

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, but I am working.” He looked back to check on his ordered beer; smoke from the haze in the bar, most of it from cigarettes, choked 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, you are right. At the moment, I am trying t’ cool off a bit. Then I am going back to 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, rubbed it across his face, and let it fall again, aware her eyes had followed down to his briefly bare stomach.

Accepting the mug that finally came across the bar, he took a large swallow. The chill against his hand echoed the chill of the liquid streaming down his throat.

The girl pressed into his shoulder. “Are you ever here when you’re not working?” Warm, damp fingers with painted nails circled his arm. Her fingers were short for her height, pudgy for her thinness.

Ignoring a snigger from the new bartender, Duncan 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 soft curves and harsh scent of her perfume. Too much perfume. Spicy and earthy, strong, too masculine. She wore bell bottoms and a halter just long enough to mostly cover her stomach. A bright tie-dye halter. Too bright. He disliked the halter about as much as the perfume.

She slid her hand off his arm and moved it around his fingers and the

heavy mug. “So maybe you’ll dance with me another night?” Adding the other hand, she pulled the beer to her lips and took a long swallow, her eyes on his. Narrow eyes. Lashes painted longer than natural with thick black lines extended from the corners. The green on her lids attempted 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. Other than her style choices, she looked alright, friendly enough, but not desperate. “Maybe.”

She grinned and pushed the beer back toward him.

“Keep it.” He watched her move away and flaunt 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 band. His mates were okay guys, as far as it went, but only third-rate musicians. It didn’t matter. They were only background noise for pick-up lines and relaxation by intoxication in the dark out-of-the-way bar.

He didn’t like the darkness. It disguised the niched plank floor and scratches in the old wood tables with only patches of varnish left as pointless protection. Duncan imagined his mother would cringe 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 lived these days: from city to city, jumping from one third-rate band to another while grabbing whatever cash day jobs he could find.

Duncan ordered another beer and watched the small crowd, studying those he recognized 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 more than enough to go through the motions of dancing, some with far more success than others. Their drummer was at least decent. They kept a good beat.

Movement from the over-filled table of Thiel College out-of-town students caught his attention. They were always easy to spot, dressed too well for the bar full of locals and with their chins higher than necessary. One of them got up to retrieve his drink from the bar instead of barking an order at a waitress. 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 headed in his direction and Duncan turned back, waiting to catch the bartender. “Is that beer coming tonight?”

“Make that two.” The guy stood where the flirting girl had, not quite as close. “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 made himself answer. “A while.”

“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 when the stool next to him was 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 was still trying to decide if he liked Sailcat’s *Motorcycle Mama*. Girls seemed to like it, and at least it wasn’t hard to hear over. He also tried to decide whether to keep talking to this guy. He couldn’t quite dismiss the compliment, since it wasn’t from a girl who didn’t know shit about guitar work this time and he sincerely doubted this guy was hitting on him. “You play?”

“Not much since I started school, but when I can.”

He nodded. 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 in Greenville?”

He felt his back stiffen. What made this guy think it was any of his business? Throwing an order at the bartender to have his beer sent to the band’s table, he got up. When the guy stood beside him, Duncan swung around. “Man, *wha’* do you want?”

“Just to talk. I don’t get to meet many guitarists of your caliber.”

Unbothered by Duncan’s ‘get the hell away from me’ gaze, the guy shrugged. “Actually, I’ve never met anyone who can play like that. I have to wonder why you’re wasting your time here. 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? “I am busy.”

“Your friends aren’t ready to play yet.”

“Look, ge’ lost. I am not a guitar teacher, alright?” Moving away, Duncan felt a hand grasp his shoulder and he spun, seized the guy’s arm,

and twisted it behind his back. “*Donae* push me.”

He cursed himself for giving in to his instincts as he judged 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, but the guy he so far still held was taller, and built bigger, which wasn’t a problem in itself, but he also didn’t seem naïve enough to start something he couldn’t finish. The last thing Duncan wanted was attention. The next to last thing he wanted was sore fists that would make it hard to play.

“I’m Evan Scott. Nice to meet you, too.”

The tone was friendly and the guy didn’t resist in the least. Eying the guy’s friends and noting the continued non-resistance, Duncan released him and stepped away. Evan Scott was maybe a bit taller than Duncan, an inch at the most, 5’10” or so, but he had a far 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 decent and more classic than trendy. Understated.

“Evan, *cream* that guy. He’s no match for you.” A Thiel boy edged in. Duncan glanced at him, and the other two who joined in with talk he knew they weren’t likely to back up with action. He kept his full attention on his antagonist who dismissed the push for a fight although Duncan’s band mates moved in and returned insults. Evan Scott stood, waiting for a reaction, or an answer. Or trying to decide Duncan’s weak spot.

The mouthy kid moved closer. “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 when he lunged at the kid. “Let it go.”

“Let it go, *hell*. He doesn’t know music worth a *shit*.”

“So what? Let 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.”

“It was my fault, not his. Go.”

The guy with the younger face and idiot expression hesitated as he threw 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. No point letting some little punk barely old enough to be away from home push something neither of them wanted.

But he kept pushing, calling names.

Evan Scott stepped in between, close enough to Duncan to brush his arm as he pushed his own acquaintances back farther. "Brad, back the hell off before I throw you out of here. And take your henchmen with you."

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.

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. It took them longer to back off than it did the Thiel kids. Duncan wasn't sure if it was out of greater loyalty from the band mates he barely knew or if Evan Scott had that much pull, or that much less loyalty.

Joe gave him a nod as he offered two mugs of beer, on the house, in thanks for preventing damage of his bar. Evan Scott thanked him, said it wasn't necessary. Joe insisted and set a hand on Duncan's shoulder before he left.

So, Evan Scott 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 still stood with him. Not to mention, he hadn't flinched when Duncan twisted his arm back and held it. That, more than anything, made him not want to take the guy on.

With a swallow of the beer, he relented, to an extent. "So what is it that 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-asleep state he had allowed himself. People jumped from their seats trying to beat everyone else out the door, but 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 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 his guitar, one of the two possessions he cared about, went ahead of him.

The dirty white sidewalk threw light at his face and he pulled the dark sunglasses from atop his head to shield his eyes. When his pupils adjusted, he surveyed the area. Same as any city: blank cement walls, graffiti, cigarette butts speckling 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 enough to keep 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 he was still standing in the unmarked path of the bus entrance. He looked back at the offender; his glance pushed the boy to hurry onto the bus. Heading out of the congestion, Duncan 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 coffee.

“Excuse me.” He tried to stop one of the passing locals. The guy barely looked at him before swerving 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 headed the way that looked the most promising as he dismissed the looks thrown at him. He was used to it, though they were different here. In Chicago, they were warningsto stay

away, as though he intended to cause trouble. Here, in small city Massachusetts, they looked down at him or didn't bother with more than 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 caked on their sides, others with wrought-iron gates to protect 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 to advertise its business, but it was too large to be a private home. Anyway, Duncan couldn't imagine why anyone would live in something so overdone.

Approaching a corner, he stayed on the outer edge of the sidewalk so he could see anything moving toward his path before it was too close, 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 sleep. He still had a few bills in his wallet, and Ev would likely insist he stay with him, but Duncan wouldn't count on that. Coffee would hold him a while longer.

A shapeless girl in a tight orange sweater and red and orange plaid mini-skirt stood in the doorway under the café sign. She glanced at him, looked away, then returned her gaze and kept her eyes on him as he headed toward the café. 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 tried to decide whether to push through to get inside if they didn't move voluntarily. He hoped they wouldn't press the issue. He didn't have the energy or the will for it, but he didn't see anything else close that promised coffee and time to make himself call his friend.

Duncan knew the girl couldn't tell where his eyes were focused behind his opaque black lenses. Her eyes drifted up and down his frame with no concern about whether her male friend noticed where she put the most attention. A fleeting thought of temporary companionship took hold of him, but she was too overdone. He didn't want another prima donna who would bitch that he messed up her hair or smudged her lipstick. And what was she trying to hide behind the dark pink rouge, caked-on blue eye shadow, and bright red lips? Not likely anything he really wanted.

He stopped in front of the large man, but stayed quiet. They knew he wanted through the door, and he didn't want to reveal his accent. As a show of power, the man waited several seconds before he moved aside, just

enough.

Duncan pushed the wood-frame screen door out of his way and returned the sunglasses to the top of his head. The café was empty except for three men in blue work uniforms who looked as though they expected him to cause trouble, and a young waitress in a blue work blouse behind a wood-panelled rectangular counter topped by beige formica. Blue vinyl stools around the counter looked well-used but not made to linger. The beige-tiled floor looked clean even though the light brown pattern was worn off the most-used paths.

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

She glanced at the case and gave him a shy grin. “Would you like a menu?”

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

“Over there.” She nodded to her left and moved away. She was a pretty girl: 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 she had a beautiful sweet smile that made it hard to pay attention to her other features.

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. He could feel his body fight to stay awake, but he had enough practice doing so, and the scald within the coffee’s aroma as the waitress poured it into a heavy white cup promised help. He didn’t wait for it to cool. He could taste every bit of its scald.

The cropped-hair work uniforms kept watch. Duncan kept them in his vision as he pretended not to notice. “You know the city well?”

The girl paused her retreat. “Yes. Do you need directions?”

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

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 ... 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 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 Thiel College students, including the rich girl, pulled away.

Duncan still didn't understand why Ev chose an expensive private college on the other side of the state when he couldn't afford it well. He'd said it was because it was away from home and yet close to home, and he had to be there for some girl his mom was helping to raise if she ever needed him. She wasn't a girlfriend, only a kid they looked after 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. He'd written that she moved with him, or followed him, from eastern Pennsylvania to eastern Massachusetts. Anyway, he was still looking after her.

The waitress returned to warm his still half-full cup. "I'll have it made fresh soon. Do you want me to dump this?"

He shook his head. She added to it and left again. It was stronger than most American coffee, and bitter from sitting too long, but he could feel its warmth from inside. The men in work clothes chatted with the waitress as they paid their bill, obviously regulars who knew her, then threw him a look. He needed to call Ev, but now, as they were leaving, wasn't a good time, so he let his thoughts wander as the caffeine started to surge through his system.

Sam's Shack, the little dive in Greenville, Pennsylvania where he 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 ... he wasn't sure, since Joe's wife was always just called Mel. Joe's back wouldn't allow him to lift anything heavier than a beer mug, so they'd offered Duncan a job hauling and shelving their supplies and had given him a small room in their little house connected to their bar, plus a small salary. It was enough, with the band fees, since Mel insisted he eat with them. They never had children and so "adopted" 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 with exchanged 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, except for Ev.

But Evan Scott wasn't like those who spent far more time at the bar. He'd 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 when he was young and they had no help from his father, so Ev started working at an early age to help support his family. Along with his studies, he worked on campus in some admin capacity to help pay his tuition and occasionally tutored fellow students. He had lost a brother during his teen years and often treated Duncan as a little brother, though they were only a year apart.

Duncan didn't mind, except 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. He'd invited Duncan to go back to Glenn Heights on the other side of the state and stay at his mother's home until they found an apartment. Duncan hadn't let himself accept, unwilling to become that attached. He did take Ev's address and phone number and promised to let his friend know whenever he moved.

It had been two years since Ev graduated and Duncan hadn't seen him since, but they had exchanged quite a few letters and several phone calls. His friend found another roommate to share an apartment, in 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 ceiling-to-floor windows.

The waitress stepped back. “I'm ... sorry. I just thought ... maybe you're 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. The concern for his welfare usually annoyed him. He couldn't be annoyed with her.

She refilled his cup and returned the pot to the warmer, then went back through the little doorway. Yes, he could see Ev with someone like this. And Duncan needed to call him.

With a careful swallow of the steaming, and now fresh, 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 other than Joe and Mel's. He 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 looking 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? "You 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 is Duncan. He said t' call when I got in town."

"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."

"And 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 want to tell me where you are, or hold on till I pull him back over here?"

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 coming 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?

Evan pulled his dark brown Mercury Cougar in front of *Ein Bisschen Luxus* – in English, a little luxury, though most called it the Luxus. Stu called it *Bitchin’ Luxury*, but anytime Stu could eat without having to prepare his own food was luxury to him. It was funny place for his friend to land. Besides being at least twice as far away from the bus station as it would have been if Duncan had gone the opposite direction, the little café was the band’s hangout. Susie would say it was a good omen. Evan didn’t believe in omens, but he did think it would be good for Duncan to have a little luxury for a change.

He saw him through the big window which threw sunlight back into his eyes. Moving to a better angle, Evan studied his friend. His hair was even longer, now three to four inches beyond his shoulders, and he hadn’t shaved recently. But those were minute things. His jaw line, more pronounced than usual, exposed its ridges and hollows even through the thick stubble. He’d lost weight that shouldn’t have been lost.

The scent of fresh bread wafted through the screen door. Evan pushed it open and grinned when his friend looked over and got up to meet him. Extending one hand, he grasped Duncan’s arm with his other. “It’s good to see you. I wasn’t sure you would actually come.”

“I was no’ sure either, bu’ I had nowhere else in mind.”

Evan released him and turned to Alison. “It looks like you’ve already met.”

“Not formally.” She looked at Duncan. “It was Evan you called?”

“Actually he got Mike, but I was next door. Alison Luchner, Duncan O’Neil.”

A light of recognition hit her face. “Oh, you’re who Doug has been talking about. I should have realized when you came in with the guitar. You’re here to join the band?”

Duncan raised an eyebrow.

“We haven’t talked much about that yet. I was only hoping he would.” He threw his confused buddy a grin but only got a placid acknowledgment in return, silent. His eyes were even more vacant than Evan remembered.

Alison filled in at the continued silence. “So how is Susie? I haven’t seen her recently.”

An easier conversation, and Evan was glad for it. “Very busy with the show coming up in a couple of months. Don’t take it personally; I don’t see her often right now, either.”

“Wow, that is busy.” She smiled, teasing with her eyes. “Are you staying for coffee? I was forcing your friend to try Mom’s latest batch of bread. I’m sure I can sneak another. It’ll be less she pushes on me, and I don’t need it.”

Evan chuckled. “Thanks, but I’ll think we’ll get back. Another time.” He agreed to take some of the morning’s leftover doughnuts to Stu, since he always seemed to need to eat, and waited for her to wrap them. His friend set money on the table when she left. Too much for just coffee and bread. Duncan always tipped well, whether or not he could afford it.

Silence infused the drive back to the apartment, with questions Evan threw getting only curt replies. He decided to leave it alone for the moment and be satisfied enough when Duncan agreed to stay the night in the little third bedroom. He didn’t care how small it was. Of course, from the way his friend had described the “pad” he’d just left, Evan was sure his and Mike’s apartment would be a big improvement. He could always see where Duncan was living from the description in the letters he received. Evan couldn’t help a touch of jealousy about his friend’s natural writing ability. Duncan’s songs, as well as his guitar skills and vocals, would be a wonderful asset to the band, if he could get him to stay.

Still in silence, other than the car’s smooth rumble and wind whipping through the open windows, Evan turned the Mercury around the corner that led to the old boarding house. It was now an apartment building, with two three-bedroom apartments upstairs and the same number of two-bedrooms on the main floor, leaving room for an entranceway with a security door. The best thing about it was the large basement, which had high ceilings and great acoustics for their practices. And it was in a quiet part of town: clean and well-kept, with a large yard that set the building away from the road and an open area in back with two large maples. The front was adorned with spring bulbs currently in bloom and an ornamental pear tree Susie loved. The houses on each side also had large yards that were well maintained and neighbors that were friendly but not not overly

friendly. The back edge of the property had a high wooden fence to block their side of the shared island between streets from the other side.

To break the silence, Evan told his friend the building had started as a one family dwelling, one of the Massachusetts Money families, as many around them still were. He figured that was why their neighbors weren't overly friendly; he, Mike, Doug, and Stu weren't close to part of that. The owner of the building wasn't, either. He'd picked it up at a bargain and did some minor fixes. Roy lived in one of the bottom apartments. They could only afford to live there since Roy was also the band's manager and gave them a break on the rent.

He didn't tell Duncan yet that the hardest part of joining the band, if he did, would be dealing with Roy. Evan was prepared for that. Susie didn't like the guy, either. Still, she managed to work around him.

What would she think of his friend? Naturally, she would accept Duncan. She always welcomed his friends and acquaintances, and they generally agreed about who they wanted to hang around. With a couple of exceptions. But Duncan... He glanced over at the man staring out the window. Susie would be able to see past the defensiveness as Evan had, though he wouldn't be surprised if it took her a while to fully accept him. She was leery about men, with good reason, and tended to keep her distance. Even Mike thought she was a snob when they first met.

Mike could be a problem, as well. The phone conversation had put him on edge. Evan had warned him, though, that Duncan wasn't open and didn't give information willingly and not to be offended by it. Out of loyalty, he couldn't tell him more than that, and the secrecy also made Mike edgy.

As Susie would say, Mike would have to just get over it. Evan heard her say it as he pulled the car into the building's parking lot and switched off the engine. She was right, as normal. "The guys may all be upstairs. They caught me as I was leaving."

Duncan glanced at him, then nodded and opened the door.

"Hey."

His friend looked back, an eyebrow slightly raised.

"What made you finally come out here? What happened?"

His gaze fell and the muscles on his face tightened. "Needed different scenery." Then he looked up at the building and around at the area, and met Evan's gaze. "Think your band mates and your neighbors are goin' t' want me here? This isnae... I can see tha' it fits y' well, bu' I amnae sure..."

"I want you here. Always have. And I couldn't care one iota whether or not the neighbors do. You know that. As for the band ... yes, I think they

will.”

His expression didn't change, but he nodded again and got out of the car, refusing to let Evan take either the bag or the guitar. As they walked to the front door, Duncan looked over at a passing car, across the street at the other houses, up at the white-blooming tree, and down at the tulips and daffodils and grape hyacinths and the conical things Evan didn't remember the name of. He could almost hear his friend's thoughts. *Story book*. Duncan had commented before, back in Greenville, about the few 'story book' houses and yards that made life look pretty and perfect. Evan had mentioned that his mom's house generally looked the same on the outside, but it was due largely to Susie's love of planting and taking care of flowers and small colorful shrubs. An escape for her. He didn't mention she'd done the same with their building.

The wide, worn wooden staircase creaked under their feet as they made their way to the second level side-by-side. Inside looked far less story book. The front door needed to be propped open again to clear the mustiness, and the old beige wallpaper with blue and fuchsia flowered vines hadn't been replaced yet as they'd requested. His friend didn't comment. Evan figured he was tired. It was roughly sixteen hours from Chicago to Lakewood by bus, maybe more with all the stops in between. And Duncan didn't sleep around strangers.

At his apartment, he turned the knob and tried to let his friend in first. Duncan stood back and waited.

Mike's voice hit them as the door opened. The words weren't audible, but the sarcasm in his voice was.

“Mike, you are so full of shit. Doug, tell him he has no idea what the hell he's talking about.” Stu's voice was loud and clear, as normal.

“Like hell I am, just because you don't want to believe it. That doesn't make it not true.”

“It's not true because it's not true. With all your brains, you can't figure that out?”

Evan sighed and stepped in where they could see him. “How about continuing this later?”

Mike turned. “So? Did he change his mind?”

“Not yet. Keep trying.” Evan looked back. Was that a spark of amusement? He took the guitar case and motioned for Duncan to follow. “Come on in, if you dare.” There was no mistaking the slight grin. For a moment, his friend looked almost like himself.

They didn't hide their surprise well at his appearance as they stood to greet him. And Duncan would notice.

“Mike Kean, Doug Lawrence, Stuart Lowe ... Duncan O’Neil.” They each took his hand, and he answered each with a nod.

Stu studied him up and down. “You’re Evan’s friend? Like ... actually his *friend*?”

Doug nudged him with a grimace. “He doesn’t mean to be offensive. His mouth overruns his brain too often. It’s nice to meet you. Evan has...”

“I’m not being offensive.” Stu shrugged. “Not to him, anyway, and Evan’s used to me by now. O’Neil? Are you Irish?”

Duncan perused him a moment. “Partly.”

“Shit, Evan, what’s wrong with you? You know the English and Irish don’t get along.”

“Ev is Irish.”

“Yeah, but he’s part English, too. That makes him okay to be around.”

Duncan raised an eyebrow. “If he is part Irish, and par’ English, I would say tha’ some of them do ge’ along.”

Stu laughed. “Damn, and he’s like ... freshly Irish. Even has the accent still.”

“Y’ havenae been ou’ of your back yard, I would guess.”

“I am out of my back yard. It’s up there in New Hampshire.” He looked at Evan. “That’s what he said, right? Kinda hard to tell.”

Duncan jumped back in before he could answer. “Y’ have been away from England too long.”

“Never been to England. Yet. Might someday.”

“Do y’ know where it is?”

“Yeah okay. And he’s damn funny, too.” Stu set a hand on Evan’s arm. “Hey man, he’s in as far as I’m concerned.”

“Stu.”

“What? You have asked him about the band, right? Isn’t that why he brought his guitar?”

Mike elbowed Stu and rolled his eyes. “Ignore him. He’s barely legal and we’re still trying to raise him. And by the way, he’s more Swiss than English. He tends to forget that.”

“At least I’m not a high-falutin’ ass.”

“At least I know what country my family came from.” He turned back to Duncan. “Doug’s family is very English, and Evan barely is, though maybe you know that already.”

Duncan eyed him. “And yours is English, as well, with the name of Kean.”

“Way back when, part English, part French, some Dutch, but we’ve been here since before it was the U.S., on both sides, so that’s all I claim.

And you don't sound very Irish, if I had to guess."

"Do I nae? Y' know a lo' of Irish, from Ireland, no' from the colonies?"

Mike stiffened. "I study language. Always have."

Evan figured it was time to interrupt but Doug beat him to it and suggested they could sit. Duncan refused anything to drink when Evan offered and took the seat farthest from the group.

Mike was still studying him until he noticed Evan's silent reprisal. "Oh, Gerry called while you were out. He wants us this Friday. Will that work for you?"

"I was supposed to work late. What time?"

"He's negotiable since it's a last-minute fill-in."

"I'll get off as early as I can; won't be before seven, though."

"So eight would work?"

"That's fine. I'll take my things in and meet you there." He looked over at Duncan. "Feel like sitting in Friday night? Nothing big, just a local bar we play all the time, and you should be familiar with most of the stuff we're doing."

His friend glanced at Mike, who had resumed the condescending stare. "If you want, bu' no' if I am in the way."

Mike could think whatever he wished. He'd have to get over it. "You won't be. We practice every night after work, except any Friday we're not playing, though that's always subject to change. We usually take Sundays off, too, depending..."

"Hell, not today, we're not." Stu pushed to the edge of his seat. "After what you've been saying, I wanna hear the guy play."

If he wanted to be as rude as Mike, Evan would tell Stuart to shut the hell up. "He's been on a bus since last night." And it was nearly five. "Do you want to lie down a while?"

"In the middle o' the day? Y' know I do no' do naps."

Stuart laughed. "Told you, didn't he? That's a true musician, always ready to play. So let's go." Jumping off the couch, he stood.

Evan looked for the reaction, but Duncan was watching Stu.

"Why not? If you're game. Evan *bas* said you're not bad." Mike stood, turning it into a dare.

"If Ev wants t' play, I will walk down with him."

Perfect answer. Not confrontational, but not letting Mike take control, as he was apt to do. Duncan knew he was being tested. Maybe Evan should have mentioned that his friend was not someone to take lightly, or to underestimate. His combination of quick intelligence and street smarts made him a venomous opponent when pushed too far.

With the hope that playing would break the tension between the two men, he stood, and Duncan did the same. So far, he was going along, but Evan knew that wouldn't last.

Stuart badgered him with questions on the way down to the basement. Where had he learned to play? Taught himself. How long had he been playing? A while. Who was his biggest influence? Clapton. Did he play anything except guitar? Didn't have any interest. Did he read music?

Duncan finally stopped, and turned. He stared silently at the kid giving him the third degree. Evan wondered if he should step in. Duncan hated to be badgered and he was tired and he didn't know Stu from Adam. Mike moved closer to Stu, as a warning.

Ignoring Mike, Duncan kept his eyes on the keyboardist. "Do y' always talk so much?"

Stu hesitated with a glance at Evan. "Generally."

Duncan shook his head, then continued down the second flight of stairs leading to the basement door.

Evan checked the reactions. Stu was speechless for a change. Doug was amused. Mike wasn't. He was used to being the only one who put Stuart 'in his place.' That could be trouble.

Susie picked up the last toy from the floor and dropped it into the plastic bin she kept for Timmy and Taylor. Now that her charges had gone home, she thought about catching up on paperwork she hadn't bothered to do yet. But she was tired tonight. So instead, she lit the three lavender-scented candles on her oak coffee table, flopped onto her favorite corner of the light brown sectional couch, and pulled her legs up in front, entwining them into a knot.

The silence was deafening after having the little ones there most of the day. She wondered if Evan would come back over. She doubted it, since his friend just arrived. What would he be like in person? Of course, she had heard a lot about Duncan and knew how excited Evan was about him coming, finally, after two years of inviting him. She also knew Evan wasn't sure he would stay. At least she would finally get to meet him, and no matter what he was like, she would welcome him for Evan's sake.

Even if the guy had pulled her best friend away when they were finally getting to spend time together. The show had kept her so busy recently, with extra practices and planning meetings and ordering costumes, that she had hardly been able to say two words to him in the last two weeks. And she'd missed him.

She could go over and say hello, but Duncan would likely want to get

settled in before being bombarded with company. She would. She still remembered feeling overwhelmed the first time she visited Evan after he moved to Lakewood. Mike, Stu and Doug were constantly there. Well, Doug wasn't so much, since he enjoyed the peace of having Stu out of their apartment now and then, but Mike and Stu were a bit overbearing. She liked them all from the start, but Stu was ... just constant, and Mike ... well, she still wasn't always sure he wanted her around. Although he acted the same with everyone else, too, except Evan. Evan had a way of being welcome anywhere. She didn't know anyone who didn't want him around. Maybe it was his Libra calmness, or because he was so ... perfect. Or nearly.

His perfection was covered by humility, though. She had never known anyone else who was so sweet and gentle, and yet so strong. He was also incredibly smart and had a wonderful sense of humor. Not to mention his looks: the solid shoulders and expansive chest muscles, which she didn't get to see often enough, along with his rich brown eyes and perfectly-layered brown hair. Okay, she preferred darker hair, but it wouldn't look good on him. And she wouldn't change anything about her best friend.

Maybe one thing, and maybe that could still happen.

Susie swallowed a sudden, deep breath, and stood. She needed to go work out, to her own music instead of the stuff she was using for the show. The long leggings she wore under her T-shirt ... under Evan's T-shirt that she'd borrowed and hadn't returned yet, would be fine. She could pull the shirt off when it started to get in her way, since she had her stretch tank underneath. Stu always teased her about wearing dance clothes even when she wasn't dancing, but they were comfortable and she didn't have to go change if she had a sudden urge to work out.

Rifling through her cassettes, she started to pick up a Mozart tape Evan gave her long ago. She wasn't in the mood for classical. What was she in the mood for? Going past Elton John, she stopped at Jimi Hendrix. She had forgotten to give it back to Stu. He would ask for it soon, but she could use it again first.

Blowing out the candles and grabbing her jazz shoes and keys, she slipped her flats onto her feet almost as an afterthought. The warmth of the hallway reminded her that her apartment windows were still open and it would chilly soon. Returning long enough to close them, she checked again to make sure her keys were in her hand and shut the door. Music greeted her; it swelled up from the basement. She could hear the drum beat from the top hallway and guitar as she descended far enough. That guitar wasn't Evan or Stu. Stu was on his keyboards. Susie could start to hear it. They surely weren't practicing with his friend already. Evan said he was coming

in on the bus and Chicago was quite a long ride. She got tired on their car trips to Pennsylvania, though Evan said it was because she wasn't used to holding still for so long at a time.

Susie opened the basement door slowly and was greeted with the blast of a guitar riff. She held still and listened. The song was familiar, and Mike's voice, and Doug, and Stu, but ... if that was Duncan, Evan had under-emphasized his skill. It was ... astounding, given he was only a small club musician. Of course, so was Raucous at the moment but they wouldn't stay there. They were headed toward bigger things. This guy should be, also. Honestly, he should be there already.

They wouldn't see her from the far end of the room since it was dark on her end and she was glad of that. It would give her a better chance to listen without interrupting. She moved up only to where she was still hidden in the shadows and set her things on the floor against the wall, then stood, watching.

Evan had switched to bass. She didn't get to see that often since he was the band's lead guitarist and either Stu or Mike did bass depending whether the song needed Stu on keyboards, and she enjoyed the difference of his sound. He had a flair they didn't have. Stu was technically incredible on the bass but his best flair was on his main instrument. Mike didn't like to play and lead sing both so he only did the basic part. Evan ... was as incredible on bass as his friend was on guitar.

And he was incredible on guitar. He also didn't look the way she expected. His hair was a deep shade of brown and hung a ways past his shoulders. From this distance, it nearly blended in with his black leather vest. Well, it could be imitation leather, she supposed, but somehow, she didn't imagine it was. He didn't look fake in any way. His jeans were well-worn, with a tear above one knee, and the T-shirt he hadn't bothered to tuck in was faded to a soft red and could have been painted to his chest, a muscular, well-toned chest to match the well-toned arms. Even with the vest hiding part of him, his clothes showed him off well. There was no extra material. Susie often wished Evan would wear his that way.

And he *was* good on that guitar, a deep red guitar with a white fretboard. But, he acted as though he knew he was good. The other guys watched each other and Evan's friend, but he watched no one. Now and then he focused on his guitar, though as masterfully as he manipulated the strings, he couldn't need to concentrate on them. She supposed he'd heard too often how good he was, but that didn't fit the image she had of him from what Evan said. Evan had never been impressed with people who were too full of themselves. He would, however, want this kind of talent in

the band if possible. Would he befriend anyone for only that reason? No. She couldn't see it.

Susie crept closer, still hidden by the darkness of the large basement. The sound was more intense than usual, more alive ... hypnotic. They had talked about needing either a second guitarist or bass player, so they could always have one on each and still leave Stu on his keyboards without pushing Mike onto bass, and they had auditioned a few, but none had fit well. Nathan fit in musically, when he tried hard enough, but they hadn't found a replacement after he left. And he could never have improved enough to compare to this.

When the song ended, Stu's voice rang through the basement. He was as impressed as she was, and despite his nonchalant attitude, he wasn't at all easy to impress. Doug agreed, though more quietly. Evan was watching Mike. Susie knew it was his opinion Evan most wanted. Their lead stayed quiet. She imagined he didn't like the look of this guy with the torn jeans, the long hair, and the black leather. Mike could really be a snob when he tried. And he seemed to be trying.

She ventured closer yet, quietly, watching.

"Well?" Evan finally pushed Mike.

"Well, what?"

"What do you mean, what? Do we offer him a job if he wants it?"

At Mike's continued silence, the guitarist pulled the strap from around his neck. "Man, if he does no' want me in, he is no' about t' say so in front of me. And I only came t' visit."

Her stomach fluttered. Evan hadn't mentioned his accent. It was gorgeous, not American, but she couldn't quite place it. She didn't remember Evan bothering to tell her he was foreign.

He returned his instrument to its case, and she watched him bend down, the skin of his knee pressing against the torn denim, long fingers pushing hair back out of his way. Even from this distance, he emitted a feeling of sensuality, not only because of his bronzed skin and slender, muscular build accenting a sculpted jawline, but also because of the way he moved: rhythmically, gracefully. He was graceful for a man, but still ... so fully masculine.

"Well hell, I don't know what you're waiting for." Mike shrugged. "We all knew he was in as soon as you said he was coming."

The guy stood again, holding onto his guitar case, his head tilted, barely. "No' if I am no' wanted here. I did no' come for a job."

Not wanted? Susie couldn't imagine any band not wanting him. He would be good for them, maybe the finishing touch they needed.

She moved into the glow from the light over their heads. “He didn’t seem to want me here when I came, either, but he still puts up with me.” Susie smiled at Evan, ignoring Mike, then forced herself to appear calmer than she felt when she met the stranger’s eyes. “Of course they want you. Evan wouldn’t have asked you to play with them if they didn’t. That’s what he meant. They trust his judgment.”

The guitarist’s eyes bore into hers: blue eyes, serious, piercing blue eyes. Maybe she should have stayed out of it, but she always had trouble staying out of the band’s business. And she didn’t want Mike to chase him off, for Evan’s sake as well as for Raucous as a whole.

Evan propped his bass against its stand and came over to join her. “Been here long?” He set a hand on her back.

“No, but long enough. He’s even better than you said.” She spoke softly, so the man whose eyes she could still feel wouldn’t overhear.

“Come let me introduce you.”

As Susie walked beside him, she did her best not to let her nervousness show. What was wrong with her? She hadn’t been nervous when she met the other guys; well, not very. And she was nineteen now, not sixteen as she’d been on her first visit.

The guitarist’s eyes remained on her face. They were gorgeous: bright blue, with long lashes, and so shockingly direct. She generally didn’t like stubble on a man’s chin, but his accentuated his ruggedness. Maybe that wasn’t the right word. It was more ... a sensual aura. As she had felt at a greater distance, the man truly emitted pure sensuality.

“Suse, this is Duncan O’Neil. Susie Brooks.”

She barely heard Evan, but she already knew his friend’s name.

He extended a hand without releasing her eyes. “It is a pleasure.”

She felt the calluses on his fingers as he gripped her hand firmly, but carefully, as though trying not to hurt her. “Thank you. It’s nice to meet you finally, since I’ve heard so much.” Good. She had managed to keep her voice from shaking.

He glanced at Evan with a slightly raised eyebrow, just one. It was adorable.

“I know you remember me talking about Susie.” Evan touched her back again, her lower back: a possessive touch that didn’t make much sense, considering.

Duncan noticed and released her hand. He studied her as though trying to remember. Evan obviously hadn’t talked about her much.

“My friend from Pennsylvania. I wrote that she moved out here.”

Now, a sign of recognition. “The one your mum took care of?” He

tilted his head with a touch of a frown. “He did no’ describe you well. I was picturing a young girl, which you are no’.”

A young girl? Was that how Evan saw her?

“I can no’ imagine why anyone would no’ want you around.”

Susie pulled her eyes away in hopes he wouldn’t see the warmth she could feel crawling into her cheeks. Why was he getting to her? It wasn’t as though she had never received a compliment from a guy. She’d received plenty, but most had only been lines, not real.

“I am sorry. I did no’ mean t’ embarrass you.”

She forced an imitation calm and grinned at him. “No, it’s ... I was thinking the same thing ... about you... I mean...” Cursing herself silently, she shook her head and took a deep breath. “I’m sorry. It’s been a long week. What I mean is ... Mike was just giving you a hard time. You fit with the band well. I hope you’ll stay and give it a try.”

“Hey, that *is* a compliment, coming from Susie.” Stu jumped in and nudged Duncan’s shoulder. “She’s the one who always has an objection for everyone we audition.”

Duncan barely glanced at Stu and his eyes were back on her. “D’ you hang with the band much?”

Band talk. She could handle that. “Pretty often. Whenever I’m not working.”

“In that case, I migh’ just hang around a while.”

Shivers ran through her body. Was he hitting on her? Why would a guy like him have any interest in her? Or was he another who hit on every girl he met? Somehow, she didn’t think so. He was completely wrapped up in her, at least for the moment, and they had just met. How wrapped up would he get if they actually...

Evan rubbed her back and she vaguely heard him invite her over for pizza while Stu teased about “another one” flirting.

Flirting. Maybe he was a natural flirt. Evan didn’t seem concerned. She was making too much of it.

Evan watched Duncan as he studied her.

He was obviously attracted to Susie, but so was most every other male she met. Why wouldn’t they be? She was beautiful, and not only on the outside, but also from within. The shiny, long black hair contrasted with her dark blue eyes and alabaster skin, along with her perfect features were just the frame she had to have. Anything less would have been unnatural. A Monet couldn’t go into a garage sale frame. He supposed they did at times, but Susie ... she was balanced, not only with the light and dark exterior

complimentary contrast but also her gentleness mixed with her strength, her giving nature combined with her wariness. It all blended together and stood out like any outstanding impressionist painting. And an impression of her was all most people ever got. Very few truly saw the full scene.

For Duncan to so overtly show interest in a girl, any girl, though was ... well, Evan had never seen it. Girls constantly showed plenty of interest in him, but he rarely paid much attention to them, even when he dated one. Although dating wasn't exactly what Evan would call it. A date generally involved getting to know your companion and that didn't seem to happen with Duncan and his ... flings. Usually.

He was still quiet as they sat around the apartment after pizza was delivered and consumed, the rest stored in the refrigerator. Stu kept trying to draw Duncan into the conversation, and his friend wasn't being rude, exactly. He had again chosen the chair farthest from the others and answered direct questions but didn't elaborate. Although Evan knew Duncan's knowledge of music would easily rival Stuart's.

"We need more good rock and less of this mushy stuff that's trying to pass for rock or pop or whatever it's trying to pass for. Look at John Denver. *Sunshine ... on my shoulders...*" Stu sang the first line, and went back to complaining. "What is that? A child could write those lyrics. And if you can't sing more than two notes, then why bother?"

Susie pulled a leg up beneath her. "It's easy listening."

"Easy for who? Please." He went on to sing the next line, in a fairly close imitation, then shook his head. "Is he kidding, or what?"

"Maybe some of us are tired of the whining about how bad things are with the world. You know, there's a place for every type of music. Just because it doesn't have Led Zeppelin's strength or Eric Clapton's technique doesn't mean it's not good. I like John Denver's music. It's soothing."

"You're a girl. What do you know?"

"Excuse me? I've been into music almost as long as you have been. No, I don't play it, but I listen to all kinds, and I had my own music teacher." She glanced at Evan. "And being male or female has nothing to do with being able to appreciate music, or anything else."

"Oh... like..." Stu tried to hold a grin.

"Don't even say it."

"Well, you said..."

"You like Clapton?" Duncan interrupted.

She turned her attention to him with a touch of surprise. "Yes. Not all of the songs, but I love his playing and his voice. I really like *Lovin' You Lovin' Me*. It's beautiful."

“The words or the music?”

Susie stared. Evan couldn't tell whether she was deciding how to answer, or wondering why Duncan had finally decided to start talking. A girl who was into Clapton would definitely get his friend's attention.

“Both, together. I really can't like a song if I don't like both the music and lyrics. If one or the other irritates me, I won't listen to it.”

“There are a lo' of songs out there that have great music, though, even if the words are no' good.”

“I'm sure there are, but what is the point of listening to them if it's not enjoyable? And if part of it annoys you, how is that enjoyable? Isn't that what music is for?”

“Sometimes. Bu' sometimes it is just about the feeling of it.”

“Well maybe so, but unless the feeling is supposed to be irritation, the words have to be as good as the music and vice versa. Otherwise, it doesn't work.”

“And if the songwriter wants y' to feel annoyed?”

“Why would he? Who would buy music that annoys them?”

“I have seen tha' many people seem t' enjoy being annoyed. Have y' not?”

“Well, sure, but ... there are enough annoying things out there. Why would you use music that way?”

Evan couldn't keep from chuckling.

She shot him a look. “Don't you dare join the boys' club, here, and act like I don't know anything just 'cause I'm a girl. I swear I'll never talk to you again.”

He raised his eyebrows and tried to control another chuckle. “Oh, I think you will. You never stay mad at me long.”

“There's a first time for everything.” Her expression was serious but the sparkle in her eyes gave her away.

“I'm not laughing at you. Of course you're right.”

“Then what's so funny?”

“I only wondered if you would argue. Most girls will no' argue with a musician abou' music.” He seemed more himself the longer he talked to her. If he would shave the beard...

“She's not a girl; she's just one of us. Evan raised her more like a brother than a sister.”

He began to answer Stu, but she beat him to it. “Evan did not raise me. And he's not my brother.”

“You grew up in the same house. What's the difference?”

The look she gave Stu warned him to back off, and she turned to Evan.

But what could he say? Nothing he was ready to admit.

She got up. "I have things I need to get done. Thanks for the pizza. It was nice to meet you, Duncan. I do hope you'll stay a while."

He stood. "I did no' mean t' offend you."

"Oh, you didn't. I love to talk about music, whether we agree or not. Another time?" With his nod, she left the apartment.

Evan repeated her glance at Stu, and followed. He should have been able to think of an answer since she'd been asking him for one. She stopped in between her door and his when he called her name.

"You know Stu was just trying to get to you because he likes to see you riled. What did you expect me to say?"

She came to him, close, and met his eyes. "Do you think of me as a little sister? As a child, as you gave your friend the impression I was? I want to know, Evan. Do you?"

No, not anything like a sister. He could never think of her that way. But she was young. Nineteen. Five years younger.

"Evan?"

"No, Angel. I have never thought of you as a sister. And I have not thought of you as a child for quite some time."

"Then..." Her gaze reached in, pressing the issue.

She was pressing the issue. Finally. For the first time. But he couldn't quite do it. "You're my best friend. You always have been." He took her hand. "You always will be."

She was silent for a long while, waiting. Maybe it was time to tell her. His nerves interfered. She was still young...

"You promise?"

Or not. Maybe all she wanted was his reassurance that no one else would take her place. Was she afraid with as much as he talked about wanting Duncan here, he wouldn't spend as much time with her, or would need her less? He couldn't possibly ever need her less, or more.

"Suse, I promise no one will ever come between us. No one will ever matter more to me than you do."

She held him, her head against his shoulder, brushing his jaw. A soft floral scent combined with her own, and the warmth in her hands penetrated his shirt right through to his skin. Her arms around him felt too natural not to belong there. Even when they dated other people, there was never anything permanent in the relationships. She would see eventually that she belonged with him.

Too soon, she moved away. "I do need to get some things done. Can I ride in with you tomorrow?"

Her question didn't surprise him. Any time they had any kind of friction, she spent the next day or two staying closer than usual, as though she honestly thought she might lose him. There was no chance of that. "Of course. But I thought I'd offer Duncan the job I've been holding at the gym, so he may be going in with me, too. If you don't mind?"

"You know I don't mind. Do you think he's going to stay?"

"I don't know, but I'm going to try my darndest."

"And not just for the band."

"No. Even if he's not interested in the band. And not just because I enjoy his company, but because ... he needs a home base. I can see it. Something's happened."

"Yes. I don't even know him and I can see it. So did I pass his test?" Her eyes sparkled.

"I would guess so. And don't take it personally. He talked more to you than he does to most people until he gets to know them."

"Well, I hope he'll like it here."

Evan watched her try to act like it didn't matter to her, other than for his sake. He didn't think it was quite true. "Is Kate home?"

"Not that I know of." She turned to unlock her door.

He walked her in and touched her back as she turned on the lights. He loved that she was wearing his shirt. His own act came when she "borrowed" anything that belonged to him. He pretended it mattered, somewhat, though he supposed she knew darn well she could borrow anything he had and keep whatever she wanted.

Outside her closed door, he inhaled deeply. In time it would happen. He had to wait. She wasn't ready yet for all he wanted to offer, and as long as he'd been waiting, he wasn't sure how well he would control it once it went that far, once he allowed himself to kiss her, to take her in his arms.

He saw her attraction to Duncan, and Mike had mentioned it when they were alone in the kitchen. Evan was as used to seeing that as he was to seeing men attracted to her. Every girl he'd dated had been attracted to his friend when they met him. Only one tried to follow through. Duncan told her to get lost. Physical attraction was only that. Evan had seen her attracted to men before. It didn't matter.

Susie slid out of her shoes and went to her cassette holder, picking up another she'd borrowed from Stu. It was funny how Duncan stayed quiet until she brought up Eric Clapton. She knew that's what got his attention by the way his eyes snapped to hers. He was likely a fan. She really couldn't call herself one, though she liked him okay. But Jim Croce, Carly Simon,

and Elton John were more her style. She wondered how he felt about them. Maybe she would ask, when she got enough nerve.

She did really like *Lovin' You* though.

Pulling the cassette from its case, she broke the silence of her apartment by clicking open the door of her stereo/cassette player. It was at the beginning of side one, where she always left them, so she slid the tape in with side two facing her and hit rewind. Sitting in front of the machine, Susie closed her eyes and listened as the thin, brown tape moved from one side to the other until it was close to where she wanted. After the hours she had spent in front of her stereo, rewinding or fast forwarding, she pretty well knew by the pitch how close it was to the beginning or end. A crazy trick to teach herself, she supposed, but it was music-related, in a way, or just a distraction to keep her mind off other things in the silence.

Deciding it should be in about the right spot, she stopped the spin and pushed play. *Bottle of Red Wine* was ending. Close enough; she would wait and let it finish.

At least he admitted he didn't think of her as a sister. That was something. Not much, but something. She felt his hand on her back; she loved when he set a hand on her back. It felt both comforting and possessive. Maybe she shouldn't think his possessiveness of her was comforting. Kate would throw a fit if she ever told her roommate it was. But it was. As the last strains faded, the feel of Evan's hand on her back was replaced by the feel of his friend holding her hand, looking at her as though the world would stop if she wasn't there. Susie admonished herself. She was imagining things. But his eyes ... and the way he held her ... even if it had only been her hand...

The music pulled her back again. Maybe Duncan was a Clapton fan, but *Lovin' You Lovin' Me* was Evan's song. He sang it at nearly every gig they had, and she'd been the one to request that he learn it.

She didn't sing along this time, as she often did. Instead, she let the music, and the words, invade her senses and saw Evan on stage, singing to her. Why couldn't he see her as more than a friend, even a best friend? She wasn't a child any longer. Her mom was married by her age. Of course, she wasn't ready for that, but she was ready for something ... real. And she wanted it with Evan.

Susie closed her eyes and let the song finish, then clicked it off, hit fast forward to leave it at the beginning of side one and pulled it from the stereo. A noise at the door broke the spell and she turned to see her roommate come in. Not alone.

"Hey Suse, this is Kirk, the lead in our play. Are we interrupting, or

would you mind if we went over some lines here?”

Susie pushed to her feet. The guy let his eyes roam her frame. “No, it’s okay. I’ll take my work back to my room.”

The guy smirked. “She could stay out here and read with us. I have the perfect part for her.”

She glanced at Kate, who didn’t seem to notice the tone of his voice, or didn’t care. “Thanks, but I really need to get this stuff done.”

Kate said they’d go to her room so she could work unbothered. Kirk obediently followed. Kirk. Right. It was probably Bob, or Frank, and he was trying to make himself sound more theatrical. Everyone Kate brought home was so fake it was ridiculous. Why she would want a guy like that instead of Mike was beyond her. So Mike could be a bit of a snob, but underneath, he was a great guy. And he would likely be in a better mood more often if Kate would stop messing with him and just say yes or no.

But then, who was she to criticize? She couldn’t even tell her best friend how she really felt about him. The rejection would be more than she wanted to face, and then what? No. It had to be his move. She would wait.

About the Books

Rehearsal is a series of novels following a young dance teacher and her best friend, along with his band and their families, through the turbulent world of Seventies music. With songs from the era highlighted, as well as cultural issues and headlines, the series explores relationships, love, loss, and passions. The characters grow and change as they move into the early Eighties and have to bend with the shifting winds or fight against it.

About the Author

LK Hunsaker is the author of a string of intertwined novels centered around the arts and societal issues, combined with strong romantic elements. Spouse of a career soldier, she has traveled widely, moved several times, raised two children, and earned degrees in psychology and art. Her short stories, poems, articles, and book reviews have been published in literary ezines and print magazines. She is now settled in western Pennsylvania.