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SNARE

DEBORAH J LEDFORD

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PROLOGUE

VALENTINE, NEBRASKA
AUGUST 29, 1995 - 11:29 p.m.

Katina’s eyes locked on the straight-back chair she had wedged under the doorknob. From behind the door her father’s sharp insults continued, interspersed by her mother’s pleas.

“No. Karl! That was my father’s,” her mother cried. A thud, followed by a crash, split the air in a crescendo of chaos. Katina imagined what was most likely a hand-painted pottery bowl scattered in shards on the living room floor.

Sitting on her bed, knees tucked under her chin, she fingered the sheet dotted with tiny roses, faded to the faintest shade of pink.

Her father’s rage filtered through the thin walls of her bedroom. Two hours now by her Hello Kitty alarm clock. Her parents’ loud, then calmer voices competed with the sports announcer and crowd chatter from a ballgame on the television in the front room.

Struggling to make out words, Katina searched her mind for anything she could have done to have made her father so mad.

She wished for a radio or record player, anything that might drown out the sounds. She wondered how long *this* fight would last. There had been so many in the past few weeks. They seemed to get worse each time.

Streaked ivory wallpaper peeled near the heat register in the cramped bedroom, furnished only with a twin-sized bed and a scuffed desk. The room displayed none of the comforts the few kids she knew took for granted. A tattered, handmade quilt, passed down from her father’s mother, offered the only color in the room. Its unraveling edge brushed against the frayed braided rug on the floor.

Even the table lamp that took up much of the desk had been spray painted a color her father laughingly called “*Navajo White*.”

Just like you.” This always confused Katina because her mother often proudly proclaimed she was Taos Pueblo Indian, that Katina was too—not Navajo. But she never corrected her white father, or asked him why he said such a thing, knowing the sting of his hand on her cheek would be his answer.

The jewelry box her Aunt Sylvie had sent for her eighth birthday drew her to the desk under the cracked window-pane. She lifted its imitation-leather lid and a lovely melody tinkled as the ballerina rose and spun on the tips of her toes.

“It all ends, tonight!” her father roared.

She squeezed her eyes shut and remembered the party last month that no other kids had been invited to attend. Her mother, her constant companion, sat alone with her on the bedroom floor. Pink foil hats with pompoms on top were fastened to their heads by elastic bands.

“*Your Aunt Sylvie sent this all the way from the reservation,*” her mother said, clapping her hands. “*Open it up, Kitty Kat.*”

As excited as her mother, Katina tore into the newspaper-filled cardboard box to discover another box, then a smaller one. For a moment Katina stopped to watch her smoothing out the *Taos News*, printed two states away.

She reached out to stroke her mother’s drape of shining black hair that trailed one side of her face to pool on the floor beside her. “*You’re so pretty, Momma. Will I ever be as pretty as you?*”

She stroked Katina’s hand and said, “*You’re already beautiful, my princess. And you sing like an angel, just like your auntie. Come on now, let’s see what treasure she found for you.*”

Katina opened the final cardboard box and discovered a jewelry chest. She opened the lid and listened, enchanted as a clear tinkling filled the room. Her mother’s eyes closed and Katina knew a memory must have taken over her mind.

A bright stutter of light filled the room, sweeping Katina from her recollection. Lightning. No thunder followed. She imagined someone in the yard taking flash pictures of her. She smiled her biggest smile and spun round and round, mimicking the tiny ballerina. After her fourth twirl, she stopped, curtsied and blew a kiss at the imaginary photographer.

Looking down at the jewelry box, she touched the dancing lady’s pink lace tutu and felt its vibrations with each tiny note. Another flash, longer than the first, caught her attention. She raised her head in time to see the outline of a bare oak tree in the yard, then blackness again.

A deafening clap of thunder shook the window. Katina's gangly body jerked, knocking the tiny dancer off its spinning platform. She gasped in anguish at the lifeless form cradled in her palm.

Another burst of light, briefer this time, illuminated the windowpane. She slid the ballerina into her skirt pocket and traced the length of the fissure in the window with the tip of her finger. It always reminded her of a crooked road on a map. A half inch point of air blew the whisper of a breeze on her neck.

Shivering, she plugged the bullet hole with her finger and remembered the time her father fired the shiny silver pistol he kept on his nightstand. He swore over and over he wasn't trying to shoot her, but she hadn't believed him. She touched the now cold finger to her hot cheek.

The house stilled. She froze and listened for any sound. She didn't even hear the TV anymore. The silence that replaced angry murmurs seemed even scarier than the fight.

She waited for the door to her parents' bedroom down the hall to close as it often would after their arguments. Other cries would follow, although her mother reassured her time and time again they were not screams of pain.

Her heart fluttering in her chest, Katina crossed the few steps to her door and laid her ear against it to listen.

A loud crack split the quiet.

She yelped and jumped from the door, her hand flying up to cover her mouth. She knew the noise wasn't thunder from the storm outside.

"I won't miss next time, Santana," her father yelled.

Trembling, ramrod-straight, Katina held her breath and prayed to hear her mother's voice. After what seemed like a long time, her mother's muffled words filtered through the door. "Karl, stop it. Now!"

Katina kept her eyes on the door and hoped her mother wasn't as scared as she was.

The faint smell of gun smoke tickled her nostrils. She clamped her bottom lip between her teeth and bit down. A warm trickle slid down her lip. She swept the back of her hand across her mouth. A smear of blood stained the length of her middle finger.

She grabbed the chair's back to yank it from under the doorknob. Her mother's warning to never come out until she gave the all-clear stopped her. She tucked up against the door

and listened again.

Her mother screamed. Her father roared words that always made them both cry: “You’re nothing but a good-for-nothing squaw. What good are you? None. You’re nothing, just like your less-than-good-for-nothing squaw brat.” Then he said words she had never heard before. “This is your last night, Princess Squash Blossom. First, your worthless papoose, then you.”

This time, closer to her room, another crack shot new fear through Katina. Tree branches screeched against the windowpane as a burst of wind rattled the glass. Thumps and thuds against the hallway walls leading to her room locked the screams in her throat.

“No, Karl, please,” her mother pleaded just outside her door.

The doorknob jiggled and Katina’s heart pounded in her ears. Her hand went to her shoulder that still hurt in cold weather. She thought about the sound of her bone popping under her father’s thumb as he clutched her last year. Another chill shook her body.

Feeling like a trapped animal, Katina paced a tight circle in front of the bed. Her eyes darted from the door to the window and back again.

“Get off me, you unfaithful bitch,” her father yelled outside her door. “This is happening. You can’t stop it.”

“Katina! Run!” her mother said in a tone filled with terror.

Katina nudged the window’s casing with all her might. It wouldn’t budge. She stared at the rusted nail heads her father had hammered in, “*So that nobody will take you,*” he said. She hadn’t believed him then, either.

She grabbed the lamp and threw it at the window. The crash freed her from her cage and she scrambled atop the desk. Careful to avoid shards of glass, she jumped out the jagged windowpane.

Dropping onto the ground, raindrops the size of dimes pelted her. Her sneakers pummeled the mud as she sprinted toward the next farmhouse a mile away.

Heart pounding, she ran until too winded to go farther. Spotting a tree three times as big around as her body, she hid behind it, gasping.

She sat, wet and shivering, under the canopy of dancing leaves. She had run so far she could barely see the roof of her house. The rain had stopped a while earlier and every-thing smelled clean.

Katina wondered how much longer she should wait for her mother. Fighting the urge to return home, she reached into her

pocket and found her ballerina. Exhausted, she caressed the figurine's lacy skirt as she leaned against the rough bark of the tree and drifted off.

She had no idea how long she slept. Cold, clammy dampness woke her. She tucked her knees to her chest and clenched her chattering teeth together. She shivered, listening to dogs baying far away. Eyes wide, she feared they, too, were coming to get her. Wind blew through the tree above her and the howls stopped.

She closed her eyes for a moment and caught her mother's scent of rosewater and gardenias. Calm filled her body, as though she were surrounded and protected in a way she couldn't comprehend. A song, more of a chant, came to her mind and she began to hum.

The half-moon touched treetops and stars winked at her from high above. A flicker on the horizon caught her attention. She frowned at the orange glow, knowing the sun had set many hours before.

Mumbled obscenities floated her way. Her father passed, so close she could have reached out to touch the sleeve of his jacket. She tucked behind the tree and prayed he would not find her.

"Katina? Where are you?" he shouted. "Katina, come on out! Your momma wants to see you. Everything's all right, now. She sent me to come get you."

Katina always did what her father told her, so she let out a deep breath and looked at the ballerina for a moment before she slid it back in her pocket.

Taking a step from the tree, she saw the silver gun clutched in her father's hand glinting in the moon's glow.

She eased behind the trunk and slid off her shoes, watching as her father continued onward. Then she turned and sprinted barefoot in the opposite direction, toward the neighbors she had never met.

After a dozen strides she glanced over her shoulder to see the cuffs of her father's white shirt glowing in the moonlight.

The gap between them grew. She ran on, pumping her arms and legs as fast as they would take her.

In the distance, where her home should have been, a fireball raged.

1

*BRYSON CITY, NORTH CAROLINA
FIFTEEN YEARS LATER
THURSDAY*

Deep in the Smoky Mountains of western North Carolina, Steven Hawk leaned against the counter in his mother's kitchen. Sipping a cup of coffee, he watched his girlfriend, Inola Walela, as she crouched under the sink to repair the garbage disposal.

Less than a minute later, Inola scooted out and tucked in the shirt of her khaki police officer's uniform. "Try it now, Steven."

He flipped the switch and the disposal crunched and whirred to life. "You shouldn't make everything you do look so easy. Mama's probably got a whole list of chores her incompetent son can't manage."

"You know I don't mind helping," Inola said.

"All set now, Mama," he yelled out.

Hawk's mother rounded the corner, her slippers padding along the spotless linoleum. "Praise be, you fixed it," she said, clasping her hands together. "Bless your heart, Inola. What would we do without you?"

Inola blushed as she released her hair from a band, freeing the shining black, shoulder-length mane that framed her glowing copper skin, enhanced by the high cheekbones of her Cherokee heritage. "The switch just needed to be reset."

"Inola to the rescue, again. I didn't have a clue what to do." Hawk bent his six-foot-four body a foot lower to kiss Inola's forehead, then turned his attention to his mother. "What did you manage to stick in there this time?"

His mother took a mangled butter knife from the counter and showed it to them.

"You have to be more careful!" He grinned to cut the sting of his words.

She shrugged, tossing the utensil into the trash can and went

to the refrigerator. “It was an accident, sugar. I’m not losing my faculties.” She emerged, arms heaped with produce and a glass dish.

“What are you doing?” Hawk asked.

“Making you and Kenny a sandwich.”

“Mama, you don’t have to—”

“Hush now. Come around noon, you’ll be wantin’ this meatloaf. Inola, there’s plenty here for you, too.”

“Better not, Vivien,” Inola said. “I’m going to get fat with all your good cooking.”

“Ah, honey, you need your strength keepin’ up with all those boys you work with.”

Hawk picked off a piece of meat from the dish and winked at her. “No mayo.” He patted his flat stomach and a cough he couldn’t suppress racked his body.

His mother frowned and clutched the neck of her robe, her eyes flitting to Inola then back to her son. “I wish you’d see Doctor Everett about that cough of yours.”

“Smoke inhalation takes time to heal. I’m getting better every day. Isn’t that right, Inola?”

“But, Steven—”

“I’m fine, Mama. Quit worrying about me.”

“That’ll never happen.”

He couldn’t help returning his mother’s smile.

She shoved up a sleeve of her dark chocolate-colored sweater to expose an arm the same shade. A clunky watch rattled on her wrist.

He gave Inola a concerned glance before turning back to his mother. “Why are you wearing Dad’s old watch?”

“I like to think of your daddy in the morning.” She fumbled with the worn leather band. “I wear the fancy one you gave me last Christmas when I leave the house.”

Hawk frowned, unable to take his eyes off his father’s watch. He often worried she spent too much time locked in memories of the man they had lost years earlier.

“When are you gonna finish building the back porch for me?” she asked. “Inola would help, wouldn’t you, honey?”

“Absolutely.” Inola wrapped her arm around the older woman’s shoulder. “I’ve got every tool we’d ever need.”

“We’ll get to it soon,” he said, still thinking about the watch on his mother’s arm.

“You’ve been telling me that going on seven years now.”

“I know. I will. I promise.”

“Sure would be nice to enjoy the evenin’ breeze from out there.”

He avoided his mother’s yearnings and glanced at the clock above the stove. “Damn. I’m gonna be late.”

She grabbed a dishtowel from the counter and swatted his backside with it. “Mind that mouth of yours, son.”

“Sorry, Mama.”

“I ironed your shirt. It’s hanging on the door.”

“I already ironed it,” he mumbled as he turned down the narrow hall of his mother’s modest three-bedroom house and entered the farthest door.

His gunbelt lay on a quilt atop the bed. He gazed at the leather-sheathed gear as he slid on a crisp, sand-colored shirt, then tucked the tail into a pair of matching slacks. He moved closer to the mirror hanging over the bureau and pinned on a silver badge. Above his left breast pocket he fastened a name plate stenciled with the letters DEPUTY S. HAWK.

Turning around, he noticed his twelve-year-old sister, Annie, dressed in yellow pajamas patterned with ice cream cones, standing in the doorway.

“Did you fix the disposal?”

“Inola did.”

“She can do anything, can’t she?”

“Why do you think I keep her around?” Hawk kidded with a wink.

“‘Cause she’s beautiful.”

“Yeah, that too.”

“Mama’s been needing your help a lot, lately,” she said, knuckling sleep from her eye. “You may as well move back home.”

“Now that’d be a fine thing, wouldn’t it? A grown man living with his mama and little sister.”

“I think it’d be sweet.” For a moment she smiled wide enough to reveal the entire top row of her braces. She pressed her lips together and fidgeted with the hem of her top. “She’s been kinda out of it this week.”

“She’s fine, baby girl. There’s no need for you to worry. I guess she’s got a lot on her mind.”

She sat on the bed and stroked a case on the utility belt that contained a pair of handcuffs. “Where’s your medal, Stevie?”

“It’s not to be worn except for special occasions.”

“Like what?”

He thought about Annie’s question as he adjusted the thick black gunbelt around his waist. He withdrew his firearm and checked the chambered round of the Glock 23 semi-automatic and re-holstered the weapon on his right hip. Then he removed two ammunition clips from their sheaths and made sure they were each fully stacked with thirteen .40 caliber rounds.

“Well, let me see. Funerals for fallen comrades are about the only reason I can think of.”

“Shoot, if I won that thing I’d wear it pinned to my forehead so everyone could see it.”

“That would be a little prideful, don’t you think?”

Annie shrugged and lowered her head. “Still . . .”

“Mama’s keeping the medal in a safe place for me. You can look at it whenever you want.”

He removed a metal baton, and with a snap of his wrist flicked the steel wand to its full three-foot length.

“Cool,” Annie said. “I want one of those.”

Hawk grinned. “Maybe someday.”

He telescoped the baton shut and slid it into a ring along the belt. Unsnapping another sheath, he pulled out a slender Surefire tactical flashlight and clicked it on. The bright light lit up the bin of games and stuffed animals at his feet.

Hawk smoothed his hair, clipped so short it denied any possibility of becoming an unruly afro, swept a white Stetson from the bureau, squared it on his head and turned to Annie. Pinching the brim between his thumb and forefinger he told her, “You be good now, you hear?”

Annie stood tall and saluted her brother. “Keep us safe, Deputy Hawk.”

He caressed Annie’s dark cheek before he strode down the hall. Back in the kitchen, he hugged his mother and then stepped to Inola for a kiss.

“I’ll walk you out,” she said.

“Thanks for stoppin’ by, son.”

“You bet. Just . . . be careful, will you please?”

“I’m fixin’ up a pot of beans and a mess of collard greens. Supper’s at seven.”

“I’ll do my best,” he said over his shoulder.

“We’ll be here,” Inola said loud enough for his mother to hear.

Opening the front door, he scanned the recently painted

crimson finish. He looked at Inola and shook his head. “Don’t you think red is too bold, Mama?”

His mother peered around the corner, beaming. “I love it. Brightens up the place. Now everybody’s gonna know where Swain County’s best lawman’s mama lives.”

“I’m not so sure that’s a good thing,” he muttered to Inola. Shutting the door behind them, he grabbed her around the waist and pulled her into his arms.

“I don’t need to be back on patrol for another hour.” She ran a finger along Hawk’s badge. “In ten minutes we could be back at your place for a quickie.”

“Tempting, but I’m late already.” He laced his fingers in her thick hair and eased her lips to his own.

“I’ll stick around here for a bit. Turns out, your mama does have a list of chores for me.”

“I swear, you’re the best thing that’s happened to this family in a long time, Inola.”

Tears glistened in her eyes. “Well, I guess that’s fair because your family is the best thing that’s *ever* happened to me.”

“I’ll see you tonight,” he said, then hurried to his Dodge Ram pickup parked at the curb behind Inola’s Bryson City police cruiser. He drove from his mother’s house to a different street with single-family dwellings a few blocks away.

He stopped in front of the three-bedroom clapboard house he and Inola had discovered a few months ago. He assessed the property, relieved to see the realtor sign still stuck at a haphazard angle in the untended lawn. The place had been vacant for three years and he hoped the chipped paint and overgrowth that nearly hid the property would drive away any other serious prospects a while longer.

Although Hawk loved Inola, and he knew she felt the same, both had agreed the leap to sharing a mortgage was an extreme commitment this early in their relationship. And for some reason Hawk couldn’t figure out, Inola would change the subject every time he even mentioned getting married.

He accelerated out of the neighborhood and turned onto the mountainous two-lane highway. Devoid of guardrails except along the most treacherous turns was a challenging drive, even when the fog didn’t impede visibility.

The mighty Nantahala River raged thirty feet below. Kudzu vines covered the towering pines that lined the twisting road. Their noxious growth threatened to choke and kill anything

standing still throughout much of the region.

He passed a street that led to a remote house he knew would still be a burned-out shell. His thoughts went to the two boys he had rescued from an inferno in that home two months earlier. Their screams had visited him every night since. Even knowing they would survive their burns and damaged lungs, Hawk couldn't forget the nightmare. He couldn't even bear to keep the medal of bravery the governor had pinned to his chest in his own house.

He squeezed his fist until the still-tender flesh on the top of his left hand brought tears to his eyes. He never intended to be "first man in" but the terrified wails made the wait for a fire unit seem eternal.

The memory flashed into Hawk's mind: waves of fire licking and dancing up the walls and curtains, engulfing furniture as he yelled out to anyone who might be inside, the gut churning stench of burning flesh filling his nostrils. When he found the boys and scooped them up, they kicked and scratched at him, struggling to escape his arms. By the time he made it safely outside with them he had to pin down their writhing bodies with his own so they wouldn't run back inside.

"*Mama! Mama!*" the young brothers cried over and over until spent of hope. Then they said nothing else.

Hawk rubbed his nose and shook his head hard, blotting out the memory. Everyone in the county and beyond had proclaimed him a hero, and yet, he couldn't help feeling he had failed the boys.

Strangling the steering wheel, he thought, as he had so many times before, *If only I could have saved their mother.*

2

SANTA BARBARA, CALIFORNIA

Bare feet tucked under her jean-clad legs, her wide shoulders squared, Katina Salvo sat on a plush sofa looking through a wall of windows. The clear day enabled her to see Santa Clara Island in the distance. She twirled a lock of her straight, waist-length sable hair as she stared absently at the tops of tropical plants swaying in the courtyard below. A leather-bound journal on her lap, extra-fine rollerball pen in hand, she wrote down words that raced through her mind.

Her business manager, Petra Sullivan, whose silvery-gray hair met her perfect posture shoulders, spoke into the phone with a melodic, refined British accent. Petra's confident, low voice soothed Katina and she settled back into her work.

Katina had written some of her most powerful lyrics in her manager's presence while sitting in the second-story condominium office. She felt safe around Petra. She always had. At first, Katina hadn't known why, but after five years of depending on the older woman's friendship and career guidance, Katina knew she had made the right choice. She could trust Petra. She always felt better when they were in the same room. Now, she lapsed into a trancelike state as the song she composed flowed from her mind to the tip of her pen and onto the journal that never left her side.

A belly laugh from Petra prompted Katina to glance at her friend sitting at the massive desk, cooing into the hand-set. When Petra hung up, Katina approached. She nearly ran into Samuel Collier, who had darted into the office carrying a post office container brimming with mail.

"Kat," Petra's assistant said. Samuel's crystalline blue eyes, looking a little wide with apprehension, locked on her. "I didn't know you were still here."

Katina popped to her toes and peered into the overflowing bin that held correspondences varying in size and color. "Oooh, is that fan mail?"

“Hey, I’m glad you’re still here,” Samuel said. “I just signed for a big package from your aunt.”

“Great. She was afraid she wouldn’t be able to get it to me in time.”

“What did she send you?”

Katina gave him a coy smile. “You’ll have to wait and see pictures from the concert when we get back.” She tried to get a better look in the bin, but Samuel had all but hidden it behind his back. “Is any of that for me?”

He shot a worried glance to Petra. “All of it. This is only two days’ worth.”

Katina’s mouth dropped open. “No!”

“I’ll come back.” Still clutching the receptacle, he turned toward the doorway.

“Wait a minute. It’s my mail, right?” Katina snatched one of the envelopes. “See, my name’s right there.”

“No need to look at those,” Petra said, rushing away from her desk to join Katina.

“Petra, I know you hold some of them back. The only ones you give me are from little kids, or glowing letters from people who say how much I’ve changed their lives. I need to see the bad stuff, too. Keeps me humble. Know what I mean?”

Petra nodded and Samuel set the container on the table in front of the couch. He proceeded to fiddle with the cuff of his Oxford. “We’ve had to hire an extra person to—”

“You can leave us now, Samuel,” Petra snapped. “Please tell Michael I will be there in a moment.”

Plunging a hand into the mail container, Katina stirred the letters around a bit and withdrew a handful of envelopes.

“I’m sorry,” Samuel muttered to Petra before he left the room, but Katina’s curiosity as to what he was “sorry” about quickly fled as she settled back onto the couch and decided which letter to read first.

A thin stack of business-sized envelopes secured by a rubber band caught her attention. She took the bundle out of the container and fanned through them. Bold red slashes crossed each of the opened envelopes. Frowning, Katina pulled one out and removed a single sheet of paper.

Petra took the letter from Katina and shoved it back into its envelope. “There’s no need to look at any from that stack.”

“What are you doing?”

Petra lunged forward and attempted to grab the bundle from

Katina. “Some mail arrives that you needn’t be bothered with.” Peering into the container, Petra picked out an envelope written in juvenile handwriting. “Open this one.”

Katina ignored the letter Petra waved at her. “Why do these have red slashes on the envelopes?”

“We have . . . readers evaluate the letters Michael and I need to look over.”

“What aren’t you telling me?”

Petra tightened her lips and didn’t reply.

“Petra. Don’t hold out on me.”

With a heavy sigh, she held out the now crumpled, red-lined envelope, then settled on the couch next to Katina.

Katina studied the blurred postmark for a moment before she again withdrew the sheet of white, typewritten paper. Taking a deep breath, she began to read.

Hey Bitch that never answers my mail! It’s me again. I know you wrote those songs about me and what I did to her. You think you’re so special?

You’re nothing but a half-breed whore, just like your mother. She screamed your name before I shot her—did you know that? Write me back, bitch. NOW!

Your #1 With-A-Bullet-Fan!

The blood rushed from Katina’s head, the constant ringing in her ears cranked up in volume. She swallowed the bile rising in her throat. “Is this from him?”

As if not hearing her, Petra said, “Look, you mustn’t be concerned.”

Katina flipped through the envelopes and counted twelve, all typewritten, to be delivered in care of Katina’s agency. None of them indicated a return address. “Have there been more than these?”

“I’m afraid so.”

“Are they all from the same person?”

Petra shrugged. “It is impossible to tell. The postmarks are from different states across the country. Most of the letters are similar in tone. We’re hoping it’s the same person.” She leaned forward, elbows on her knees. “Have you heard anything about your father lately?”

Katina whirled to Petra. “Why?” Realization hitting her, she let the letter flutter to the floor. “You do think they’re from him,

don't you?"

"I've no idea, but it's entirely possible, is it not? The person . . . or people sending these seem to know quite a lot about you and your mother."

Katina's worry escalated when Petra avoided her gaze. She tightened her lips as she thought about the scenario she most dreaded, yet she knew would have to eventually face—that one day, her father would reach out to her. "He wants me to write back, but there's no return address."

"Katina, it's a prank. You're a big star now. I don't think the letters are from your father. They are undoubtedly from some crazy lunatic who doesn't merit another thought. We've handed the other correspondences over to the authorities, and they're looking into them, but until . . ."

"Until what?" Katina bolted off the couch. "Until he comes after me? Isn't it your job to see that I'm safe?" She regretted her words the instant they fell from her lips, remembering that she herself had dismissed the Man of Steel limo driver Petra had sent to pick her up three hours earlier.

She remained standing, pressing her nails into the heels of her hands, watching her manager. Despite the seriousness of her expression, the older woman seemed unruffled. Katina didn't know whether to be infuriated or soothed.

"Listen, neither Michael nor I have a single high-profile client who doesn't receive disturbing mail from time to time. It comes with fame. This is one of the reasons performers have managers, my darling. Of course it's upsetting, but you must remember that these threats are not directed at *you*. This is merely some pathetic lost soul looking for attention."

Katina tried her best to ignore the knot tightening in her stomach. She began to pace, trying to hold down her fear. "Why didn't you say anything?"

"Kat, it is nearly impossible that the letters came from your father. There are people who want nothing else than to get close to you. Some choose manipulation."

"I know all about manipulation."

"Which is why this shouldn't be much of a surprise to you. You're only twenty-three years old. It is my job to protect you. If I told you every little thing going on in the periphery of your world, you wouldn't have the time, nor the inclination, to create another song."

"Still . . . you should have told me," Katina muttered.

“You are not merely a client to me. You’re more of a daughter than my own. You know that.”

Katina stopped pacing and plopped down on the sofa. “Should we cancel the concert?” she asked, unable to mask the concern in her voice.

“Is that what you want?”

“Sounds like a great excuse to me.”

“Katina, think of your recording label.”

“Why? Are they insisting I go through with the concert?”

“Well, you’re their only artist to become successful without any live performances or videos. They took a huge risk with you. Now they expect wider exposure to help sell more albums.”

Katina hesitated, possible repercussions whirling in her mind. “Paragon’s been a great label. Everyone there has been good to me. I don’t want to piss anyone off. I’m just afraid of the publicity.”

“Yes, I know, but you can’t hide out forever.”

Katina’s eyes drifted to the red-slashed letters. “I guess I’ve always known my past would come out, eventually.”

“None of that will matter to your loyal fans. You’re not merely a beautiful woman who sings with the command of someone far beyond your years. There is something beyond special about you, Kat. I want the world to experience what I see.”

Katina shook her head, unable to comprehend the quality Petra had described to herself and others time and time again.

“My darling, there truly is no need to worry about tomorrow night. Security will be so tight *you* will need to present I.D. to get onstage.” Petra scooted closer to her. “I hand-picked the Wilhoit Theatre in Bryson City for your debut so you could get your feet wet in a nonthreatening environment. The Indian Invitational Festival will be in Cherokee, North Carolina next month, not far from the Wilhoit. I thought perhaps we would become familiar with the area so you won’t be too nervous when you perform at the festival.”

Petra took Katina’s hand in her own. “I’ve thought of everything. All you need to concern yourself with is keeping your singing voice in shape and to continue writing brilliant lyrics. You do know that I’m looking out for your best interest, don’t you?”

“Yeah, I know. Sometimes I wonder why you haven’t tossed me to the wolves.” She offered a benign smile. “There are a lot

of performers out there who would literally kill to have you as a manager.”

“Enough about that,” Petra said with a wave of her hand. “The Wilhoit Theatre has been sold out for weeks. The press has been notified and we know they’ll show up in droves. Tomorrow night, you will be revealed to the entire world.”

Katina gazed out at the waves. “Thanks. You’ve de-scribed my greatest fear.”

“Your fans adore you. You’ve been reclusive long enough. It’s time to take the next step and elevate yourself to the level your talent deserves. If we’re going to keep everyone interested, they must see you perform live.”

Katina shifted in her seat, fighting the urge to run from the room.

“Are you sure you want to let them down?”

“I don’t want to let *anyone* down,” Katina admitted miserably. “You’ve worked as hard as I have on my career. It’s you I don’t want to let down most of all.”

“Impossible.” A tender smile crossed Petra’s lips. “Your safety is the most important thing to me. I completely understand if you’re uncomfortable, and even a little bit scared.”

“Massively scared,” Katina whispered.

“I suppose you could stay on the same path your entire career and never set foot on a performance stage. After all, you’ve waited this long to present yourself to the public. Say the word and the concert is off.” Petra nudged Katina’s shoulder with her own. “But Katina, don’t you want to show off just a little bit? I know it’s not in your nature—”

“Oh, bullshit,” Katina said. “I’m only half Indian. My white half is as competitive as you are.”

“There’s the fire I love.”

A slight grin twitched at Katina’s lips. Her eyes locked on the threatening letter for a moment. “I really want to do this, but . . .”

“The decision is made.”

“I guess it’s too much to ask for everyone to like me.”

Petra patted Katina’s knee, then returned to her desk. “I’ll have the car pick you up tomorrow morning, five a.m. sharp.”

“It’s going to be a long day. Why aren’t we going tonight?”

Petra stopped writing and stared at the page, as if searching for words. “Would you prefer that?” Katina thought for a moment, but before she could make up her mind, Petra said, “Michael has a contract pending for me to approve, and I’m

awaiting a number of calls, but I could try to arrange—”

“No, no. It’s fine.”

“Very good.” Petra scanned a sheet of paper and then looked back to Katina. “Why aren’t you at home looking out at your spectacular view?”

“I like *this* spectacular view. Anyway, it’s too quiet there. Way too many empty rooms.”

“Samuel tells me you’re only living in a few of those rooms,” Petra accused her, annoyance flashing briefly in her blue eyes.

“How many does one person need?” Katina asked, tossing the bundle of red-slashed mail into the bin.

“The house was a great investment. You won’t regret it.”

“But eighteen million dollars? I could pay for the upkeep on my mother’s entire village five lifetimes over for that amount.”

“You’re already doing that, my darling,” Petra pointed out gently.

“They don’t seem to want my money.”

“Well, substantial funds have been placed in the Tribal bank account if they ever decide they need it.”

Samuel appeared at the doorway, BlackBerry in his hand. “Petra, Michael’s ready when you are.”

“Go home and rehearse, my darling,” Petra ordered. “And be sure to rest up and avoid all of your empty rooms.”

As Katina slid into her shoes, she considered taking the mail with her to get a better sense of what she could expect with the public. But instinct, tinged with fear, told her to let it go for now.

Petra beamed as Katina sidled up and pecked her right cheek. “See you soon.”

“Your aunt’s package is on my desk,” Samuel said. “Blow them away tomorrow night, Kat.”

“That’s the plan,” she said, trying for more enthusiasm than she actually felt. “Later.”

Petra did her best not to dwell on her evasion, which she knew straddled the line of deception. Katina had a right to know everything that pertained to her well-being, but Petra realized more and more that her need to protect Katina was her ultimate job. She did her best to put aside the guilt as Samuel eased closer.

“So, she knows about the letters?” he asked.

Petra nodded.

“I’m sorry, Petra. I didn’t realize she was still here—”

“Not to worry, Samuel. It’s best she knows, and now she does.”

“She dismissed her driver and security today.”

“She what?” Petra bolted upright in her chair. “Dammit, Samuel, send a bodyguard after her, straight away.”

“Relax. She drives straight from our secured garage here to her house. I know for a fact she rarely goes anywhere else. And she always calls you the minute she gets home.”

“Which is what makes her a predictable target. Never again, understand? We must be very firm with her from now on,” she said, flipping through a document on her desk. “Tell Michael I will be right there.”

“She’s tougher than you want to believe.”

Ignoring Samuel’s assessment, she said, “Before I meet with Michael, I need to speak to the person in charge of security where we’ll be performing tomorrow.”

Samuel tapped the screen of his BlackBerry and said, “Deputy Steven Hawk. Must be a small place if they don’t have you connecting with someone in the city’s police department.”

“I’ve already spoken with the governor of North Carolina and he assures me this Hawk is the man I want leading Katina’s team.”

“The guys our protection specialist recommended are first-rate. Lisa Marie Presley used them a couple of months ago. You think two men are going to be enough?”

“Katina is already skittish,” she said. “An entire team of guards will push her over the edge.”

“Maybe we should hire some locals—”

“Not to worry,” Petra said again. “All will be well.”

He lingered, twisting the miniscule diamond stud in his left ear.

“What is it, Samuel?”

“Does she know her father was released yesterday?”

Petra shook her head. “I think it’s best to wait until after the concert.”

“Are you sure that’s a good idea? She’ll be pissed when she realizes you held out on her.”

“Any word of Katina’s father from anyone and it’s your head I will be twisting from your neck.” She issued him a condescending smile. “*Capisce?*”

He rolled his eyes and planted a hand on his hip. “You know by now I never speak to anyone but you and Michael. Everyone

hates me because I won't dish about what goes on here."

"I know, Samuel. You're like my priest. In fact, I trust you more than my priest. That's why I keep you around."

"Father Samuel at your service," he smirked, playing along. "I hope you know what you're doing."

3

LINCOLN, NEBRASKA

In a flophouse off 37th Street, Karl Brandt lay on the thin mattress in his third-story room studying a discolored splotch on the ceiling. The quiet made him uneasy and restless. Muffled street sounds urged him from the bed. He wrenched the window open and sat on the radiator beneath the glass to watch the strangers below. Accustomed to seeing only prisoners' orange jumpsuits or correctional officers' bland uniforms, he still had difficulty taking in the brightly-colored clothing of the passersby.

As if seeking tangible evidence of his freedom, he withdrew a piece of paper from his back pocket and smoothed the well-worn sheet on his thigh. He never tired of looking at his Nebraska State Penitentiary release papers. He read them again, almost fearful the words would somehow change, alerting authorities to come pounding on his door. He worried that his early release, unanimously agreed upon by the parole board, had all been a mistake; maybe they had changed their minds and decided he hadn't served enough time after all.

Stomach rumbling, he struggled to recall his last meal. He picked up the wallet next to a small can of lighter fluid on the bedside table. Opening the billfold, he thumbed through the bills and counted out six hundred and forty-nine dollars. He shook his head at the meager amount he had earned accomplishing maintenance tasks at the prison. The money wouldn't last long. He would have to find a job soon.

He shrugged on the Member's Only jacket he wore the night of his arrest fifteen years earlier, now a size too big, and stuffed his only possessions into his jacket pocket: the wallet, a package of Bugler rolling tobacco and papers, and a palm-sized zippered case. He slid his silver Zippo into the pocket of his slacks.

He locked the door and approached the stairs of his new lodgings since he had checked in the previous afternoon. As he rounded the banister to descend the last flight of steps, he heard

sharp sounds of an argument and stopped to listen. A woman's screams could be heard over a man's booming voice. The constant ringing in his ears became louder. Excitement stirred in Karl's belly. He smiled, aching to linger, but pushed ahead to the lobby.

Near the entrance a gangly man in faded blue coveralls sloshed a filthy mop along the cracked linoleum. Swirls of gray water puddled at the feet of his scuffed work boots. As Karl passed, the mop's strings flipped and a splatter spotted his only pair of chinos. He looked down at his legs then shot a glare at the careless man.

The janitor clutched the mop's handle so tightly his freckled knuckles whitened. "Sorry, pal. Got away from me."

Karl grunted and figured beating the man wasn't worth violating his parole. He went through the smudged double doors. The stench of car exhaust hit him the moment he stepped onto the busy noontime sidewalk. Weaving among the tightly packed crowd, his senses were overloaded with a panorama of bright attire and signs that adorned building fronts. Smells of rotting garbage, greasy fast food and rancid fruit overwhelmed him. Fists shoved deep into his pockets, Karl's heart thudded as he tucked his chin to his chest and kept his eyes on his shoes.

He glanced up from time to time to be certain he hadn't walked beyond the diner the night manager at the flophouse had told him about. To his left, a row of street vendors of varying ethnicities sold umbrellas, designer handbag knock-offs and compact discs. Music blaring from the speakers of a cheap boombox filled his ears as he sidled up alongside a CD vendor. The haunting resonance of a woman singing stopped him cold. He held his breath and turned to the sound.

"I see she caught your attention," the street-hawker said.

Karl approached the table and the man singled out one of the CDs and handed it to him. Air caught in Karl's lungs mid-breath as he took in the headshot picture of a young woman with dark hair and sparkling eyes.

"She's great, huh?" The peddler handed Karl two more cases. "Three for twenty bucks. What do ya' say?"

"Three?"

"Yeah. Her third album just came out. You'll like 'em all. Great sound," the salesman said, straightening the already perfectly stacked rows of cases. "You never heard of her?"

Karl stood mute, looking at every detail captured in the

photo.

“You don’t know Katina Salvo? Where you been, Mars?”

“Something like that,” Karl muttered, peeling a twenty dollar bill from his wallet.

The salesman selected three of the recordings and released them simultaneously when Karl let go of the money. “When did you get out?”

Karl leveled a steely glare.

“No offense, man. I done time myself.” The man folded the bill in thirds and held it out to Karl. “You probably need this more than me.”

Karl checked the man’s sincerity for a moment. He put two of the CDs back on the table and snatched the twenty-spot. With a quick nod of thanks, he pocketed the money and the single disc and ducked into the swarming crowd.

An hour later, gristly beef stew and bitter coffee from Bobby’s Diner burned in his gut. Karl wound his way back to his room. Sitting on the edge of the bed, notes the woman sang continued to haunt him. The tones, so closely resembling his dead wife’s, made him tremble.

He took the CD from his jacket pocket and studied the photograph. Katina’s chiseled features, from her classic nose and high cheekbones to her perfectly formed lips, looked so much like her mother’s, he felt as if someone had played a sick joke on him.

Karl looked away and opened the case. He tugged out the fanfold of paper inside and attempted to make out the miniscule print. Tipping the shiny paper toward the light coming from the window, he squinted as he read the lyrics for a song called “The Other Side.”

After half an hour he had read the words to every song, most of them about loss. He tried to glean clues of their meaning as he gazed around his room. The water-stained walls and moldy pea green carpet told him everything about what it meant to lose all you have.

He read in the notes that by going to Katina’s website he could join her fan club. He searched for an address or phone number where he could contact her, but found nothing except information about her recording company, Paragon Enterprises, located in Los Angeles, California.

The last entry noted whom Katina wished to acknowledge. A flicker of hope ignited in his chest that he, too, might be

mentioned. He scanned the names, but recognized only one: Sylvie Salvo. He searched his memory and recalled the name to be his dead wife's sister.

Karl scowled at the last words, AND, AS ALWAYS, TO MY MOTHER.

He folded the booklet and tucked it in his wallet. The disc in its clear plastic covering caught his attention. He lingered on the name, KATINA SALVO, stamped in elaborate script. With a snap of his wrist, he flicked the case. It sailed across the room, hit the wall and clattered into the dented metal wastebasket near the door.

He had no device to play the CD, but he'd never intended to listen to it anyway. Karl only wanted the picture.