.

"What are you reading?"

The voice was less startling than the face she found. It was the defiant young artist. He casually planted himself next to her, lifting the book enough to see the cover.

"The Agony and the Ecstasy? That's a good one. Have you read Lust for Life? Same author."

"No, not yet. I just finished Love Is Eternal."

"Irving Stone fan?"

“I’m becoming one.” She stole glances of his face as he studied her overtly.

“So, where’s your friend?”

Friend. Was he trying to find out more than he asked? “He’s in botany.”

“Botany? On purpose?”

Jenna couldn’t help grinning at his expression, and she agreed with him. “He’s studying to be a landscape engineer. He understands all that stuff.”

He nodded, amused. “And you? What do you want to be?”

“I don’t have the slightest idea.”

His eyes pierced her skin as they ran down her arms, touched her fingers, and then returned to her face. “Have you ever considered being a model?”

Was he joking? He didn’t look like he was. So, he was either hitting on her, or crazy. “I know you can’t be serious.” Jenna knew she wasn’t model material. She wasn’t built badly but was constantly fighting five or ten pounds she didn’t want and her features were too masculine for her taste. She had always wanted her jaw line to be less square and her eyes to be less narrow. Her mother had taught her tricks with carefully applied makeup to round out her jaw and widen her eyes, and she had pulled her long hair into a loose bun, leaving a couple of wisps to curl at the sides of her face. But she still wasn’t model material.

“I’m very serious.” The intense eyes continued to study her. “I thought you were being modest earlier, but you honestly have no idea how beautiful you are.”

Jenna again felt her cheeks get warm and pulled her eyes away to watch the Frisbee players.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to embarrass you. I have a terrible habit of saying what I think. But I always tell the truth, and I don’t waste my time drawing or painting anything I don’t want to see again.”

Her son pulled away, letting her know his tummy was sufficiently filled for the time being.

Jenna studied his round cheeks and square jaw. Aaron had inherited some of her appearance, though he looked much more like Daniel. Five and a half months old already. Maybe it was time to give him cereal. Wasn’t that what the pediatrician had suggested? She would have to go out to get it since she hadn’t thought that far ahead. She supposed she could. It wasn’t like she had any other plans, but she would likely run into someone who would insist on offering condolences again. Jenna didn’t want to deal with that today. Maybe she should have accepted Alan’s offer. He was very good at running interference whenever the

subject arose, and she missed talking to him.

With Aaron propped against her left side, she reached over to pick up the receiver, started dialing, then set it down again. She hadn't been very nice after he had gone to the trouble of coming over. He would understand, though. He always had. But the zoo? Did she really want to go there?

Jenna pushed herself off the couch and walked over to the sketches still hanging along the corkboard strip which ran the length of the studio wall. Finding the one in her mind, she sat carefully in front of it, holding Daniel's son close against her heart, studying the image she could still feel. Her mother asked every time she came over, which thankfully wasn't often, when she intended to pack Daniel's things and try to sell the sketches. Jenna didn't intend to do either. The loft was their home and it would stay their home.

But maybe Aaron could use some fresh air. Aaron Matthew, after Daniel Aaron and Alan Matthew. She took a long, deep breath, then made herself get up.

She again found the voice she wasn't looking for at the other end of the telephone. "Cheryl, hi, is Alan there?"

"Hi, Jenna! He's outside; we were just leaving. Did you want to change your mind and come with?"

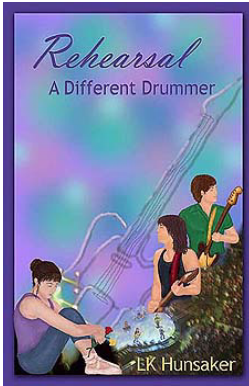
He had told her she'd refused. He surely hadn't said how rude she had been.

"Did you need to talk to him personally?"

"What? Oh, no. Just ... are you sure you wouldn't mind the intrusion?"

"Of course not." She sounded genuinely happy. "Should we come by and pick you up?"

"No, the baby seat's already in my car. I'll meet you there."



Rehearsal: A Different Drummer LK Hunsaker

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<http://www.lkhunsaker.com/DifferentDrummer/main.htm>

Susie Brooks is a nineteen-year-old dance teacher whose main stability through an uncertain childhood was her best friend, Evan Scott, a guitarist with a flair for the business world. Evan's other best friend is Duncan O'Neil, also a guitarist, but with a flair for attracting women's attention while hiding his past. When Duncan moves into Evan's world, he changes the dynamics not only within the band, but within Susie and Evan's relationship. The three friends find themselves struggling with love, loss, and secret passions during the turbulent Seventies. *A Different Drummer* is the first of a series of four.

Overture

Spring, 1972

“Hey sweetie, wanna dance?”

Duncan raised his arm to wipe sweat rolling under his chin onto his sleeve and threw her a glance, not bothering to turn the bar stool in her direction. Shagged brown hair topped her average-height frame; she was not much shorter than he was, he supposed. A modern girl, including her willingness to approach him in such a direct manner. “Thank you, bu’ I am workin’.” He looked back to check on his ordered beer, smoke choking his mouth and throat.

She moved closer. “Not at the moment, you’re not.”

Returning his eyes, he noted a tenacity in her expression and body language. A quality he liked, to a certain extent. “Well, y’ are right. At the moment, I am tryin’ t’ cool off a bit. Then I am goin’ back t’ work.” A trickle of sweat rolled down the side of his face from underneath the

damp hair falling over his forehead, and Duncan leaned forward to pull the bottom of his T-shirt up, rubbing it across his face and letting it fall again.

Accepting the mug that finally came across the bar, he took a large swallow, the coolness against his hand echoing the stream of liquid pouring down his throat.

The girl cuddled into his shoulder. “Are you ever here when you’re not working?” Fingers with painted nails touched his arm.

Ignoring a snigger from the new bartender, he again raised the mug to his lips, allowing time to consider an answer. “Now and then.” The chill of the glass distracted him from the girl’s flesh pushing against his and the muskiness of her cologne.

She broke through, sliding both hands around his fingers and the heavy mug, pulling it from him. “So maybe you’ll dance with me another night?” Sipping his beer, she kept her eyes on his. Narrow eyes. Lashes painted longer than natural matching thick black lines extending from the corners; the brushed-on green of her lids attempting to extend the brownish-green of her pupils. It didn’t work well.

She rubbed a finger around the edge of the mug, hinting.

Duncan considered the offer. She looked fake, but not snobbish. And who was he to be too particular? “Maybe.”

She grinned, pushing the drink back toward him.

“Keep it.”

He watched her move away, flaunting the beer to her table of friends, repeating the conversation, he figured, making it more than it was. He never understood the infatuation girls had with guys in local bands. Hell, this wasn’t even a good local band. His mates were okay guys, as far as it went, but barely third-rate musicians. It didn’t seem to matter. They were only background noise for pick-up lines and attempts at relaxation by intoxication in the dark out-of-the-way bar.

Dark was helpful. It disguised the niched plank floor and scratches in the old wood tables with only patches of varnish left as pointless protection. Duncan could imagine his mother cringing about him playing at the little dive, though it was better than many he’d played. For the most part, it was kept clean, though likely not clean enough for her. He was just as glad she didn’t know how he was living – day to day, city to city, jumping from one third-rate band to another while doing whatever other cash jobs he could find.

Ordering another beer, he watched the small crowd, studying the ones he recognized as regulars and the few he didn’t. Mostly, he played to the same group every weekend. It was only a paycheck. There wasn’t one, he imagined, who would even know if he played a wrong chord now and

then. They weren't listening, not more than enough to go through the motions of dancing. Their drummer was at least decent. They kept a good beat going.

A movement from the table of Thiel College students caught his attention. They were always easy to spot, dressed too well for the bar full of locals and holding their chins higher than necessary. One of them rose to retrieve his drink from the bar instead of barking an order at the girls serving. He was the only male at the table without a cigarette hanging from his mouth or fingers. Worst part of playing in bars, the damn cloud of nicotine.

The guy was heading in his direction. Duncan turned back, waiting to catch the bartender. "Is tha' beer comin' tonight?"

"Make that two. And a wine spritzer. After his, of course."

Wine spritzer. For the girl at the table sitting sideways in the chair with her legs crossed and her shoulders straight, Duncan guessed.

"How long have you been playing?"

Glancing up to make sure the college guy was talking to him, he answered ... barely. "A while." He looked away again.

"Obviously. I meant, how many years?"

"Why?" Duncan raised his hands in a questioning gesture at the new bartender. He would have to go back and play before he ever got it, at this pace.

The intruder took advantage of the stool next to him being vacated, and planted himself as if he actually belonged in the bar, raising his voice to talk over the recorded music played between sets. "You're wasting your talent here. You're a hell of a guitarist."

Duncan looked over, unable to completely dismiss the compliment, since it wasn't from a girl this time. He sincerely doubted this guy was hitting on him. "You play?"

"Not much since I started school, but when I can."

He nodded and turned away. Another beginner looking for pointers, and he had better things to do than waste time on a college student who wanted to learn just enough to pick up girls.

"So, why are you here?"

Duncan's back straightened. What made this guy think it was any of his business? Holding his thoughts, he stood. He would rather hang with the band than be harrassed by some stranger.

The college student stood up beside him and Duncan swung around. "Man, wha' do you want?"

The guy shrugged. "Just to talk. I don't get to meet many guitarists of your caliber." He chuckled. "Actually, I've never met anyone who can play like that. I have to wonder why you're wasting your time here. I

mean, with that accent, you're obviously not from Pennsylvania."

Hell, the damn accent. How long was it going to take to get rid of it? Anyway, the conversation was done. "I 'm busy."

"Your friends aren't ready to play yet."

"Look, ge' lost. I 'm no' a guitar teacher, alright?" Starting to move away, Duncan felt a hand grasp his shoulder and he spun, seizing the guy's arm and twisting it behind his back. "Do no' push me, man."

Duncan cursed himself for giving in to his instincts and began judging the group of guys who pushed in toward them – Thiel students coming to the rescue, Duncan's band mates ready to join in, and regulars jeering for a fight. He wasn't concerned about the other college kids. They wouldn't be any trouble to take out, but the guy he was so far still holding was taller, and built bigger, and didn't seem naïve enough to start something he couldn't finish.

"I'm Evan Scott. Nice to meet you, too."

Taken aback by the friendly tone and total non-resistance, Duncan released him and stepped away, studying the guy as he turned. He was maybe a bit taller than Duncan, an inch at the most, 5'10" or so, but had a larger build, probably enhanced by weights. His eyes were a shade darker than his medium brown hair and his clothes were less pretentious than those of his friends, but still decent and coordinated.

"Evan, *cream* that guy. He's no match for you."

A Thiel boy, looking for trouble. Duncan eyed him, and the other two joining in agreement, edging closer. But he kept the most attention on his antagonist, who dismissed the fact that his companions were pushing for a fight and that Duncan's band mates were moving in, calling insults back. He stood, waiting for a reaction, or an answer. Or trying to decide Duncan's weak spot.

The trouble-maker moved in. "Hell, I bet he can't fight any better than he can play. What's to worry about?"

Duncan grabbed the band's lead singer to keep him from lunging. "Le' it go."

"Let it go, *hell*. He's *insane*. He doesn't know music worth a *shit*."

"So what? Le' it go." His voice hardened. "Le' it go." The singer wouldn't go against him; they knew each other at least that well. Neither would the others.

"See? He's chicken-shit. You could take him out easy."

Evan Scott chuckled. "I wouldn't count on that. Brad, go sit down. There's nothing to fight about."

"Nothing to fight about? The guy *attacked* you."

"No, he didn't. And it was my fault, not his. Go."

The guy with the younger face and idiot expression hesitated,

throwing looks of disgust at the band. “Not before they do. You know, these locals carry weapons. They’re nothing but common thugs.”

Duncan shoved his band mates away from the college kids. This guy didn’t want to fight, either. There was no point in letting some little punk barely old enough to be away from home push something neither of them wanted.

But he kept pushing.

Evan Scott pushed back, but not physically. “Brad, go away before I personally throw you out of here. And take your henchmen with you.” The authority in his manner backed the others down. Hushed voices passed around the perimeter and Duncan’s band mates calmed but remained wary. The college kids sulked back to their table, yelling another drink order at the waitress before sitting.

Disappointed by the lack of action, the rest of the crowd slinked away. Duncan thanked his mates for the support and sent them back to the pit, waiting for further conversation with this guy while the bar owner approached, holding the two mugs of beer ordered before the confrontation, offering them on the house.

Duncan accepted the second mug, nodding at the friendly hand set on his shoulder. Evan Scott tried to insist on paying. Joe wasn’t going to have it. They had saved him a ton of trouble and expense by not causing a break-up of his bar. And Duncan always got his beer free at Sam’s.

When the owner left again, he put his eyes back on the college kid who didn’t look as much like a kid as the others. So, he could get riled if pushed hard enough, though his friendly eyes would’ve belied that fact. And he apparently had guts, since he sent his own friends away while Duncan’s companions were still standing with him.

Taking a swallow, he relented. “So what is it tha’ you want?”

“As I said, just to talk. And I prefer to know who I’m talking to.”

Duncan studied him a moment longer. He liked this guy’s style. He could give only his first name, as usual, but Evan Scott had given both of his, and he had gone to a lot of trouble to talk to him.

He extended his hand. “Duncan O’Neil.”

Fugue

10 March 1974

“Lakewood.”

Duncan opened his eyes from the half sleeping state he had allowed

himself. Looking around at people jumping from their seats trying to beat everyone else out the door, he waited. He was in no hurry. In fact, he could stay on the bus a while longer and see how far it would take him before the driver realized he had passed his stop. But, he told Ev he was coming.

He took a deep, slow breath before grabbing the things by his side and moving into the aisle. The duffel got tossed over his shoulder, but the only possession, well, one of the two possessions he cared about, went ahead of him.

The sun burned into his tired eyes as he stepped down onto the crowded sidewalk. Pulling the dark sunglasses from atop his head, he pushed them in front of his face. When his pupils adjusted, he surveyed the area. Same as any city: blank cement walls, graffiti, cigarette butts speckling the dirty curbs, bodies moving in both directions. The damn pigeons included, daring to swerve around unaware passers-by while searching for hand-outs.

A constant breath of cool air interrupted the heat, keeping his second most-treasured possession, a black leather vest, from being uncomfortable. He didn't need the extra warmth. He rarely did, but the vest had become a part of him.

A jolt against his shoulder reminded him that he was still standing in the unmarked path of the bus entrance. He looked back at the offender, his glance pushing the boy to hurry into the bus. Heading out of the congestion, he let the guitar case drop against his left leg. He always kept his right hand free.

So what now? He was in his friend's city and Ev was waiting on his call. But he needed time, and maybe coffee.

"Excuse me." He tried to stop one of the passing locals. The guy barely looked at him before swerving to move away. Duncan stared a moment, irritated by the rudeness, then searched for someone willing to give him directions.

After more of the same, he gave up and started walking, dismissing the looks he was used to getting. They were different here, though. In Chicago, they had been warning him to stay away, as though he intended to cause trouble. Here, in small city Massachusetts, they were looking down at him, or not even bothering with a glance. He supposed Ev's band mates would be the same. Not a problem; it would give him a reason to leave again.

Rain-and-dirt-streaked cement walls gave way to red brick buildings, some with bright green ivy crawling up their sides, others with wrought-iron gates protecting them from intruders. One had a large portal with two Romanesque columns supporting each end. It looked out of place

among the plainer office buildings. He wasn't sure whether it was an office or a residence. There was no sign advertising its business, but it was too large to be a private home. Anyway, Duncan couldn't imagine why anyone would want to live in something so overdone.

Approaching a corner, he stayed on the outer edge of the sidewalk, watching for what may lie beyond his present vision, and was hit with the aroma of baking bread as he turned. His stomach knotted. He hadn't eaten in ... roughly twenty-four hours. Maybe more. The events of the past few days were a blur by now, with little food and not much more sleep. He still had a few bills in his pocket, and Ev would likely insist he stay with him, but he wasn't going to count on that. Coffee would hold him a while longer.

A shapeless girl in a tight orange sweater and red mini-skirt standing in the doorway under the café sign watched him walk closer. The hairy man she was hanging on pulled a cigarette from his lips. Threading a line of smoke from the side of his mouth, he leered through narrow slits. Duncan would have to push through them to get inside if they didn't move voluntarily. He hoped they would. He didn't have the energy or the will for a confrontation.

Studying the girl, Duncan knew she couldn't tell where his eyes were focused behind his opaque black lenses. She was still watching him. Her eyes drifted up and down his frame, showing no concern about the other guy noticing. A fleeting thought of temporary companionship took hold of him, but she was too overdone. He didn't want another prima donna fussing about him messing up her hair or smudging her lips. And what was she trying to hide behind the dark pink rouge, caked-on blue eye shadow and bright red lipstick? Not likely anything he really wanted. It sure wasn't worth a fight.

Pausing in front of the large man, Duncan didn't speak. They knew he wanted through the door, and he didn't want to reveal his accent to this guy. As a show of power, the man waited several seconds before moving aside, just enough.

Duncan pushed the wood-frame screen door out of his way and returned the sunglasses to the top of his head, throwing a glance around the room. The café was nearly empty, except for three men in blue work uniforms who eyed him as he entered. The place was small and needed some modernization, but it was clean.

He could now smell coffee and greasy food and thought again about getting something semi-nutritious while making his way through the stares. Claiming a table in the corner, he threw his duffel over the back of the chair against the wall and propped the guitar case holding his Fender Mustang against the one next to him. The waitress was there as soon as

he sat down.

She grinned shyly. “Would you like a menu?”

“No, thank you. Just coffee, black. And a phone?”

“Over there.” She glanced to her left, then moved away.

She was a pretty thing: round enough to look adorably feminine, with an oval face and dark brown eyes. Her hair was rather plain, a mousy brown pulled into a high ponytail, but her friendliness threw a highlight on her beauty.

The workmen stopped her before she could return with his coffee, but she didn’t waste time getting to him. “This is a little strong. Would you like to wait for a fresh pot? It won’t take but a few minutes.”

“It’s fine.” Duncan was careful with his pronunciation, though it was always more of a struggle when he was so dead-tired.

Pouring the steaming liquid into the heavy white cup, she wouldn’t have needed to warn him about its strength. He caught a slight scald within its natural aroma. Still, the smell was tantalizing, and he didn’t bother to wait for it to cool.

The cropped-hair work suits were still watching. Duncan kept them in his vision without looking directly, and stopped the waitress. “You know the city well?”

She hesitated. “Yes. Do you need directions?”

“No.” He took another sip. “How long have you been here?”

Now she glanced back toward an open doorway behind the counter. But she didn’t walk away. “All my life. I was born in Lakewood.”

“You have not wanted t’ leave?”

Her eyes showed fear. “I have to check an order.” She pulled back and soon disappeared through the door.

What had he said? He wasn’t used to women who were so jittery. Most of the girls he had met in the last five years had been very ... well, not jittery. But then, most he had met in bars. He couldn’t see this one in a bar, unless she was with a boyfriend and sipping wine. He could see her with his friend. Ev hadn’t cared for the girls in the little dive Duncan had been playing in when they had met. He would have to have someone classier, or at least more subdued. That girl he’d been dating wasn’t his type, either. What had he said about her? “*Her parents pay her tuition and send her money.*” He hadn’t stayed with her long, though that was partly Duncan’s fault. Once Ev started hanging out with him, many of the Thiel College students, including the rich girl, pulled away.

Duncan still didn’t understand why Ev chose an expensive private college when he couldn’t really afford it. He’d said it was because it was close to home, and he had to be there for some girl his mom was helping to raise if she ever needed him. But, she wasn’t a girlfriend, just a kid

they were babysitting from the way it sounded. He hadn't said much about her, except that she lost her mom and her dad was away a lot. And he'd written that she moved with him, or followed him. Anyway, he was still looking after her.

The waitress returned to warm his still half-full coffee. "I'm making more. Do you want me to dump this?"

He shook his head. So she added to it and left again.

It was strong, and bitter, but he could feel its warmth from inside. The men in work clothes paid their bill while chatting with the waitress, then threw him a look. He needed to call Ev, but now, as they were leaving, was probably not a good time. So he let his thoughts wander while swallowing the dark liquid.

Sam's Shack, the little dive in Greenville, Pennsylvania where he had met Ev, crawled back into his mind. It hadn't been the worst place he had played, or worked, and he liked the owners, Joe and Mel. Mel was short for something, maybe Melanie or ... well, Joe's wife was always just called Mel. They had offered him a job hauling and shelving their supplies, since Joe's back wouldn't allow him to lift anything heavier than a beer mug, and had given him a small room in their home and a small salary. It had been enough, with the band fees, since Mel insisted he eat with them, as well. They never had children and lived next to their bar, "adopting" their favorite patrons. For some reason, they had taken an instant liking to Duncan when he'd started playing with their regular band. *Sam*, he'd eventually found out, had no meaning. Joe just liked the sound of it.

The little bar was a local hang-out for the younger working class. Saturday night at Sam's was a ritual for the same general crowd every week. Occasionally, though, a few Thiel College students would drop in. None ever went there alone, and for good reason. The strife between the Thiel kids and the locals had been obvious the first time Duncan played. Generally, they left each other alone, sometimes exchanging words, but a couple of times, Duncan helped one of his band mates through a fight, only from a sense of honor. He would rather have had the college kids stay away, until he met Ev.

But Ev wasn't like the others. He had been in his second year of a two-year business degree after working full-time for the first two years after high school to save money. His mom had divorced years before and they had no help from his father, so Ev started working at an early age to help support his family. He had lost a brother during his teen years and often treated Duncan as a little brother, though they were only a year apart.

He didn't mind, except that he figured once Ev graduated and moved

back home, that would be the end of it. And this guy was the only person Duncan had been able to be himself around. He would have missed him.

Ev, however, didn't intend to let the friendship end, inviting Duncan to go with him and stay at his mother's home until they found an apartment. He hadn't let himself accept, unwilling to become that attached to anyone. He did take Ev's address and phone number and promised to let his friend know whenever he moved.

Two years ago, and he hadn't seen Ev since, but they had exchanged quite a few letters and several phone calls. His friend moved, also, from Eastern Pennsylvania to Eastern Massachusetts, and was in a band that wasn't half bad, from the way Ev talked.

"Can I get you anything else?"

Duncan turned with a start from where he'd been staring out the large ceiling-to-floor windows.

The waitress stepped back. "I'm ... sorry. I just thought ... maybe you were hungry? Mom just pulled a fresh loaf of bread out of the oven. She wouldn't mind if..."

"Thank you. It sounds fine, bu' I will pay for it." He wasn't about to accept charity, and he couldn't turn her down. She was a sweet girl through her fear.

Beginning to argue, the girl decided against it and refilled his cup. Her nervousness seemed to be mixed with concern. He knew he looked like hell. Besides losing weight, he hadn't shaved in the last couple of days. And she obviously assumed he didn't have much money.

She didn't say any more, though, glancing at him and returning to the little doorway. Yes, he could see Ev with someone like this.

And Duncan needed to call.

With a careful swallow of the steaming coffee, he stood and grabbed his guitar case. He figured it was likely safe to let it sit by the table while he used the phone, but keeping a hand on his possessions had become ingrained. He did leave the duffel, however, to show he was returning.

The coins in his pocket rattled as he pulled a few out, found a dime, and dropped the rest back in. The dime clinked inside the machine and he dialed the only number he knew. Well, he still remembered Joe and Mel's but hadn't called them in a long while.

He stood facing his table, where he could see the door, and waited for an answer.

"Yeah?"

Wrong voice. "I was lookin' for Evan Scott. Do I have the wrong place?"

"No. He's here. Well, not at the moment, but ... is this Duncan?"

He paused. How in the hell did this guy know who he was? "Y"

know when he will be back?"

Silence. "Depends. Can I tell him who's asking for him?"

The guy was offended and probably a friend of Ev's. "Yeah, it's Duncan. He said t' call..."

"In that case, yes, he just stepped across the hall. I'm supposed to find out where you are and he'll be right there."

"An' you are?"

A chuckle came across the line. "Well, I was warned. I'm Mike, his roommate."

Warned? Mike... "Y' are the band's lead."

"That's me. So ... you wanna tell me where you are, or hold on 'till I pull him back over here? You are in town by now?"

The band's lead, and good friend of Ev's if Duncan remembered the letters well enough. "Yeah, uh ... hold on." Damn, what was the name of the café? He caught the waitress's attention and she came right over. "Sorry, but, what is the name of this place?"

She glanced at the small door again. Was she always so nervous? "I have someone comin' to pick me up. He lives here."

"Oh. Maybe I know him, then. Tell him it's the home of the best doughnuts in town."

Was that a test? He put the phone back to his ear. "I do no' know the name, but the waitress says..."

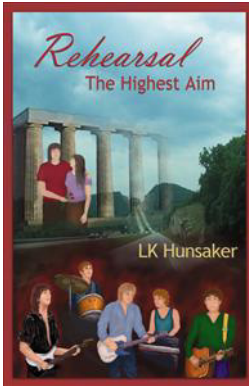
"I heard her. Tell Alison I said hello, and Evan will be right there." The phone clicked.

"Did he know?"

He returned the receiver to the cradle. "Are you Alison?"

She smiled, a beautiful smile. "I guess he did. Your bread is on the table, and I put some butter and jams there. Let me know how it is." With that, she left again to greet other customers.

Duncan returned to his table. What had he just walked into?



Rehearsal: The Highest Aim
LK Hunsaker

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NOTE: the following excerpt is a spoiler for
Different Drummer

With rising fame comes rising tensions and decisions that build relationships or destroy them.

Susie, Duncan, and Evan lead Raucous through the music world jungle heading toward the top. Along the way, family secrets are revealed and new additions come along, and the friends must redefine themselves within their new roles. While making sacrifices and reconsidering relationships, they'll have to choose between clinging to their current worlds and letting go to explore new possibilities. *The Highest Aim* is the second in a series of four.

Fermata

28 July 1974

Grabbing an amp from the storage compartment beneath the rumbling bus, Evan straightened and jerked sideways enough for his guitar case to return to hanging over his back. Susie chastised him for overdoing the load, her eyes still sparkling from the excitement of the proposal. He assured her he was fine in the gentle tone he used only for her. Engaged. She was getting married. Evan couldn't quite let it register in his brain and tried to let the strain of his muscles distract him from the strain of his thoughts.

It wasn't supposed to happen that way. Or maybe it was, as happy as Duncan made her. Still, it left Evan drifting in the confusion of losing his life-long expectations.

His mom echoed Susie's protest about carrying too much at once. It irritated Evan in a way Susie hadn't. With a polite glance to say he heard

her, he pushed on toward the apartment building, through the darkness of night and the cool breeze slapping his face. Janet held the door open, mentioning how she enjoyed the lavender scent in front of the apartment building. Evan never cared for the herb before Susie planted it the previous spring, before he noticed how she loved it. Last year, they had often sat on the steps at night to talk, enjoying the Massachusetts summer evenings, the freshness of nature, and each other. They hadn't needed anything else.

He didn't answer Janet, not wanting his girlfriend's thoughts to invade his memories.

Voices swirled around the hallway and followed him into the basement while the band unloaded their equipment. Despite it being nearly one in the morning, they were all still talkative. Stu especially wouldn't quit. He kept discussing the wedding, teasing Susie and Duncan about whether they would at least be engaged as long as they had dated. Janet countered with the necessity of waiting longer than that; four months wasn't enough time to plan a wedding.

Unloading the amp onto the floor against the wall, Evan turned to see Duncan grimace while bending to set down part of the drum set. His ribs weren't healed from the attempted mugging enough to carry much of anything yet. Wondering how Duncan got past his girlfriend ... fiancée ... in order to do so, Evan went over to him. Glancing around the basement, he didn't see her. Amazing. He didn't expect she would leave Duncan's side before they parted for the night.

"If Susie had seen the pain in your face I just did, she'd be all over you by now."

"So do no' tell her." Duncan threw a grin.

"Deal, but only if you stop now. You can't heal that way."

"Ev..."

"I'm not backing down on this one." Evan watched his friend's face. There was a trace of wanting to tell him to back the hell off, as Duncan normally would, but mostly, it was calm, relenting.

"So y' are no' pissed at me?"

"About what? You think I didn't know you would push yourself too fast? How long have we known each other?"

"That is no' what I meant. Y' have no' said anything about it yet, other than in front of everyone." He looked over at more voices. They were still far enough away not to overhear.

"I haven't said anything about what?"

Duncan's eyes searched his face. "Should I 'ave told y' I was going t' propose?"

"Why would you need to tell me first?"

“Because she is closer t’ you than to anyone else. I did talk t’ her dad, but maybe I should ‘ave said something t’ you.”

“You asked John’s permission?” Evan couldn’t hide his surprise. No one did that anymore. Or maybe they did in Scotland? In 1974? Evan rather doubted it was the norm there, either.

“His opinion matters t’ her. I wanted t’ know it would no’ cause more trouble.”

“Who are you?” Evan grinned at his friend’s raised eyebrow. “I don’t mean that as an insult. But I’ve been so focused on how Susie has changed that I think I’ve missed something. Since when do you ask permission to do anything?”

Duncan looked across the room when Susie’s laughter cut through other voices. He studied her a moment as she stood talking with Kate and Alison, then turned back. “Y’ know I am lucky she will have anything t’ do with me. I do no’ know why she does or why she accepted, but I do not want t’ screw things up now.”

“Lucky?” Evan shook his head. “You’re good for her.” Despite himself, he had to admit it. “Duncan, if you *had* asked me, I would have told you I have never in my life seen her as happy as she is now. People screw up. Hell, I screw up all the time and she hasn’t walked away from me yet.” Evan glanced over and caught her eyes, the return look telling him she knew they were talking about her.

Commotion caught his attention; Stu was struggling with an amp. Setting a hand on Duncan’s shoulder, he knew he had to say more. “You don’t need my approval, but you have it. I meant my congratulations sincerely.”

“Then y’ will stand up with me? Be my best man?”

Duncan’s best man, while he married the love of Evan’s life. Something was rather unjust about the idea. “You’ve been planning this for a while?”

“Since the day she said she was in love with me. I only waited t’ be legal so I knew I would no’ be makin’ her choose between me and her home.”

Wouldn’t make her choose. Except she already had. Susie would choose Duncan over anything, or anyone. Evan stifled his thoughts. “I would be honored to stand up with you.”

After accepting a handshake and thanks, he walked away to help Stu and to finish whatever unloading was left. Walking past Susie, he paused to mention her fiancé was having a hard time not letting himself carry equipment, knowing full well Duncan had followed and was listening.

“Oh? Well, I think he’s not going to.” She smiled at Evan and set a hand on Duncan’s stomach, her other arm wrapping around his back. “I’m still in charge.”

Duncan raised an eyebrow. “Are y’ now?”

She kissed him.

Evan continued toward Stu.

29 July

Susie felt movement on the bed and opened her eyes. Light streaming through the blinds told her it was early; the sun was still rising. Finding Duncan’s face, she moved closer, cuddling against his bare chest., revelling in the feel of his fingers touching her cheek and running through her hair. Engaged. He had asked her to be his wife. The memory of the night before brought her emotions to nearly the same level as when he asked and she gripped his shoulder, pulling him in.

“G’ mornin’.” He kissed her head.

“I love waking up with you.” She returned the kiss, to his chest. She had become bolder the night before ... earlier that morning ... when he agreed to stay, and after she agreed they would still wait until their wedding night.

“I am glad y’ do. I hope y’ will no’ get tired of me always bein’ here.”

Raising to see his face, she smiled. “Not likely.”

He kissed her, pressing closer, turning her onto her back to prop himself half-way on top. “Y’ know I am supposed t’ be goin’ to work in a few minutes.”

“Call in. Want me to dial?” She reached for the phone.

Grasping her hand, Duncan entwined his fingers in hers and pulled her arm back to their sides. “Come in with me. I can no’ leave Ev short again, bu’ I do no’ want to leave y’ today. I am no’ doing anything now that y’ can no’ do.”

“It’s driving you crazy, isn’t it?” Susie pulled her hand from his and ran it along his ribs. “Having to be so careful until you heal.”

He raised an eyebrow. “It is no’ as hard as trying t’ be careful with you.”

“No?” She slid her hand up to his chest. “So I think we should set a date. Unless you want to wait...”

“Tell me when and I will be there.”

“Tomorrow.” She chuckled at his expression. “Too soon?”

“No’ for me, bu’ y’ are no’ serious?”

She wasn't completely, but she wouldn't argue if he agreed, either. "Well, I suppose I need time to make a dress and..."

"And we need t' clear the schedule with the band, so we will have time t' go away."

"Go away?" Susie touched his hair.

"Y' do no' want a honeymoon?" The blue eyes sparkled, amused.

"Oh. Yes, nothing fancy, though, just..."

He kissed her, deeply, lowering against her body. His breath tickled her neck when he moved his lips close to her ear. "I want t' give you everything y' have always wanted. Tell me wha' kind of honeymoon y' have thought about. Honestly."

Clenching her eyes, she resisted him pulling away. "I want to be with you, alone. I don't care where we go. I don't care if it rains. I don't care if it's out in a tent somewhere. I just want to be with you."

"Y' are amazing. I offer anywhere in the world and y' will take a tent?"

"As long as you're in it with me."

"Do no' have any doubt abou' that." Returning to her mouth, he lowered further, his bare skin warming her, the light fabric of her thin tank top the only thing between them. She wanted more and didn't hesitate to show it, her fingers slipping barely beneath the elastic of his shorts.

"Be careful, my luv." Duncan's whisper broke the kiss.

"No." She raised her head to reclaim his lips. And he gave in to her, but only for another minute.

Finally forcing herself to rise, the decision of the honeymoon left in Duncan's hands, Susie walked with him to the front door. "Wait." She went to the kitchen and grabbed the extra apartment key, returning to place it in his hand. "Dad gave it back to me last night. I want you to have it." She gave him a quick kiss. "If you're done before I am, you can let yourself in."

"And I should no' tell y' wha' I am thinking right now." He grinned.

Returning the smile, she backed away a couple of steps, watching his eyes. "I'll hurry so I don't make you late for work."

"I am no' sure I would care."

She chuckled and turned to go down the hall.



Off The Moon LK Hunsaker

COMING November 2009
Elucidate Publishing

check www.lkhunsaker.com for
release information

*The following is an unedited excerpt and may
have minor changes before publication.*

"Riveting" Ryan Reynauld is immersed in a world of music, parties, and temporary companionship. Having risen to the top of the pop charts, his biggest concern is objecting to the way his music is produced. That is, until he finds a young woman standing on a window ledge. Against the advice of family and friends, and through media attacks and fan protests, Ryan determines to care for her himself, making a promise that threatens to destroy his career.

Convincing the skittish girl she can learn to trust again comes with a steep price. Sometimes the path to recovery begins by allowing your world to implode.

~ ~ 1 ~

"C'mon man, you're already in fryin' water. Where're ya going?"

Ryan shrugged and drifted farther into the office building across the street from where he was supposed to be. They could wait. Hell, what choice did they have but wait? He was the one paying their bills.

"Reynauld, what is up your ass today? You're edgy as hell and you're going the wrong direction. You do know you're going the wrong direction."

"Maybe." Dodging a couple of girls he noticed heading his way, Ryan slipped behind a crowd of business suits and briefcases, reminded of a mud-covered pig rooting through tight-assed penguins. Grinning at his own thought, he decided to hold that one in his mind to use later.

His security guard cut him off. "That way. The paycheck is *that* way."

"And what are you going to do, Daws? Throw me over your shoulder and make me go?" Ryan tried to swerve around him, not getting

anywhere. “Come on, lighten up. I’ll only be a minute.” Cocking his head at the body blockade, he feigned anger. “Either get out of my way or come with me. There’s something I gotta do.”

“Something you can’t do next door where you’re supposed to be?”

“Not unless you can pick this building up and move it over there. Might get kinda messy, though.” With an eye on where the girls he’d avoided were looking at him and talking to others, Ryan shifted out of their vision as much as he could.

“I’m not one of your flattering fans who thinks you’re hysterical. You’re holding everyone up and no matter who you are, their time matters...”

Ignoring his guard’s rant, he ducked around him and sprinted toward the elevator starting to close, calling for someone to hold it. Stares answered, relief showing on a suit’s face just before the door clenched tight. “Great. Guess we do the stairs.”

“Let it go, Reynauld. I promise if you’re good and play nice, I’ll bring you back after work.”

“Funny. Wanna handle the crowd starting instead of badgering me?” With a nod toward the few people paying attention, he used the distraction to escape into the staircase.

Ryan took the first couple of flights two steps at a time, then slowed his pace. What in the hell was he doing? Why did he have to check it out when he was already late? But then, when wasn’t he late? Why today? He shrugged again. Why not today? It woke him up the night before. There was no sense letting it nag at him instead of walking up and looking and letting it go.

Getting to the seventh floor, he pushed aside the yellow no trespassing line and turned the door handle. It worked. The hallway he crept into looked like any other hallway, except no one was in it. A deserted office building floor after nine in the morning was a strange thing, but no stranger than the building owner marking the floor off with no explanation. It had gone unused for months. No code violations. No events Ryan ever heard about. It was simply closed. His writer’s brain couldn’t accept there not being a reason. No one else seemed to care, remarking only that the owner was eccentric and did such things from time to time. It wasn’t good enough. There was a reason.

Ryan found himself enjoying the silent walk past open office doors showing nothing but remains of desks and chairs here and there. It could be a good place to write. Maybe that was why he’d been drawn to it. He could find the owner, or have someone find the owner for him, and ask about using it. Not using it exactly, but *not* using it, since the guy wanted it *not* used. Writing music, sitting by himself, wasn’t using it – only

occupying a bit of its space. There was plenty.

Almost at the end of the hallway, he turned at a door slam. Daws wasn't distracted by the crowd for long.

"Are you happy yet, moron? There's now not only a couple or three girls down there, but a whole damn army of them descending. Can we escape out of here before I have to call in the crew?"

"So we'll wait 'em out." Ryan ran his fingers along the white wall trim. No dust. And no dusty smell. The silvery blue carpet looked new but without the new carpet scent.

"You're shittin' me, right? Wait 'em out? And that's worked real well in the past."

"Yeah, okay." With a deep breath and knowing Daws would've been more occupied and would've left him alone longer if Ryan had thought to arrange an actual army of girls, he headed back.

And he stopped.

"This way. Let's go."

Taking three steps backwards, Ryan looked into the empty office he'd just passed. Nothing. He thought he'd seen something, but there was nothing. At his guard's taunting, he continued forward. But the window was open. Why? At the next open door, he peered inside. The window was closed. So was the next one.

Turning, he quickened his pace and told Daws to hang on a second. The window was open, and there were no bars, nothing. And no one there.

"What in the hell are you doing now?"

"Something's out there." He drifted closer, but slowly. The seventh floor. He could see people in the windows across the road, shadows floating around in the building where he was supposed to be.

"Man, if you saw something out that window, it damn well better have been a bird or I'm calling the nuthouse like I should have umpteen times before."

"Maybe it was a bird." Of course. He *was* a moron. What else would he have seen? Still, he wasn't sure. And he couldn't look. "Do something for me. Look out the window." He got no response. "I'll go, no hassle, no stalling ... just look out the window for me."

"Not interested. I've seen pigeons and I'm not a big fan of the dirty creatures."

Ryan gave up. Seven floors were too much to look out over. His stomach was twinging already from standing halfway across the room from it. At the door, he paused. He had to know.

Pulling away from his guard's grip, he hurried over before being stopped and before losing his nerve, and touched the frame. A cool

breeze slapped at his face. Spring air. Normally he loved it, but this time it made him shiver. Or it was the nerves. Daws was muttering in the background about leaving his ass there. Ryan knew he wouldn't, not for long. He would be back.

Gritting his teeth, he stepped closer, preparing himself for the flapping of pigeons. There were no birds. But there were shoes. To his right, on the wide window ledge, a pair of old tennis shoes were perched, their heels against the window and toes pointed forward ... out. His stomach turned while his eyes followed the shoes up to baggy jeans, a faded sweatshirt covering most of the fingers underneath, and the diminutive face with long straight hair sweeping across it with the breeze. Startled eyes caught his: round greenish-brown eyes. A girl. Young, emaciated. Afraid. She stared, silent.

Catching his breath, Ryan tried to decide what to do. Yell for Daws to get the police? It would scare her more and that was probably the last thing that would help. If anything would help. Maybe nothing would. Maybe today would be that life-changing event his brother told him would eventually happen to make him be an adult. Maybe he was destined to live forever with watching a young girl end her life. But not if he could stop it. No amount of venting through songs would ever help him deal with that.

"Is the view nice up here?" He forced his voice not to shake as he had practiced a bazillion times at the start of his career. "Myself, I prefer the ocean view. You know, 'cause if I fall in the ocean, I can swim. I've yet to learn how to fly, though. But hey, to each his own, right?" She continued staring, still silent. "I bet it's cool to watch everyone down there scurrying like ants, right? I don't have the nerve to look myself. Heights aren't my thing. But ... hey, describe it for me. I'm visual. I'll get it from what you say."

Her eyes said she was listening, and wary. She said nothing.

"How about coming this way more so I can hear you better? I haven't heard a word yet."

When he reached a hand toward her, she slid farther from him. He pulled it down. "Hey, it's okay. I'll listen harder. I'm Ryan. I'm supposed to be at work across the street but decided to check out your place first. Glad I did. I don't often get to meet anyone who goes to extremes to be alone as much as I do. It's quiet out here, huh? Well, not so much since I'm annoying you and you can tell me to go away if you want. I know how it is." Complaining to himself about sounding so stupid, Ryan heard Daws return and tried to wave him away.

"Had enough air yet? You know, I really should leave your ass to deal with that crowd alone. It'd serve you right. What in the hell are you

looking at?” Daws stuck his head out.

The girl pulled away more.

“No, it’s okay. He’ll leave. One of us is bad enough, right?” Ryan shoved the guard back and found her peering around him, watching. “Come inside. It’s okay.”

She didn’t answer. Hair blew into her face and out again.

Studying her features, Ryan decided she had to still be in her teens, although it was hard to tell as thin as she was, much too thin to be healthy, and pale. Where were her parents? Other family? Friends? Someone. There had to be someone wondering where she was, someone who was supposed to be caring for her. He had to gain her trust, at least somewhat. How?

His mind drifted to his favorite thing other than music. “Do you like boats?” She held the stare. “I love boats, and I can tell you the view from a boat drifting out on a quiet lake is like nothing else. Isn’t it? Especially when the sun begins to set and even better when it begins to rise. It’s been forever since I saw it rise over a lake. How about we go check it out? Weatherman says it’s supposed to be gorgeous the next few days. Want to get up before dawn and watch the sun come up over the water? Or do you like water?”

She remained silent but showed less fear.

“I can pick you up from wherever you want and you can bring a friend or two along. I know it would be crazy to accept a blind date from some idiot who just happened to show up on your window ledge, but if you invite someone, it’s cool, right? Daws’ll be there. He’s nearly everywhere I am, although I can ditch him if you’d rather. He’s not as grouchy as he looks. Well, he is grouchy, but he’s a sweet grouchy. Don’t tell him I said that.” He waited while she stared. “What do you think? Do you like boats?”

“I’ve never been on one.” The voice was nearly a whisper – soft, shy, and still afraid.

“No? Wow, then you’re missing something. I bet you’ll love it. Can I take you? Not just you, but you and whoever you want to bring. A brother or something is fine, too. Whoever.”

She watched him, the fear draining but something else filling her eyes. Sadness. Longing. She was entirely too desperate. Stupid thought. Of course she was desperate. Why else would she be up there? He wasn’t letting her go. She was coming back in. Whatever he had to do, she was coming back in.

Noise within the room turned his head and Ryan nearly panicked at the sight of Daws and several uniformed policemen. They would scare her for sure, and she was just starting to calm. One of them asked him to

move away. The girl flinched at the strange voice, backed up again.

“Wait.” She was getting too far, the fear returning. Clenching his teeth, Ryan pushed himself up onto the ledge, telling the officer to stay where he was, away from them, and ignored Daws calling him a moron for the umpteenth time this week. Ignoring his stomach wasn’t so easy. Damn, he hated heights. He hated looking down over one staircase. This ... this was suicide. He was going to lose it.

“What are you doing?” The girl’s eyes drew him in.

He shrugged, very carefully. And he fought the sickness welling within while rising to standing position, his fingers clamped onto the window frame. “Thought I’d see your view first since I’m trying to share mine. Gotta say...” Managing to breathe took most of his concentration. “I like mine better. Your turn?”

“Go in.”

She was worried about him. It gave him a glimmer of hope.

The officer was telling them both to come inside, that they’d get help. Ryan considered asking for a barf bag but decided he couldn’t let himself barf. It would throw his already overly shaky balance. “So?” He forced his eyes on the girl. “How about we go see the water now? From a boat. A small boat. Or a large one if you’d rather. I can deal with water below me.” He wasn’t sure she would be able to hear his voice over his heartbeat. He also wasn’t sure his heartbeat wouldn’t get strong enough to bump him right over the edge. He was becoming horribly sure he was not going to live through this. Maybe the heart attack would kill him before he had to hit the pavement. Which would be worse?

“Go in.”

“Not without you. It’s your turn. Come share my view now.”

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(I do my best to answer mail, but please allow time for periods of obsessive writing/editing, family events, and moments of escape.)

My website has a Guest Book. Please drop in and say hello!

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Best Wishes,

LK Hunsaker