

Super Star

~ Gary Marks

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Chapter One

The evening sky is busy tonight – high clouds racing, stars flashing intermittently. I watch the blinking lights of an occasional plane streaking slowly across the horizon from the east.

Back inside, Jenna is putting the finishing touches on her clay sculpture. The newspaper headlines beneath the sculpture have been grayed-out, smudged silent. A strand of red hair reaches across her face. Her tongue sticks out slightly in profound concentration. She looks eighteen in moments like this – like a young girl working on her freshman college art project still dreaming of the perfect man she hopes to meet someday. But “perfect” is a complex thing, as complex as the art she is trying to master.

When Jenna was sixteen, seven very long years ago, she was a runaway. She escaped by Greyhound from Minnesota. Actually “runaway” is not quite the right term – she had been run away from before she ran away. Because after her parents divorced, they both became so obsessed with finding someone else to love (each wanting to be the first to do so) they forgot to love their daughter, or even look her way most of the time. Jenna was going through the typical sixteen-year-old rebellion stage with no one to rebel against. She was the only one home most of the time, so she left one day without much fanfare. No police followed her. No detectives were hired. She would contact her parents every few weeks after that to let them know she was still alive. This was met with “Let me know if you need anything.” And, of course, the few times she actually asked for something it was ignored.

I was playing music in small clubs back then; trying to work my way up to playing bigger clubs. My goal was to become famous, I admit that, even though I didn’t have the kind of drive or hunger you need to play in front of an audience night after night. Nor did I get any psychic nourishment from the adulation of a crowd. I became bored and restless many nights, unless I’d written new songs to showcase. Some little bell should have gone off in my head that the kind of fame

I imagined wasn't what I really wanted. All I cared about were the songs themselves.

I returned to the present, standing on the balcony under the night sky. "Sometimes the rush of wind sweeping through the trees sounds like applause," I mused. I could see the ocean in the distance, lit up by the moon. The visuals on this tropical island never ceased to amaze me.

She pretended not to hear what I said.

Her red hair was curled slightly at the edges from the humidity in the air, framing her porcelain-smooth face. Her white silk pajama shorts had risen up a bit too far. The way she sat, I could see the tops of her thighs. It would have been a steamy image if it was posted online. This was Jenna James. It could have gone viral.

"What is that thing you're making?" I asked finally.

Without looking up she says, "It's a boat, with you in it."

I laughed. "It doesn't look very seaworthy. Are you trying to drown me?"

"Only if you're bad," she smiles.

"And where are you, if it's only me in the boat?"

"I'm still on the road. I can't see you from there."

I inspected the clay piece carefully for the first time: the human figure in the boat was leaning back casually, looking up at the sky. He seemed peaceful, yet searching for something up there.

"I like it, Jenna."

"Dishonest critics are worse than ignorant ones." Her pajama shorts slid up a bit higher as she hugged her legs. She stared intently, frowning like a child over her flawed creation. Something wasn't quite right.

I held out my hand. She smiled and accepted my offer. I pulled her up from the floor. I pulled a little too hard, and we tumbled onto the couch together into each other's arms. We were content but getting tired. It was 2 a.m. Our typical bedtime.

"Let's see if your creation can stay afloat without you lording over it all night," I whispered.

We both fell asleep on the couch. I awoke at the first hint of sunrise. The sky was still black, but a purple glow hugged the curve of the horizon.

I slipped into the bedroom to get more sleep. She soon followed, lifting the cool sheets on her side of the bed, then curling up next to me.

The sun splashed the land with light while we dreamt.

The world had lost track of us.

Chapter Two

When Jenna was eighteen, she had already been living in San Francisco for two years. She was working as a waitress in a rock club, using a fake ID to hide her age. She had rejected come-ons from the club owner, the bartender, the bouncer, the band members, and at least three or four customers a night, yet still managed to keep her job. The day she turned eighteen she threw away her fake ID and began looking around for something more interesting to do with her time.

That's how we met. I had put an ad in a local music magazine for a roadie — someone to help me set up and break down my gear on nights I had gigs. The gigs were fortunately increasing, but so was the setup time and the equipment I needed to do a show. I had a synthesizer, two electric guitars, an acoustic 6-string, an acoustic 12-string, two amps, and a couple of mics and mic stands. In short, I needed help from a strong guy who could lug heavy equipment around, had experience with electronics, knew how to work a sound board, and could tune my guitars between songs.

But Jenna showed up instead. She told me she had experience working in the music business. She told me she'd been around bands for years and knew how to set up gear. Being around bands for years — at least that was true. As far as the gear, I had to teach her everything, and then had to help her carry equipment to and from the van before and after each gig. So what I had actually found was an assistant roadie — but without a doubt the most beautiful assistant roadie in the rock and roll world.

* * *

What was Jenna James like when she was eighteen? All the elements of who she would later become were there. She was wild-eyed, with a smile that had a cunningness to it, a mischievous confidence. My assistant roadie also had a good dose of rock 'n' roll toughness to her. Because she was willing to stick out the job despite the learning curve and all the physical strength it required. Obviously, she was not

as strong as some of the roadies you might see at a typical show, with their tattoos and bulging arms and leather jackets. But she insisted on carrying all but the heaviest equipment by herself. She took pride in it. She grew stronger.

Jenna was also street-smart. She could read people quickly. She understood what motivated them, sometimes even before they knew themselves.

At times it became hard for me to focus on the gigs. She was becoming a major distraction. Sometimes knowing I was going to see her was the only reason I wanted to play that night. The things I felt for her were there long before “the moment” arrived.

The moment happened one Saturday night at Uncle George’s, a club downtown owned by MAD George. MAD was an acronym which stood for -- More Addicted to Drugs (than any of us were). There are a lot of odd birds in the music business, but George had a very annoying eccentric habit that made me, and all the other bands that played there, want to kill him. He would let you set up your own sound using his very expensive soundboard in the back of the club, but during the sound check if George got drunk enough, or snorted too much coke (his favorite powdered beverage) he’d come over and scream “Too loud!” and pull all the faders down to zero with one swipe of his long shaking arm.

During this particular sound check Jenna surprised me by pulling out a recording she’d made of my last gig. She put it on the main speakers while she was setting up the keyboard on stage. I called out, “Jenna, see if the mic is live.” So she went over to test it by tapping it with her finger, and when she heard that it was on, as a joke she started singing to my song. She sang along with the chorus, pretending to be “a rock star.” She moved her body in a sensual way, mocking the exaggerated movements it takes to attract the attention of a crowd. She shifted her hair back with one hand and came in closer to the mic.

I turned off the recording and she stopped singing. She had already turned away from the mic to continue setting up.

“Wait! Keep singing a little bit longer, I’m having trouble with that mic anyway. The midrange is screwed up... just... sing the song without the music.”

She sang a few more lines. She thought she was helping me dial in the sound. She was mindlessly screwing around. But if an audience heard what I was hearing, and saw her commanding the stage like that, they wouldn't even have remembered my name that night.

A few gigs later, she was singing backup harmonies on half of my songs. Our rehearsals had been effortless. She already knew all the lyrics. She learned fast and she was pitch perfect. Jenna was ecstatic just to be on stage with me. She loved the lights, and she loved the emotional tension just before walking on stage. She could sense the energy and mood of a crowd beforehand. She also knew that even the smallest audience in the smallest club was hoping for something great to happen. Her natural instinct at every gig was to try to help me reach that greatness.

What we also found out, as she began singing along with some of my favorite CDs in between rehearsals, was that she was far more convincing when she was singing songs that had a message or told a story. She was far less comfortable singing lyrics that were overtly pop, with rehashed love stories. Harriett Wheeler of The Sundays became one of her heroes, even though The Sundays had broken up years before. Of course, her tastes and tendencies also created a natural connection between us. Because the songs I wrote were based (for better or worse, commercially) on stories, and characters, and free-form associations. Even when I wrote a song with a great melody or a catchy groove, if the lyrics couldn't hold my attention and move me emotionally when I sang them, I would throw the song away within a few days. It had no long-term reason to live.

Eventually I began to write lyrics for her (as opposed to secretly writing songs about her). They were lyrics I knew she would want to sing.

Before playing gigs together everything between us had been strictly business. She would come to my house a few hours before a show wearing beat-up jeans and a ratty sweatshirt and start loading things into my van. There was no time for hanging out after a gig. She would leave as soon as the gear was unloaded back at my place, which was usually around 2 or 3 a.m.

But when we began to sing together the dynamics of our relationship changed. We would rehearse for hours in the middle of

the day, take breaks to eat, take walks to clear our heads, talk about politics, favorite bands, the music business.

She was distractingly beautiful, but I was also starting to like her. She was disarmingly straightforward, she was smart, and fun to be around. She was good-hearted but also street tough. She was fair-minded and usually kind, but wasn't about to be pushed around by me or anyone else.

Sometimes we agreed, sometimes we disagreed. But when we disagreed it was no big deal. She would always laugh off our differences of opinion. I liked that. We became true friends. In fact, over time we became great friends. By that I mean we began to trust not just each other's thoughts, but the motives behind them.

A friend had been something Jenna was waiting to find ever since she left home. She had accepted the offer of "love" a few times, in a purely physical kind of way. But she remembered all too well the crazy fights her parents had had when they were together. So she ran off in search of sanity – friendship.

Up until now friends would eventually disappoint her. Some couldn't match her loyalty. Others would say they loved her, but what they meant was that they wanted her to surrender to them. She came to see early on that's the only way some people know how to love.

After her parents officially divorced, she saw both of them rush into relationships again and again with people that were in her opinion hideous human beings. They seemed to just be filling up space and time in their life to hide their desperation, because they had no idea there was any other way to live. Her mom and dad were just repeating the same mistakes separately that they had made with each other.

Jenna would try to tell them, warn them, that they were falling into the same traps. But what did she know? She was just a kid. Even though they acted more like children than she did.

They say most kids blame themselves for their parents' divorce. Jenna never blamed herself.

After spending two years as a waitress with a fake ID, being chased, begged, stalked, cajoled, and occasionally seduced, in the end she had fallen for none of it.

Now here we were, working together, singing together, becoming friends. She liked it that way.

But she was becoming my muse. My obsession. I would spend hours writing about her in my notebook. I would notice that one moment her demeanor was unflappable, calm even when difficulties arose. Quiet. Sometimes aloof. The next moment she would become excited over the smallest thing and her face would be filled with a childlike glow – her eyes sparkling, her reddish-blond eyebrows slightly arched in amazement.

Equally true was the fact that Jenna was not naturally warm or easy to get to know. She had an edge to her. She was often hard to read. In part, because she didn't completely trust anyone. And she wasn't going to pretend she did.

Chapter Three

There was a place in town where every local rock band wanted to showcase their music: All-Star City Music Hall. It was a very sophisticated two-tier auditorium with tables and chairs on the bottom level and rows of seats on top. On the weekends about a thousand people jammed their way in to see people like Mike Doughty or Ziggy Marley. But weeknights belonged to the local bands. Usually the local acts were lucky to pull in four-hundred people for a show, but the owners were determined to support local artists while making a killing the other three nights a week with nationally known rising stars. They were very cool that way.

We were booked for a Wednesday night. We were actually the opening act for a big local band called Henna, who we'd heard before. They were good, they played pretty well, jumped around a lot, and had a very decent drummer. But they were mostly just loud. The crowd came for energy. And Henna definitely supplied it in volume.

But like most good working bands they lacked one essential ingredient that often seemed unnecessary at local rock gigs like these — great original songs.

Jenna and I couldn't rely on a wall of sound like they did. It was just the two of us up there. We had no bass player, no drummer. We couldn't afford a band. I just played guitar through my big amp, and my Nord 88 synthesizer.

Before I met Jenna, I would play these kinds of gigs alone. I had a medium-sized fan base. My voice was pretty good. At least I didn't sound like anyone else. My looks were not a negative, demographically speaking, but I didn't look like Jim Morrison. And I could not (and would never) want to dance around and entertain like MJ, or eat a live bat on stage, or set my guitar on fire. Other than my songs I pretty much had nothing to offer. The songs would have to carry the show, and occasionally they did.

Sometimes I would zone into some other place on stage. On those nights I would completely lose myself in the moment. I'd get off

on the energy created between me and the crowd. Despite that very artificial environment which merges image and theater, I could drop into a transcendent place. And the crowd would drop into it with me. The synergy would create something critics might call “a great show,” if any had bothered to come. For me the best part was that the songs were heard and appreciated the way I dreamed they would be.

Those rare gigs kept me going for a long time. But I couldn't recreate them at will. I felt like a ball player who was a hero in the last game, and here he comes, walking up to the plate in the ninth with two outs and the bases loaded. Two runs wins it. One ties it. And that pitch comes in, looking fat and hittable, but then it starts to tail off right at the last second, and that home run he's hoping to hit turns into a line drive to the right fielder. Game over.

But what I wanted even more than those occasional magical nights on stage was to record my songs during a peak performance in the recording studio, where they would live in their own perfect world forever. All I had to do was zone in for one great take, capture each song at its highest moment. Then I could let those songs go and move on. I would always have them. After that I would never need to play any of them live again.

But once Jenna started to sing with me, something changed – I loved being on stage with her. She was never nervous. Never edgy before a gig. If something went wrong on stage, she would find a way to improvise and laugh about it with the audience. And suddenly everyone was laughing with her. It was weird. She absorbed the crowd into her energy. She was electric.

Before a gig she would bring a sense of fun and calm into the dressing room, making some sarcastic joke about the club owner just before we hit the stage, straightening my shirt, combing my hair with her hand, and wishing me luck, since these were my songs, my show.

But this night opening up for Henna at the Music Hall was different. Because on this Wednesday night, in front of five hundred people, I was letting Jenna sing her first lead vocal. I was letting her sing one of my best songs. Because the truth was, she could sing it, and deliver it, better than I could. That revelation was simultaneously joyful and horrifying to me. My ego felt threatened, but my love for the song won out.

The dressing room was down a flight of stairs from the stage. It was big compared to most of the dressing rooms I was used to. A fifteen-foot wide mirror made the room look even bigger, and at the same time it made everyone very self-conscious. The fake Turkish rugs covering most of the cement floor were shot to hell. They looked like they had been chewed up by some kind of wild dog. There were wooden chairs everywhere, used by the band, their manager, and their insignificant others. And there was a big iron door with a latch to wall off uninvited riff-raff and keep out other fans who didn't have handwritten backstage passes.

Jenna and I were getting ready to go on stage when the guys from Henna walked in — four tattooed, too-cool, insecure punks, all of them dressed in black to show their individuality, of course. They snarled a hello at me in that cocky way mediocre rock musicians tend to rely on -- a hello that feels more like they're swatting away a mosquito. They don't have time to meet you. They already know for sure they are better than you, because they just had to be. They were Henna. They were the headliners. They were the hottest band in the entire city. We were simply another opening act. Then they saw Jenna and their attitude shifted a bit.

"Hey slick, is the girl in your band?" the leader asked.

I nodded.

"We gotta check out the opening act guys," he smiled to the others. They laughed a little under their breath.

Jenna said, "You ought to check out this dude's song writing, guys."

She was met with an odd silence and some sideways glances. They didn't like her mocking tone. But worse, the implication was that their songs weren't as good as mine. Their manager had been told by a few record companies that their song writing "wasn't quite there yet." They had read reviews in the local music rags echoing that criticism. She had hit a nerve.

It was time for us to play, so we left the dressing room to walk up to the stage. I was half afraid my car keys would be stolen by the time we got back down there. The Henna boys misread me as a bit of a nerdy folk-musician type, playing without a full band, using a cute girl as a prop.

Jenna saw me as a rock songwriter with a unique sound that didn't need a band when I played live. Besides, no one in the audience could focus on lyrics with a rhythm section competing with the singer's vocal. There would be time for band arrangements in the studio someday, where I would have control over the mixes. I could hire any player in town I wanted for any track. They didn't have to commit to being in my band full-time. And I didn't have to worry about hurting some band member's feelings if he wasn't cutting it in the studio. I also didn't have to be responsible week to week for someone else's financial survival. That's another reason I'd always chosen to play alone, until I heard Jenna sing.

After my name was announced the crowd began to applaud modestly and we walked on stage. Two of Jenna's friends who were waitresses from the bar she used to work at, Allison and Joy, were the only ones besides me that knew Jenna was going to sing her first lead song that night. So they showed up, excited and already mildly drunk. They were chanting, "Jenna, Jenna," clapping loudly and screaming. Jenna heard them and smiled.

The lighting at the Music Hall was more sophisticated than most of the places I played. I couldn't see them changing color like the audience could, but I could sense them shifting from lighter to darker tones as I sang. A separate spotlight locked in on me as I played one of my guitar songs. Occasionally the spotlight would focus on Jenna when she was singing a particularly noticeable backup part. But mostly she stayed in the shadows.

Then came the unexpected. I hadn't worked out how I was going to announce the moment. At the time it really didn't seem like that big of a deal. I simply said, "And now Jenna James is going to sing a song of mine called, 'Rules of the Road.'" The announcement was followed by curious light applause, along with a few loud whistles from Allison and Joy, and the chant of "Jenna, Jenna."

It was a rock song that started off with a catchy melodic verse:

*I remember rebel kind of eyes,
and how you'd take the challenge on and win.
You whispered me promises.
I never trusted much back then.*

She moved to another part of the stage as the next verse came, focusing on a different section of the audience. You could see she was gaining confidence. On the next verse she quickly walked to the other side of the stage, almost skipping. She was smiling in between her vocal lines. Her voice could be sensitive or powerful while she highlighted a particular word or phrase. At one point she bent over while she sang to meet a few eyes staring up at her in the front row. The crowd began to focus their full attention on what was happening. I could feel the shift from the stage. It was a feeling I had known a few times before as a singer, when everything came together just right, when I became locked in, creating pure energy on some level, plugging the crowd into it with me.

I looked out at the audience as my fingers drummed out the chords on the piano. I saw mostly dark outlines from the stage because of the lights shining in my eyes, but the shadows of people standing on the perimeter of the hall told the story. No one was moving. Everyone had stopped to watch.

The song ended with the chorus repeating, but with the melody improvised by her until the final phrase.

When she was ready to end the song she looked at me just like we rehearsed it, raised her right hand up in the air, and brought it down hard to catch the rhythm of the last chord with me. The spotlight went dark on cue.

I expected a good reaction. I expected strong applause before we started the next song. What I didn't expect was the screaming, the stomping of feet, the calls for more. The applause and whistles didn't stop. It was as if it was our last song of the night and we were walking off the stage after a perfect gig. I was stunned, and a little unnerved. Honestly, I don't know if I was all that happy at that moment, since I truly never got a response like that, especially not in the middle of my show. But it was my song, after all. I re-introduced her to the crowd as the sonic boom finally began to fade a bit. "Jenna James!" I said simply over the crowd, pointing my finger to her. She had already moved back into the shadows at end of the stage. Allison and Joy began their "Jenna, Jenna" chant again. This time some people in the audience joined in. But she had already returned to her role as a backup singer. The chanting died down. We got a great response when we finished the set.

As we went back downstairs to the dressing room the Henna boys were gathered close together, drinking, smoking weed. They were getting ready for their show. "Hey dudes, how's the crowd out there tonight?"

Before either of us could answer they were off on another subject, laughing nervously, staying clustered among themselves. Their manager was smoking a cigarette in the little bathroom in the back with the door open.

We went back up to the stage to quickly break down our gear while the curtain was closed. Our gear was set up in front of the headliner's gear, so Henna's roadies were already moving our stuff off to the corner by the time we got there.

We curled wires into long tight ovals and put them into their appropriate black bags. One of their roadies said, "Hey man, you were really good." I said thanks. This kind of unsolicited praise happened often enough. But not the next thing. As Jenna was gathering more wires on the other side of the stage the roadie asked, "And the girl, who is she?"

"Jenna? She's my backup singer."

"No, man," he said to me with a slanted smile on his face, shaking his head, "She's a star. She's the hottest fucking thing in this city, like right now."

I nodded my head, still not fully realizing what the implication of that might be.

Back down in the dressing room Henna prepared to go on stage by finishing their last communal swigs from a bottle of Johnny Walker. When they left to go up the steps to the stage Jenna came over to me and said, "I want to tell you something."

I was feeling relaxed. There is nothing as nice as that "after-gig glow" -- a feeling of emotional peace and contentment that often sticks around for the rest of the night as long as the show didn't bomb.

Friends would soon be coming backstage to see me, but not until they watched Henna play. After all, they were the "up and coming band," and the main reason the crowd was as big as it was.

Jenna was looking at me strangely.

“What’s up?”

“I just want to say, I admire you, Adam. You’re not just in it for the head trip, like those jokers. Man, those kinds of bands, I saw bands like that almost every night for two years waitressing just a mile up the street from here. They’ll come and go. But you’re good. You’re real. The audience tonight, they’ll know the difference.”

“Well, your singing tonight just rocked the house, J.J.”

“Ya think?” She looked away and began to gather things into her backpack.

Could she be serious? Didn’t she know?

“Jenna, you got a better reaction than I did.”

“Henna’s an all-guy band,” she shrugged. “And you’re a guy. So the crowd just got into the chick singer thing. I was the novelty.”

“Uh, no. No, it was more than that.”

She cut off my next sentence by walking over to me quickly and kissing me. Then she backed up and almost fell into a chair. Then her eyes darted away for a second. She was looking at the big backstage door, almost expecting someone to come in. When her eyes came back to meeting mine she said. “In the beginning I didn’t know if I could trust you. I didn’t know what your motivations were, or if you’d ever really want me to shine once I started singing with you. And then what if I did shine? Would you get pissed off if I ever actually did do well out there? Would I suddenly be your competition? I couldn’t know. I couldn’t be sure.”

She went over to the dressing room door and locked it. Then turned to me, “But I’m sure now.”

She kissed me again. We laid down on the cold floor and fell into each other. The more passionate we became the more I could feel my obsession growing.

This was the best encore of my entire life.

After quickly getting dressed she took my hand and we went upstairs to watch the end of Henna’s set from backstage. It was their big finale, with drums and guitars thrashing chaotically – the artless rock cliché that brings everyone to their feet.

They ran off stage and the lights dimmed. We heard the crowd screaming for what we thought was an encore. It started off with some in the crowd screaming for more, but then it turned into a chant. It sounded like they were calling out, "Henna, Henna, Henna."

But then we suddenly realized that wasn't what they were chanting at all. It was her name.

Chapter Four

Our hilly pastel-colored city never did pride itself on breeding sexy cult heroes like Marilyn Monroe, or sexy mega-stars like Madonna. That was way too L.A. Instead, it had a long history of discovering singers and songwriters and bands that were not flashy or media polished but had a uniqueness that made them great.

Jenna was not only unaware of that fact, she was unaware of what her singing did to people, or what her looks did to people. She had just turned nineteen.

Jenna had a natural flair for the dramatic on stage, but also romantically. After we were officially together, we found new ways to connect up with each other before and after gigs -- in the van, at the beach, and beneath one of the city's bridges at 2 a.m., after most of the city was asleep.

Almost every time we played a gig, her effect on the crowd when she sang was similar to what happened that first night. The reaction was immediate, chaotic, electric. The city was falling in love with Jenna James at the same time we were falling in love with each other.

* * *

You have to push hard to get a big review in this town. No one at the Chronicle or any of the major media outlets would go from club to club looking for unknown talent. There had to be a press release, followed by the band pleading for a reviewer to actually read the press release, followed by more begging and pleading for them to actually come to a gig. Repeated phone calls as friendly reminders were just part of the way things worked. And that's just to grease the wheels of the local press. Getting the big fish to show up on a national level took playing big venues with big crowds.

But with Jenna, word began to spread in a more natural way. Not a lot of hype was necessary. I gave her more and more lead vocals

at our gigs. I wanted my songs to be heard by more than just my local fans, and I wanted them to sound as good as they could sound. And of course, I also wanted Jenna to feel more and more like she was part of my world. That was no less important to me.

As always, I taught private guitar and piano lessons in my free time. But now we were also going to hip stores downtown and buying interesting quirky clothes for her to wear at the gigs.

She found a pair of tight black pants she liked that had the word, "FUⁿK," which was repeated in a circular motion in big white letters up and down both legs. She also liked wearing a number of Mala necklaces from India all at once. When she combined the pants and necklaces with an old yellow cotton T-shirt, and black vans, that was the "Jenna look."

I never enjoyed the staging of a show before, but now it wasn't just for me. I was producing an image, one she felt comfortable with.

Out in the world on a normal day she was increasingly becoming recognized. Jenna stood out even if she was dressed in yoga pants and a sweatshirt. Her natural red hair, and her large luminescent eyes made her something like a walking advertisement of herself.

In the beginning she thought it was exciting when someone would call out her name. We both took it as a good sign. Then after a few more months it became a little odd being stopped so often. Soon it became annoying. So she began to wear hats and sunglasses when we ventured out, just like an L.A. movie star. It was all part of the fun back then.

Fortunately, the city was also surrounded by hiking trails. That's where we often found ourselves when we wanted a combination of fresh air and privacy.

Jenna hated the thought of becoming a local diva. She saw too many wannabe chick singers playing that role when she was a waitress. They would dress the part, and treat people like crap, and never ever get their hands dirty. So she insisted on staying my assistant roadie, and insisted we set up the gigs by ourselves. She was proud of that. She also told me helping with the heavy lifting before a gig centered her and calmed her down. There were also other sedative-inducing pleasures she occasionally used before a gig. I was her drug of choice.

She was also now becoming our chief sound engineer. She would suss out the acoustics in the room or the hall before a gig and tweak the mix until it created “our sound.” Then and only then would she let the venue’s official sound guy take over the board. She was also constantly picking out different mics for us to use, and better amps for my guitar and synthesizer. She bought me a Line 6 foot pedal for my guitar, which took me almost a month to master. Our shows were beginning to sound more quirky, more unique.

We were also starting to make some pretty serious money together -- about a thousand dollars a show each, gigging most weekends all over the Bay Area. No more weekday gigs. We were headliners now.

I started getting more confident with my lyrics. Taking more risks. Jenna had a political side to her. And a cynical edge that was a natural outgrowth of how she grew up. I reflected that in my new songs.

Nobody’s Following

*Wave your flag for your religion
Carve your maps up
Into your own divisions
Watch the soldiers multiplying
Incite the angry
till they don’t care you’re lying.
Throw us out into the fog beyond truth
But in the end nobody’s following you.*

*I’m leavin’, I’ll find my way alone.
In the end nobody’s following.....*

* * *

Then came our – or really her -- first big review. Her face, sultry and gorgeous, was also on the front of the Bay Area’s biggest rock magazine. The review was written by the most respected rock reviewer in town, Patrick Donovan:

“Jenna James is a singer who kidnapped our well-established Bay Area music scene virtually overnight. She has a Jesse

James swagger combined with a youthful vulnerability that is at once sexy and stunning. The veteran local songwriter, Adam Devonshire, is her only band mate. He is the one-man band behind her lead vocals, and always seems to give her an interesting palette to work with. James has made the most of it. She interprets his quirky lyrics artfully, while at the same time flat-out rocking the house.... Her onstage presence belies the fact that she's still a rookie, coming to us, it seems from out of nowhere. It's easy to see arrows up for this duo if they continue to create the kind of magic I heard last Saturday night at The Circle...."

Ask me if I cared that he didn't mention I sing some of the lead vocals too... . Short answer: no. It was a great review. It was just what we needed to book bigger venues and get better paying gigs.

Once in a while, as I walked down 24th Street to pick up some food for dinner I wondered why I was doing all this, since I originally had no interest in spending half of my life on stage.

I tried to be completely honest with myself. Did I really care that much about my songs getting out in the world? Or having my face now occasionally recognized by strangers? What was the true gratification in that?

Would I rather play it safe? Use the money I've made to record my songs the right way for the few people I actually cared about, and, as an additional but not insignificant benefit, keep Jenna all to myself? She could be my secret muse. I could write songs for her forever. She could sing on my records. But if the rest of the world gets hold of her, where would that leave "us" in the long run?

* * *

One night at a local restaurant a guy came up to us and told Jenna she was a fox, then flipped his business card on the table. "I'm a manager," the young kid said to her without even looking in my direction. "Call me and I'll make you a star."

Jenna smiled politely, but when he left, she threw the card onto her dinner plate. It landed on top of her left-over chicken bones and a few bites of uneaten mashed potatoes.

“Tell my manager he can eat my leftovers,” she said to no one. She threw her napkin on the table and insisted we skip dessert. Just another pleasant night on the town.

As the holidays neared the crowds became bigger. The venues that hired us got bigger. Our careers were becoming more lucrative by the month, and more serious by the day: there was local press coverage at just about every gig, maybe a local radio interview before the show, shouts of “Jenna, Jenna” were sometimes interrupting the opening acts, for which we apologized afterwards. All the bands playing in front of us were just as serious about making it big as we were. We weren’t playing music to one-up anybody. But that’s the way it came off far too often.

In our minds we had no competition. We didn’t need this trip to get any bigger or wilder than it was. Jenna was still just in it for the ride, like I was. We had no vision of greatness, no dreams of stardom.

About a week before Christmas, to Jenna’s surprise, her mother called. She’d had Jenna’s cell phone number, but this was the first time she called in over a year.

“Jenna, dear, guess what? I’m living in L.A. now. I love it here! And, well, life is good,” she whispered confidentially. “Things are so good.” This was the lead up to the big wonderful surprise she called about, “So I’ve decided to invite you to visit for Christmas. I’ll even pay your airfare! Don’t you worry about that. And... there’s someone I want you to meet.”

“Mom, you’ve got to be kidding,” was Jenna’s rapid response. “I’m not coming to see you.”

This remark had its intended affect.

“Jenna, I know I haven’t been in touch. But I’m trying to reconnect with you -- you’re still my daughter.”

“Mom, hey, you think I want to show up magically on Christmas Eve and pretend I’m Santa Claus for you and your new boyfriend? I have no interest in that. Besides, I’m working Christmas night.”

“Oh dear, I’m so sorry, Jenna. I really don’t enjoy thinking of you being a waitress. I could send you some money.”

“I’m not waitressing anymore.”

“Well, what are you doing then?”

“Singing.”

She laughed. “What do you mean, singing?” Then there was a fumbling for words “How? Who taught you to sing?”

Jenna paused. “Mom, remember the music you played in the house all the time? I used to sing to it... like all the time... with you, and to you. Don’t you remember anything about... ?”

“People are paying you to sing?”

“Well, my friend is a great songwriter, Adam Devonshire. Remember that name, mom. I’m singing his songs. They’re coming to see him. I’m just... ”

“Oh, I get it now. So are you perhaps more than friends with this friend?”

Jenna hesitated. “That’s none of your fucking business, and not the point.”

“Okay, okay. Well, I didn’t mean to get us off on the wrong foot. I just wanted you to know I love you, honey. I always knew you’d turn out fine. I knew you could be someone special... .”

Jenna swiped a few strands of her red hair away from her face and turned towards the wall for privacy.

She spoke quietly, “You never knew anything about me actually, and you don’t know me now. You had no idea if I was special three years ago, or if I was on drugs spending my free time on the back of someone’s motorcycle. Did you even consider the possibility that you’d call tonight and find out I was living in a homeless shelter? Did you have any clue at all? But why care? Why care?”

That was pretty much the way the call ended. Of course, I thought Jenna would be upset – angry, sad. I thought she’d need to talk things over with me and explain everything she was feeling.

But she saw it like this: Even one more thought about her past was one thought too many.

She went over to the piano to practice her blues scales and never said another word about the call.

Chapter Five

We had a lot of musician friends in the city. I call them “friends” because they were people who knew us and respected us as musicians before all this crazy stuff started happening.

All of our friends were musicians because music was pretty much everything we did, all the time. There were the rehearsals Jenna and I had, learning new songs, and taking the songs we knew to higher levels of difficulty. Then there were the piano students I couldn’t quite give up, since some of them had been taking lessons from me for years.

One key part of our week was jamming with musicians who we thought we might want to play with some day, or even record with when the time was right.

After the really big shows we would hang out with the “after-the-concert crowd” until 3 or 4 in the morning, sleep until 10 or 11, and start all over again.

Some days we might try to quickly clean the house, or go running, or make love in a place Jenna chose – like under a window where we could hear snippets of conversations of people passing by. Rarely did we make love in bed, or before we were about to go to sleep. She hated that.

Over a late breakfast one morning I came up with a new idea:

I thought we needed to limit our gigs. Playing every weekend would eventually kill the magic, kill the joy, and eventually kill the crowds. Playing less would give us more free time to hang out, plus put us even more in demand.

I also didn’t want to jam with other people anymore. I needed time to write new material.

Jenna liked the plan and trusted my instincts. We were in sync.

My first new song during this stage that we referred to later as the “us period” was, of course, about her.

*Like a satellite looking over mountains wide,
Or aurora lights flashing out of sky blue eyes
She comes out of nowhere
Lighting up the terrain.*

*A star appears brightest light in the evening sky
You reach out knowing it's foolish to try.
Other stars shine but you're haunted by her golden fire,
you're left chasing only your own desire....*

It was a good start to a new era.

Chapter Six

I decided to contact a high-powered music attorney in L.A., Elliot Oberman. I think it was because I was curious -- even though I didn't have a driving need to become famous I wanted to know if it was possible. I was like Narcissus dipping my toe in the water instead of falling all the way in.

Music attorneys were the ones that cut the deals in our business. Managers and agents were afterthoughts. But, of course, famous music attorneys are also extremely hard to connect with when you're a relative unknown.

After about a week I was finally able to get him on the phone. He told us to send him a CD.

I told him we would send him three finished songs, thinking that it would be a good reason for us to do a professional three song recording anyway.

But he said, "Look, I don't want to see you waste your time or money going into a studio. You don't have to make a big deal of this. Just send me a few songs from your next live gig and I'll be honest with you. After that, the next step will be obvious."

I thought his advice was good, even though what he was saying, if I read between the lines, was: The odds of an unknown artist actually being good, especially one without a CD to showcase, was one in a million.

We asked a friend to record us at our next two gigs. Jenna, knowing we were recording, instead of trying to play it safe, took wild chances vocally and, in typical fashion, everything she tried worked.

We sent a few MP3s to Elliot with the email reminding him who we were. It took me a few weeks to get hold of him again. When I did, I thought his reaction sounded subdued. He said it sounded "pretty good," and the photos of Jenna that we sent made it clear she was "a great looking kid."

Then I asked him straight out if the next step was for us to make a CD. He said no, not yet. Instead, he wanted to fly to San Francisco to hear our next show.

I thought that was encouraging. I didn't realize at the time that he would never have offered to do that unless he was blown away and planning to represent us. His low-key demeanor was giving him an easy out if he didn't like the live show. And it was also a way of protecting his own interests if he did.

The gig he came to was at Plaza One Amphitheater. We were opening for a band called Zooloo. They were touring non-stop. They looked burned out. The reviews of their newly released CD hadn't been what they hoped for. The crowds were thinning out rather than getting bigger. The label was just about ready to pull the plug, so the record company was finding local acts to open for them.

Zooloo spent their days on the bus calling radio stations on their cell phones, begging them for airtime. The stories they told us when we met backstage were humbling.

Jenna got the picture too for the first time. This was not an easy life. The odds of crashing and burning at some point were extremely high.

We started playing our set while the Zooloo crowd was still filtering in. This wasn't our crowd. We weren't usually playing places this big, and none of our fans wanted to see Zooloo. They wanted to see us in our usual, far more intimate settings. So we felt pretty alone up there on the stage. But by the time our third song started the seats were nearly filled with Zooloo's fans, and then the typical Jenna thing started happening.

The applause became louder and louder as each song ended. When we finished the set there were whistles and a lot of shouting throughout the amphitheater. This was an organic response to a performer who could simply zone in, read a crowd, and somehow steal their attention. She could take their breath away with her voice, lure them with her looks, and coerce them with her very presence. By the last song of the set no one wanted to see or hear anyone but her.

For our encore everyone was expecting a rockin' song to get the crowd ready for the headliner. But I sensed that the crowd had already peaked, so I decided to switch things up and have Jenna sing

a quiet song I had just written. We'd only rehearsed it for a few days but she was open for anything, and my adrenaline was running high. I didn't care if it worked or not. We were in control now.

She agreed the moment I whispered the song title in her ear. She nodded and smiled. This was our audience now, not Zooloo's. We had no fear.

Chapter Seven

Elliot met us backstage. There was no more facade, no more aloofness. He told us he was confident he could get us a deal with a major label and wanted to get some financial backing together for us to make a three-song CD so he could showcase it.

I could have waited for a better time, but I decided right then and there to tell him that I had a clear idea about the kind of deal I wanted. "If we're going to do this, I want control of the recordings. I want to produce, or at least have the final say."

Oberman turned very somber. He was an attorney, after all, and he knew the realities. "It's not appropriate to demand that your first time out, Adam."

"I know that. But with all due respect, I'm concerned my songs will turn into something I'll end up hating."

"Well, you have to have some trust, some patience, and, frankly, some humility about your first record. These guys know how to make great records, and they also know how to make money and put you on the map. If you make it, then you can do whatever you want."

I shot back, "That seems like a trap to me. I mean, if I can't record the songs the way I hear them, then if the record fails, how do I know I failed? How do I know who failed? Maybe it was my songs, or my sound, or maybe it was someone else who ruined my songs, which I care very much about! How will I ever know?"

I pointed to Jenna and said a little too loudly, "This is our one chance, Elliot. Why shouldn't we make sure the music is recorded the way we hear it, and live or die with the consequences?"

"Because you could spend a hundred years in the studio and not be able to get the sound the way you hear it. You need an experienced producer in the studio. The sound isn't just about turning on a machine that you sing and play into. It's like building a house from the ground up. There's a process. Even bands who want to get a simple 'live' sound struggle to translate it into a recording."

"From everything I've heard, producers can ruin everything."

"Good producers get paid big money for a reason. Don't underestimate them, Adam. You may love what they do with your music! It may be better than anything you are capable of imagining in your head."

"Elliot, they might come up with great ideas, but I know how the songs should sound. I wrote them. So I'm open to anyone's ideas at any time, but they have to make sense to me. And I have to be the one with the final say. That's what I'm trying to tell you."

"Well, that's not going to happen. It's crazy, frankly. You don't even know what you're doing in a big studio. You need some outside perspective when things get bogged down. Besides, it's their money. It's their cash on the line. Not yours."

"I've spent time in studios, Elliot. I just haven't had the money to record my songs yet. I know my way around the board, and what I don't know I can learn as I go along. I'll be happy to have all the help I can get, that's for sure. But I'm not giving anyone else the final say."

"Not even Jenna?"

Jenna was sitting right next to me. "I would never ask for that," she said. "The music is his creation."

"I appreciate your loyalty, Jenna," Oberman said quietly. I could tell he was thinking about stepping out of this before it got too weird for him. He wasn't about to take chances with his career and reputation. Not even for her.

"And I want total control over the mixes too for that matter," I added.

Oberman was getting extremely frustrated now; his voice became agitated. "Songwriters and bands and singers don't go to the mixes anymore, Adam. Sometimes even the producer doesn't go. Mixing engineers are a special breed. You're talking twenty-five or thirty thousand dollars a mix. That's per song. And believe me they wouldn't get paid that kind of money for what's usually half a day's work unless they were worth it. The tricks these mixing engineers use to get a hit sound is not something you pick up in a few days of hanging around a control room!"

"I understand. I really do. But I'm not going to be a slave to the process. Jenna and I are the process, not them."

"Then we have a big problem," he said.

But as he said it, a thought entered his mind. "Do you two have a contract with each other?"

"No."

"Okay then, I'm going to be honest with you, Jenna, I need to know where you stand. Because I believe you have something special. I believe if you wanted to sing the Russian national anthem people would pay to see you sing it."

"I won't be singing the Russian national anthem. I only sing Adam's songs."

"Is that your handshake deal?"

"That's my decision," she shot back. "I only want to sing Adam's songs."

He shook his head. "Then why did you people call me in the first place? I really don't get you guys. You send me your gig tape asking for my help. Out of a thousand tapes I listen to in a year from unknown singers and bands, zero out of a thousand tapes get more than ten seconds of my attention before I pass. But this time I heard some magic there. So I contacted you and I fly here, and now you tell me you want to sit around and play local gigs until the magic runs out? The magic is now! Everything else will take care of itself over time. Let's just send it to some labels and see what happens."

Jenna broke in, "We have to take care of ourselves right from the beginning. Not later, when it's too late to ask for the kind of control Adam wants."

He looked at her with a strange half-smile. It had a trace of surrender. "Adam has sobered you to the business, Jenna, and that's good. But holy god, girl, you drank the Kool-Aid. It tastes amazing, doesn't it? Let me at least try to promote you, maybe with songs you're not so attached to. Then after you make it big we'll record Adam's songs, with him getting all the control he wants. There you go! There's a blueprint: Hit songs now, Adam's songs later. How's that for a compromise?"

Odd things can be hatched from the minds of lawyers. He was obviously making a final play for Jenna, cutting me out of the deal.

“Not a chance,” Jenna said quietly.

“It’s okay with me,” I said to her. I wasn’t about to look like the bad guy in front of him. “Jenna, you can do whatever you want. We have no contract between us. And I’ll never want one.”

She waved me off. “Elliot, Adam’s songs are why I sing. We’re having fun together. I’m not about to screw it up. If Adam says yes, I’m in. If he says no, I’m out. I hope that’s clear.”

“But, thanks for coming,” I added.

His eyes were suddenly quite steely. He wasn’t used to being treated like this.

She held out her hand to shake his, with a courteous smile on her face. He moved closer, shook her hand somberly, staring at her, trying to read her, trying to read between the lines. But nothing was between the lines. This wasn’t L.A.

Chapter Eight

I half-expected her to be a little angry with me. Or maybe even, after thinking it over for a few days, eventually take his offer. If she wanted what everyone else in this business wanted, she would have called me a stupid shit and bought a plane ticket for Los Angeles.

Instead she looked at me with a serious expression. Her eyebrows were furled. The silence in the room was a bit absurd, since Zooloo was vibrating the ceiling with their riotous plea for glory. "If that's the way the game works," she said, "who cares if we win or lose?"

I said, "We'll probably just keep gigging around town until we burn out, you know? I'm almost there now, in fact." I was shocked at what came out of my mouth. I was maybe being a little too honest.

But I was also somewhat unnerved by the things Oberman had said — many of which were true. The most important thing I knew he was right about was — this was our time. We were in a creative groove. We had everything we needed to make the leap onto a bigger stage, literally and figuratively. We were in love with our music, and with each other. If we were ever going to try, we should try it now. If I wanted to be famous badly enough, I would have taken his offer, or made Jenna take his offer and wait my turn. But I didn't want it badly enough.

She knew I was wrestling with these thoughts without me saying a word. Suddenly, she looked at me with an impish smile. "We need to make a CD with great musicians. We need to make the CD now, while we have control over the game. The game will be your songs. Your ears. My voice. And we'll do the whole CD, before we try to find a label."

I started to shake my head. "Too much money. Too risky."

"Yes, Adam! Yes!" She was ignoring me. "Then we'll sell them the CD we've already made, and they'll take it as a completed work, exactly as it is, or we walk!"

“A full CD would cost us everything we have.”

“So what? We get to create our sound, our image, without anyone else pulling us in some other direction.”

“It’s a good idea, Jenna, theoretically, except for one thing. After we spend all of our money on the tracks, mixing the songs with a really good mixing engineer will cost us a lot more. We wouldn’t have enough money to finish it.”

She had already considered that. “We’ll find our own backers.”

“And if we don’t get a record deal afterwards? How do we pay them back?”

“We’ll sell the CD at the gigs until we break even someday. We’ll pay them back eventually. Slowly. They’ll be proud of the music. They won’t mind waiting.”

I was already into this too deep. I thought about being in debt for the first time since I was nineteen and somehow it didn’t matter.

“But...” I had to say it. I had to lay it on the line. “Right now, tonight, tomorrow we also control our days, our time, we’re not working for anyone except for ourselves. No one gets to push us back onto the bus to travel to the next city, no one can force us to leave our life here. Maybe the way it is right now, the way we’re living, is as good as it will ever get. Maybe having more than what we have right now would be so much more that it will ruin everything. More fame, more money, a mansion maybe, fancy cars, a crew of roadies, an entourage of business people, and the press and deranged fans following us around like mosquitoes — instead of it being just the two of us, here. And phones ringing off the hook, Jenna, when all we want to do is sing to each other. I mean, what the hell kind of life would touring offer us compared to what we already have?”

She smiled at me, but I could see through it. A part of her was curious to see what would happen if we reached for it all. It was an Eve thing. I was advocating the Adam thing.

She wanted to prove her love to me, and her musical loyalty. If she didn’t love me as much as she did, she would have been dreaming of L.A. right now — the lure of fame would have overwhelmed everything else I said tonight. My songs would slowly lose their magic. My lyrics would suddenly make no sense. I wouldn’t make sense. I’d

eventually seem like some stubborn boring arrogant academic who refused to eat the shiny apple that was put right in my hand.

The look in her eyes was filled with temptation. She was fighting her thoughts. But she didn't want us to turn into her parents, arguing, not trusting, leaving. Leaving for something better, that quickly turned into something worse. If she left me now, she would have learned nothing. Even success would fail her. That's what she knew at the core of her. And that's what I heard her saying to me, just by the look in her eyes.

I was also thinking about how beautiful those crystal blue eyes would look on the cover of our CD.

Chapter Nine

A few months after Jenna and I became a couple, we gave up our individual apartments and rented a small house in San Francisco with a pottery shed in the backyard, and a garden that we were responsible for keeping alive. That's where we formed our home base. Jenna enjoyed the domesticity. Not only did she like watering the plants and watching things grow, but she also began to work with clay, making some simple pots and creating a few abstract sculptures that stayed hidden in the shed.

The house had a living room big enough for rehearsals with a band. We needed that. Because we were getting ready to record our CD, just like Jenna wanted, basically wiping out both of our savings in the process. We decided we didn't want to try to find a backer and risk getting into all the emotional entanglements that might involve. We'd feel better going broke. We'd have to go back to playing more gigs. College gigs. But so be it. We were still having fun playing together. And we had to come up with enough money to pay for the mixes and also pay the rent.

Between the band rehearsals and the local concerts both of us craved a bit of normalcy in our free time. It was re-energizing to spend a quiet Sunday afternoon around the house. TV was always a bore, neither of us even wanted one in the house. And sometimes listening to music was the last thing we'd want to do for relaxation. But we might take a walk around the neighborhood or go to a local gym. Or, sometimes while she was in the garden or in the pottery shed I would read one of the novels that were piling up on my night stand. Or I'd thumb through a Will Durant history book from his ten-volume set, which I stumbled upon at the local library. At night we would grab some dinner at a local cafe where people were used to seeing us and would usually leave us alone, and then maybe go to a movie downtown. Everything was so very normal -- sometimes.

I was now twenty-seven. An ancient and strange age in the annals of rock music. It was the age that Paul McCartney quit The

Beatles. He had already recorded a dozen of the greatest albums of all time and made three movies by then.

Then there was this bizarre fact: Jimi Hendrix, Janis Joplin, Jim Morrison and Kurt Cobain all died at the age of twenty-seven.

I wondered what twenty-seven held in store for me. Because this was the make or break year. The year I decided to go all in. The CD would be done in a matter of months. Our money would be gone. Our fate decided.

One Sunday at sunset while Jenna was out shopping a strange mood hit me. I felt a momentary shadow of loneliness, something rare for me. The truth came to light for one clear moment, the kind of truth you admit grudgingly, and then just move on with your life anyway, as if it never crossed your mind. Because it's too big and too radical to contemplate. And maybe it's not even entirely true, you think... as time mercifully tries to kidnap you back into the humdrum tick-tock illusions of today, and then the next day comes, filled with plans and schedules. I took out my notebook:

*Songs are like captured animals.
I'm not here to be a zookeeper. I should apologize
to every one of them, and one night when no one
is looking set them free, and walk away.*

The nightmarish thought blew away the minute Jenna walked through the door. She smiled and declared: "Spaghetti for dinner, with real Italian meatballs from the deli. Leave my kitchen at once, young man, for you know not what I do."

She called me back into the kitchen as an after-thought and dared me to make love to her on the kitchen table timing it to the eight minutes it would take until the spaghetti boiled. The task I was given was clear -- eight minutes - no more, no less. I accepted the challenge. And the lines I had written in my notebook slinked back into the shadows.

* * *

The time came to record our CD, and with it our leisure time vanished completely.

We wanted this CD to sound professional enough for a major label to pick it up and run with it, no changes. We would need ten of my best songs recorded and mixed to sound as good as the best CDs out there.

We booked time in the premier studio in the city, with the best engineer, and the best players in the city. All of the pieces to the puzzle were laid out before us. We knew who to hire. Where to work.

The problem inevitably was everyone wanted to be paid what they felt they were worth.

These players we wanted to hire were not friends. They were players that toured with up-and-coming bands who had record deals. And whenever they were back home, they were hired to play in local recording studios all the time. Their days of playing for free, with anyone, were long gone.

We would need thirty-grand just to pay for the mixes in L.A., where the mixing Gods resided. Thirty-thousand dollars for mixing an entire CD was, in fact, a vastly discounted price. So we were supposed to consider ourselves lucky. Our budget was sixty-thousand total. That was all the money we had. Jenna and I were going to sink or swim with this one shot.

The rhythm tracks went smoothly. All ten songs were laid down in the first six days, working twelve hours a day. But because I kept changing little things here and there, we found ourselves behind schedule.

In the oddest but most logical decision I'd ever made in my musical life, I decided Jenna was going to sing all the leads. I had never imagined my first professional CD to have any other voice on it but mine. She wanted me to do the singing on at least a few tracks. But I decided against it. It would make the CD more cohesive to have her sing on all the tracks, and it would give the labels a hook they could work with. She was the hook. She was going to be the star. I would be the quasar beam deep out in space. She truly did translate the story of the lyrics better than I could anyway. I'd always told myself it was all about the songs, now I had to prove that to myself.

By the time we were ready to lay down Jenna's vocals we were almost a full day over budget. We also knew we were doing everything backwards. In other words, regardless how good the CD

sounded, if the songs and the singer weren't what the labels were looking for right at that moment they would stop listening to the CD ten seconds into the first song.

But we kept reminding each other that we were doing this for ourselves. We were chronicling our best work and giving these songs a finality. Our fallback plan was to make a few thousand copies and sell them at gigs, like Jenna had suggested. We'd need to sell four thousand copies at \$15 each just to break even. That was our goal, if all else failed. But even that goal seemed pretty crazy. We figured it would take at least a year of working like crazy just to make our money back.

The problem we faced now was that the we had originally scheduled three days for Jenna's ten lead vocals. But we'd have to finish them in far less time or we'd literally run out of money before we even got to the mixes. The pressure was on her and she knew it.

Usually a singer will sing one song all the way through a number of times. Then the producer will take pieces of each track and make a composite track. Then you might fill in lines that still aren't quite right with punch-ins. By the time you're five or six hours into the session a singer's voice was shot for the day, and maybe two or three lead vocal tracks would be completed if they were on a roll.

I was already thinking I might need to leave a song or two off the CD to save time and money if things slowed down any further. I was hoping we'd get lucky.

Jenna came into the studio that day with lots of energy. No sign of pressure or tension. It was typical Jenna. The atmosphere changed when she came into the control room. Everything felt "on." Everyone's mood lifted as soon as she made eye contact with them.

She had a suggestion that I thought was a bit crazy at first. She didn't want to sing each song two or three times. What she wanted to do was unheard of, actually. She asked that we set up all ten songs in the order they were going to be placed on the CD, and let her sing them straight through without stopping.

She knew the engineer needed thirty minutes or so to dial things in and get the vocal tones we wanted. Maybe we'd try a few different mics. But then she wanted to sing all ten songs virtually non-stop, like she was singing on stage.

Jenna knew everything she needed to know about these songs. We'd played them at concerts. We'd rehearsed them. If this is what she wanted to try, why not? This is the type of thing a professional producer would never have allowed a first-time singer to try. Or even a great established singer. Never.

To my way of thinking, something big was about to happen, either very good or very bad. She was going for it with everything she had. She'd either hit a grand slam or strike out in a cloud of dust. But it was going to be dramatic, that was for sure.

In another odd twist, she asked to be set up in a dark corner of the big tracking room. Not in the vocal booth where we would be able to control her sound better, but out in the open, in the big room used for tracking drums and piano. I saw the engineer shaking his head every time she made another request. He thought for sure this was going to be a disastrous waste of time. He even began to question why I wasn't putting a stop to it. She obviously didn't know what she was doing.

We checked the vocal sound one more time. It actually sounded surprisingly good in the big room. Very live and raw. Then we told her everything was ready, and the first track started. I closed my eyes and listened through headphones so I could focus on every phrase and every note. Her opening line was perfect. And so was the next line. And the line after that... .

As the first track turned into the next track, with almost no break in between, what happened became what could only be described as (in a profound understatement) a masterful live performance.

By the time the sixth song started I had my eyes glued on her. She was holding onto her headphone with one hand, swaying in the semi-darkness. I was smiling, almost laughing. I was no longer focusing on each line separately, no longer holding a pen in my hand ready to take detailed notes of what lines we would have to re-do. I was no longer watching the soundboard. I was no longer producing. I was just listening to a miracle, listening to my songs coming fully alive, forever – on the first take.

It was time for the last song.

Anything

*In the best of worlds
We'd be far from here
Walking 'cross a bridge in
The Paris sun.
We could see that everything's really alright
and that the time is ours to set ablaze.*

*I know love is hard when the walls close in
And the world gets small -- no vision.
But we've got this thing when we touch
that goes all the way in
Makes me feel we can do
anything.*

* * *

Ten songs.
Ten first takes.
Perfect, every one.

Jenna James became a superstar in forty-five unbelievable minutes. And it only got wilder from there.

Chapter Ten

The engineer and I knew we had just seen the equivalent of someone making a forty-five-minute movie with no second takes and no edits. It was like pulling a royal straight flush in the biggest card game of your life.

Now suddenly we were two days ahead of schedule and under budget, instead of a day behind and thousands in the hole. We blew through the harmony tracks in the one day we allotted for them. Then we thanked the engineer for his work, put the tracks onto a backup hard drive, and headed off for L.A. to work on the final mixes.

* * *

The L.A. mixing experience remains one of the best memories of my life. The mixing engineer was the famous Jay Lofgren, Grammy winner, brilliant exponentializer of sound and energy. He gave us a big discount to work with him as long as we were willing to book specific dates. Those dates had been cancelled by a famous band the week before because they hadn't finished tracking. We were filling in Jay's dead time.

The L.A. hotel we reserved was somehow fully booked when we got there. They couldn't find our reservations until I showed them the email confirmation on my computer. They finally gave us a room just above the incinerator.

The night sky was orange. The day sky was... not there — a clod of gray nothingness veiled the sun. All the while people were running around the city like exclamation marks. We drove past endless phone lines with transformers buzzing, and massive canisters filled with gas of some kind. Maybe the sky was caught in there — maybe for its own protection.

We entered Jay Lofgren's studio at 11 a.m. the next morning. It was a studio like no other — batiks and Persian rugs were hanging on the walls. Incense was in the air. A view of the Pacific coastline

glistened from his window. His waiting room, the size of a warehouse, was as unique as the studio itself. A kick drum with "The Beatles" written on it was placed up high, like a great Zeus-like statue, overlooking the room. A functional and well-cared-for turntable was in the corner. In a cedar chest, in perfect sideways stacked rows, were many of the greatest vinyl albums ever made: Traffic, Ray Charles, early Dylan records, Muddy Watters, Eric Clapton, Tim Buckley, Marvin Gaye, and on and on.

When it came time for the first song to be mixed what he did was as unique as his studio. It was almost as unique as what Jenna did on her vocal tracks. Usually a mixing engineer works on the drum sound first. Vocals are mixed in last, after the band sound is solidified. But he mixed backwards.

The first thing he pulled up was Jenna's vocal track. He pushed it right up against the needle, just below where it would distort. He worked with Jenna's sound until we were excited just listening to her voice by itself.

Then he took my rhythm guitar track and turned it way up, until my guitar and Jenna's voice were the only things blasting through the room on his huge speakers. It was almost as if no other instruments were even necessary. Just like when we performed our local gigs back home. Except he didn't know that!

He turned to us and said: "That's the song right there. Anything that gets in the way of that is my bad."

When the drums and bass and all the other tracks were slowly added in behind Jenna's voice, the end result was better than anything we could have hoped for. Everything sounded insanely big. Each song came alive, one by one.

Our CD was finished. It sounded great. And, most importantly to us, no one was ever going to be able to change the way it sounded.

* * *

Before we left L.A. I decided to take a chance. I knew Elliot Oberman would still be pissed off. But I also knew he was the best music attorney on the West Coast. So I called him and begged him to meet with us for five minutes. Just five minutes! After my

begging started to embarrass him he agreed to squeeze us into his busy schedule.

When we walked in, he was very formal with us. He barely shook our hands. He was still feeling snake-bit. But to his credit he was willing to give a quick listen, probably because of Jenna. He hadn't forgotten her.

Elliot was a round man with a pleasant face, narrow tired attorney eyes, prematurely balding. He definitely knew how to dress the part – dapper black suit and a yellow-gold tie. He couldn't have pulled off the blue jeans and black tee-shirt look anyway, so he dressed like the CEO of IBM.

He agreed to hear parts of two or three tracks at most. But he warned us his time was limited: meetings, conference calls, court filings. He had a lot of built-in reasons to kick us out fast. Gold records shined behind framed glass on all four walls. We were beggars at a banquet. Elliot had long ago gotten more than his share of the feast.

We played the first track and tried to read the expression on his face. We knew he didn't want to like it. He wanted to tell us after the first ten or fifteen seconds to play the next track. He didn't want to admit that we could produce a great sounding CD. But here it was. He would have looked bad admitting that we pulled it off, that's true. But he would have looked even worse if he said we didn't. Because we knew we did, and we knew he knew.

At a certain point we all began laughing, because he knew that we knew that he knew.

Suddenly he had all the time in the world for us. No meetings to rush off to. No conference calls to take. After listening to all the tracks he said he'd see what he could do. He made no promises. He was still doubtful a major label would agree to sign us with a completed CD, no matter how good it sounded. Independent labels, maybe. But he only dealt with the biggest of the indie labels, not the small ones with only three or four artists on their roster.

He also wanted photos of Jenna, of course. And lots of them. The skimpier and sexier the outfits, the better. She was going to have to be the one to sell this. But we knew that. And he knew we knew.

* * *

We were excited by Elliot's response. But we were also burned out from the last three months of non-stop work. As soon as we left his office and hit the crowded L.A. streets filled with normal people -- construction workers, taxi drivers, and all the other banquet beggars like us, it was clear we had to get off the hamster wheel for a while, or we were going to melt down.

So we literally ran away. With the final few thousand dollars we had left from being under budget at the studio we booked a flight to Kauai -- a quiet Hawaiian island. We got on the plane directly from L.A. with our two overnight bags. Jenna and I were never afraid to follow our impulses. It almost didn't seem crazy enough. But it would have to do. It would be our first tropical island experience. Although it wouldn't be our last.

Kauai's green mossy mountains were Martian-like, oddly rounded at the top. The ocean at the north end of the island was snow bright from the setting sun. The warmth in the air soothed our bones. The rains at night cooled our minds and magnetized our bodies together.

We didn't know during those days we spent in isolation who might be listening to the CD that day. What mogul in the industry might call Oberman and say, "I have to have this." Or "I hate this." We busied ourselves by hiking the muddy Na Pali Coast trail, three thousand feet above the edge of the island. We body surfed on cool, cobalt-colored waves. We rode a Zodiac boat halfway around the island, skipping over the rough surf. We ate simple meals from roadside stands and hippie cafes, and devoured each other in every crazy demented way possible. We ended the week wiped out, weak, muddy, laughing, and seeing our potential journey in the music business for what it was -- a wild trip down a very big and dangerous road.

Whatever was going to happen from here was fine with us. Our experience making the CD was enough to feel content as true artists. We didn't need anyone else to define it or us.

This warm and beautiful place was an odd irony. This kind of life was what we were ultimately striving for. But we were already here. Why leave only to try to get back here all over again someday?

Chapter Eleven

We got home to at least a hundred voice messages. Offers for gigs...jam sessions...invites to two parties last Saturday... where are you – trying to borrow your guitar amp tonight...beep... hey, found an amp, thanks anyway.... beep.... Adam and Jenna, this is Elliot, call me back...beep...Hello, this is Senator Knox, as you know I'm running for...beep.... Adam, Jenna, are you available to speak? This is Elliot Oberman. Please call me on my cell if I'm not at the office...beep.

We dialed his cell. The first words we heard were, "I'm glad you finally decided to call me back, you assholes." He was laughing but clearly annoyed.

"Sorry Elliot, we were in Kauai."

"Kauai? Did you have a gig there?"

"A private gig."

"Okay. Well you may be playing another gig very soon. Because Warton Records wants to sign you, pending seeing you play live."

"What? Warton?"

"It's not a major, as you know, but it's the hippest indie label out there. And it's big enough to make big things happen fast."

"Will they accept the CD as it is?" I asked.

"I brought it up to them. They didn't want to discuss it until, or if, we begin to negotiate. All I know is they want to sign you if the live act is as good as what they heard on the CD. They're willing to pay for the band to fly to L.A. for a private show."

"Okay Elliot, but you need to know we're not recording these songs over. They're done."

There was dead silence on the other end of the line. I thought I heard him breathing. He was thinking about a response. Finally he said, "If you want me to tell them that's the only way you'd sign..."

"I do."

"You're sure."

"Positive."

Jenna was standing over my shoulder trying to listen to both sides of the conversation. When we said goodbye I turned to her and said, "We're really close, I think."

I was wrong. A week later Elliot made our CD released as-is, a non-negotiable demand on my behalf. But Wharton already had a producer in mind, with a certain sound that would be perfect for us. They also had a certain image for Jenna, a different look. The way Jenna currently presented herself wasn't quite it. So they passed.

Chapter Twelve

The morning after Warton Records officially walked away from the deal Jenna came in from the garden frowning. "Adam, I admit it, I'm a little scared. Maybe we made a mistake turning them down. Maybe no one will do what we want them to do for all sorts of reasons we don't understand now, but..."

"What's the alternative, Eve?" She hated when I called her Eve.

"First of all, fuck you." She smiled but she was annoyed. She needed me to hear her out.

"Look Adam, we didn't want them to control the music, right? But what's left for them to control? The CD is the road map. Maybe they're stuck in their little game of doing it a certain way. Maybe they just need to tweak a few things to satisfy their egos. Who knows? So maybe we take the deal, but, at least we know what we want the songs to sound like. If it comes out even a little better in the process then everyone wins."

"And what if the producer starts tearing the thing apart? What if he wants one of the songs at a faster tempo? Or, 'Let's make that little rockin' song at the end of the CD a big ballad? We have a Nord 3 here in the studio that has fantastic orchestral sounds? What's the harm in trying, kids? And, by the way, can we tweak the lyrics just a smidge so we can get more radio play?"

"Well, if that happens, we tell the execs, look, you signed us because of the CD you heard, let the world hear what you heard."

"That's what we're saying to them now!"

"But if we don't like what the producer is doing, can't we just give them back the advance and walk away?"

"Jenna, we'd have to sign a contract to do the recording and tour it. If we walked away, they'd sue us!"

"We're broke! They would sue us for what exactly?"

"Then they'd probably blackball us from the whole fucking industry forever." I sighed and shook my head.

It was a matter of the naïve leading the naïve.

Of course, she was right in one sense. We were taking a huge risk turning down a company that big. This was all about me, my songs, my sensibilities, my ego. But was it fair to her? This was her career too.

She was about to go back out to the garden, wearing my old Prince T-shirt and a pair of muddy jean shorts. "Wait, Jenna. Come back. What if we just give in and get a huge advance, take the money and deal with their bullshit. Trust fate. Is that what you want?"

Of course, I set up the question to get only one answer. I was such a shit, really. She was too sweet, and too into me, to agree to anything like that.

Right at that moment the phone rang. We almost let it go to voicemail, we were both in such a funk, but Jenna decided to pick it up.

"Chart Records," the voice on the phone said flatly. Then silence.

"Elliot?"

"Jenna, Chart Records, the biggest indie label in the world right now, just agreed to use your CD master if your live show kills it. Simple as that."

"Woooooo!" Jenna screamed. "Seriously?"

I couldn't hear Elliot's voice on the other end of the phone. I thought that Warton may have offered a compromise, and that maybe she was getting too excited, because in the end they'd find a way to screw us. "Slow down, Jenna," I whispered.

"Chart!" screamed Jenna breathlessly to me. "They'll take the CD as-is!"

"What?"

She handed me the phone. "Elliot?"

"Adam, what they said clearly is that they'll distribute the CD without any changes as long as you can put on a great show and tour it. They don't mind saving the recording costs and they think it

sounds good. If you can blow their minds on stage, they'll want you guys to pack your bags, like now, and tour it like crazy. They believe in you. But I mean, there's also a downside. They're offering a smaller advance than Warton did, because they do feel it's a risk to put the CD out as is. They think it's a little raw. But, if you pull off the gig they're going to set up for you..."

"How much would the advance be?"

"Nothing firm yet. But probably in the two range."

"Two what?"

"Two hundred thousand."

I was silent.

"What do you think?" he said.

I tried to sound businesslike, "I don't know, Elliot. You're our attorney. What do you think?"

He laughed. "I think we ask for three-fifty and settle for three, if they decide to sign you. But I'll tell you this -- there won't be any room for error. The good news is, the CD is done, but they're also jittery because the CD is done. You understand? It's a double-edged sword, and they're using it to their advantage until you can prove you're tour-ready."

"That's fine. It's not the advance I'm concerned about."

"That's the right way to think, Adam. Because look, if you break this thing on tour, the next advance could be two million. But if you fall on your face out there, you'll be lucky if they offer you two hundred a week to sweep their floors after that. There won't be a next CD. And they already have enough janitors. You understand? That's the gamble you're taking. But we're getting ahead of ourselves. First they need to see you play live. Where do you want them to see you?"

"We're playing The Santa Cruz Cavern on the 5th. It's a cool place. Big, fun-loving crowd -- and they love us there."

"No good," he said. "No, I'm changing my thinking about this as we speak. We don't want Jenna to come off as a local singer playing in front of her home crowd. They want to see something different. Something more ready. Has to be bigger... Let me see if I can get you

to open for a band that owes me a favor. They're playing the Oakland Coliseum next month."

"Gulp!" I laughed.

"It would be a good show for them to see. Capacity twenty thousand. And if they see you can play there, then they'll know you can play anywhere. You want to gamble, then let's gamble. Let me make some calls and set some wheels in motion and I'll get back to you."

"Yes, sir!"

"Bye then."

"Elliot?"

"Yes, Adam?"

"Thanks for hanging in there with us."

"You're welcome, wild man. Let's see if we can nail this deal down. Then you can thank me with a big fat check."

When I hung up the phone, Jenna screamed, "Wooo hoo, boyfriend!" She was jumping up and down and clapping her hands.

"I guess your gardening gig is officially over, J.J. Your fired! Take off those muddy clothes, and let's get back to work."

Chapter Thirteen

The Oakland Coliseum is enormous. We were opening for Firebrand, the hottest new band on the Chart label. It would be mostly Firebrand's crowd. They would fill the place.

We assumed we needed to have the full band backing us up to make the show sound like the CD. But when we spoke to Elliot, he said Chart didn't want us to try to put a band together with the show coming up so soon. They were willing to get a first impression seeing just the two of us. As long as Jenna was featured. We knew what that meant. It was crystal clear. They were coming to see her.

We arrived for sound check at 3 p.m. Firebrand's crew agreed to work with us that night.

We stayed to watch Firebrand's sound check. It was a work of art. They were amazing. They had been on the road for four straight months and had everything dialed in. All the guys in the band were very laid back. They were smart, they were funny. They won us over.

We hung around backstage until show time. We didn't want to risk going anywhere outside the building. Neither of us ate any food. We were too nervous. Firebrand, well they were a different story, scarfing down every edible thing in sight. One of them went out with one of the road crew looking for a liquor store. Their nervousness before gigs had been left behind a hundred shows ago.

At exactly 8 pm we took the stage. We had a name now. We called ourselves, Jade. We decided on the name because of the first letters of our names: Jenna, Adam, Devonshire, and Emily – Jenna's middle name.

The applause was frighteningly sparse as we walked on stage. There were a lot of empty seats. The show was sold out, but most of the Firebrand fans were not interested in seeing the opening act. Especially one they could see at a local club for a fraction of the price they were paying for these tickets. Our core fans were out there somewhere, but there were so many seats at the Coliseum the thousand

fans who came to give us their support were lost in the wilderness. We were going to have to manufacture energy without any help from the crowd.

Our first song went well we thought, but there were still way too many empty seats. It felt like we were playing at a sound check. Jenna, who was used to immediate positive feedback, looked at me with a hint of fearfulness. I knew we'd have to do something wild. Take a chance of some kind.

Then suddenly, I decided against it. I walked over to her and whispered off mic: "The execs from Chart are out there somewhere. Don't worry about the rest of the crowd. Just play right to them as if they love you. Sing as if there are five-hundred-thousand of them out there screaming for you and you're gonna rock their world."

She nodded and went back to the mic. "I'd like to say hi to all our friends at Chart Records!" The crowd responded to this positively, recognizing this as Firebrand's label.

"And to our good friends, Firebrand, who asked us to open for them tonight." A little poetic license, but it seemed to get the crowd's attention. She got a lot of applause for that line.

As Jenna began to sing the next song something happened. It was the way it had happened so many times before. The crowd began to sink into a trance listening to her, watching her. She didn't know where the execs at Chart were seated, but she pretended she did. She waved at them in the middle of the song, then sang the next line all the way out to the back of the arena with everything she had. A few more songs into the set and we had regained our confidence. Jenna started to sing with an insane kind of brilliance. She improvised phrases with a wild confidence you only see from big stars on rare nights. It was probably the best she'd ever sung. She had quickly adjusted to this enormous space and the lack of noise from a sparse restless crowd. Everyone was riveted now as the people filing in quickly took their seats without talking.

We didn't get an encore, but we weren't expecting one. We only had thirty minutes, so we played what Elliot felt were our best seven songs from the CD and waved goodbye to the crowd.

Jenna freaked out backstage. "Adam, that was the toughest gig we've ever done. Was anyone even listening out there?"

“Chart was,” I said, then I kissed her. “And, Jenna, if they have ears that haven’t gone deaf, and eyes that see, you’ll be signed in fifteen minutes. You were fucking great.”

“You mean we?”

Elliot came backstage and said the Chart execs liked the show but they needed to hear us with a band now. We’d past the first test. They couldn’t quite imagine the whole package yet, but it wasn’t a “no.”

Jenna suddenly felt like the show was a huge waste of everyone’s time and energy. If they needed to hear us with a band then what the hell was this night about? We were back in audition mode. I knew they got what they came for. Step one: Jenna was the real thing.

Chapter Fourteen

This is a time when the city, our city, had to save us. Our wild, windy city with winding-hills and fog that stays too long in the summer. Because there was no way we were going to move to L.A. and try to find a band there. It would take us months to just decide on players.

Besides, every cab driver in L.A. apparently almost had a record deal with a major label, at least the way they tell it when they're driving you to the hotel. The only difference was, they had more money in the bank than we did at the moment.

So we fell back on old friends that we had been snubbing the entire year. In part, because the guys we used for the recording were too busy to commit to something this speculative. So, that meant we'd have to rely on the guys who had been wanting to play with us all along.

I hadn't wanted to commit to forming an official band in the past, but I realized that may have been a mistake. We could have had years of rehearsals and playing experience by now. We could have been tight. We could have been locked in where you start to read each other's minds. Instead we were starting from scratch.

Jenna was far more optimistic. "Look Adam, all we need is Neal on drums and Rob on bass and we have a band. We'll nail down these songs in a week."

"No, J.J. We need another guitarist too. Someone who can play lead, and play Stef's solos from the recording."

"Then let's ask Stef."

"He's too busy."

"Too busy to play with a touring band signed to the biggest indie label in the world?"

"Almost touring. Maybe signed. And no money to pay him to take the chance."

“They’ll sign us, Adam. I was shaky at The Coliseum. It felt like I was singing into an abyss! We just need one more shot.”

“We’re anything but a sure thing, Jenna. And even if the gamble works and the guys get paid on the road, there’s not a lot of money to be made unless we break really big. Even then, they won’t be the star, you will.”

“You and I will.”

“Okay, fine. I hope you know how funny that is.”

Jenna waved me off. “You’re the real star, Adam. Everyone will realize that eventually.”

To my surprise, after making a few phone calls, Jenna’s instincts about Stef were right. This city wasn’t as mercenary and cynical as L.A. When we said to our guys that we were shooting for a deal with Chart, instead of saying, “Yeah, write me a post card when you’re touring Europe,” they said, “Wow, how do we get us over the top?” Neal was “in 100,” Rob was “psyched.” Stef said, “Okay, I’ll commit until the end of the year, I just need to rearrange a few things.”

In just a few days we had put our band together. And Jenna and I suddenly had more commitments to keep. But they weren’t just commitments. We felt a responsibility to make sure their loyalty paid off, if and when the time came. I didn’t want to let them down.

Chapter Fifteen

We played a few gigs around the Bay Area to get ready. Some fans wanted to hear Jenna and me without the band. They were used to hearing just the two of us and thought it sounded better that way. At first I thought they might be right. I was concerned about the lack of intimacy and connection, which seemed so easy to create when it was just the two of us. But after a few more gigs we started to feel a spark, a pulse, when we played together. From there, we all knew there was no turning back. Stef's solos became longer and wilder. Rob found amazing melodic riffs he'd throw in at just the right time. Sometimes he made me laugh on stage right in the middle of a riff.

And Neal's drums started to sound like a launched rocket. There was no stopping his joy and power.

We didn't want to wait too much longer. The band was tight and fresh and eager to kick ass. We also knew that labels can lose interest on any given rainy day.

Chart set up a gig for us in L.A. at a famous club called the O-Zone. It was on an off-night in a city where we had no fans, no draw, no energy to pull from. But they said they would manufacture a crowd – mostly Chart employees and their significant or insignificant others. It was going to be an industry crowd. No stomping and whistling the minute Jenna sang her first note. We had to prepare ourselves for a toned-down response. We were being inspected, dissected, looked at through a microscope, pinched, sniffed, scratched for gold. I told Jenna, "Any response better than what we got at The Coliseum, and we'll be signed." But I didn't really believe it.

In fact, I was pretty sure this wasn't going to work. I didn't relate to the Chart execs. They were too strait-laced. Dollar bills in their eyes. Coke up their nose. It was an old scene I'd tried briefly, and left, a long time ago.

We stayed at a crazy pink hotel called, The Sunset Marquis. We sat around the outdoor pool eating breakfast at a table with white linen tablecloths. Lots of managers and publishers and wannabe rock

stars we didn't recognize were sipping espressos, working while still hung over from the night before, talking away on their cell phones while texting someone else, whispering something important in someone's ear sitting next to them, who was also on the phone and texting, cutting deals, losing deals. It was like the music business version of being on the trading floor of Wall Street.

We felt like "The Five Impostors" might have been a better name for the band than Jade. Five destitute amateurs from a rival city with no one to call on their phone, no one interrupting our oh-so-pleasant breakfast. Luckily, Chart was paying the bill for all this. We ate all the food we could. I even had a Bloody Mary for an appetizer. This was our one chance to live it up with the in-crowd. The private jet set. We were all broke. We stuffed extra croissants in our pockets after covering them with soft white napkins.

* * *

A funny thing happened that night at the O-Zone Theater. Something went wrong with the main sound system just before we were supposed to go on, and the in-house sound guy couldn't figure out the problem. The sound check had gone off without a hitch. But here we were ten minutes from show time, with the crowd murmuring and clinking glasses, and the main speakers were out.

A few people started running around, panicked. A few Chart execs started to point fingers at the club owner. They were walking around with a drink in their hand, trying to find someone to yell at.

Much to the sound guy's amazement, Jenna came out, already dressed for the show. She looked around at the dozens of blinking lights on the soundboard, then followed a few thick wires taped to the ground all the way to where the main speakers were.

She came back to where the sound guy was standing, moved him aside, and crawled under the board on her hands and knees until she found a small plug that had become disconnected to the board itself. She knew exactly where to plug it back in. She was back to being a roadie again.

A loud crackling sound was heard, then a smooth low hum. The mains were back on.

She looked at the sound guy while smoothing out her dress. She shrugged her shoulders, "The show must go on."

"Can I marry you?" the sound guy laughed, shaking his head.

"Well, let's see how the sound is tonight, then we'll talk."

A few Chart execs had seen all this from a nearby seat and started tapping the shoulders of some of the other execs nearby. Jenna told me later she won them over before she sang a note. This was just the kind of beautiful, unpretentious, rough-around-the-edges kid they'd been looking for.

Backstage Jenna was feeling loose. "This is our lucky night," she said. "I can feel it. I got to be a roadie again, just like the old days. I'm happy. This is fun. We're gonna smoke this."

Our band was announced and we ran on stage as the overhead lights came on. A light sophisticated applause made us feel a bit fop-pish. The whole intro was coming off a bit too "show biz," but we assumed that's what they wanted to see. They also wanted to see how we responded to another lukewarm audience, I suppose. Because this felt like the Oakland Coliseum redux. Then again, that's what it would be like on the road some nights. Chart knew that. None of our local fans would be there to sing the chorus with Jenna when we were in New York, or Philly. It would feel just like tonight. This was an all-L.A. (and almost exclusively Chart Records) crowd. It was time to prove ourselves, or realize the dream was over and go home.

We knew they wanted to see a take charge attitude on our part. So we had a surprise in store, to prove we had the well-conceived recklessness they were looking for. Our first song was one I had just written. It wasn't on the CD. I called it, "Sky High." I figured the big execs had already heard the CD, as well as the set we played at the Coliseum. What if we gave them something new to hear first? Plus, the band naturally rocked this one.

*Sky high this time
No chains, I'm fine.
Friends by day
Hold you at night
Only You
For the best time*

*Sky high.
This time...
love won*

* * *

The initial reaction to Sky High from the young execs at Chart was positive. A few of them even whistled their approval, which was a big commitment on their part. What if none of the other execs whistled? They could be gone tomorrow.

Jenna gained confidence as we quickly segued into the songs from the CD.

By the end of the set the Chart crowd saw what they were hoping for. They even wanted an encore. They were freely drinking now, and excited about their new act. The audition was over. We were part of the team. They were the overlords, and we were their anointed cash cows.

When the show was over and our CD began playing loudly over the main speakers, half the Chart crowd rushed up to us to shake our hands. Others were making their way towards Elliot. Jenna was their cool, rockin' golden angel. She'll break this record to the top world-wide in three months, someone said, just watch.

They saw me as a young up-and-coming songwriter, as well as leader of the band, producer, business manager, and the boyfriend of the lead singer and budding star. But they didn't see me as a potential star on my own. I was an important appendage. Kind of like an arm, or a strumming hand. And as far as the rest of the band was concerned, they were completely replaceable. L.A. had dozens of Stef's and Rob's and Neal's a phone call away. It was all about her. Her voice, her image. As I assumed it would be.

"How many units do you think she'll sell in the first four months?" asked one young exec.

"It depends what she's wearing, or not wearing," replied the other.

"Definitely the Vogue Mag circuit," said another. "This one isn't just cute. She's fucking hot."

"Imagine her selling jeans."

“No, perfume. Brand it.”

They were drunk. They were all being too honest out loud. Jenna might manufacture herself into the next rock icon if they were lucky, if she did enough interviews, and got her face on enough magazine covers. Their final verdict was in: It was a wonderfully productive evening, and a hell of a party.

Chapter Sixteen

Back home, Jenna and I began to discuss how to split the advance money. I thought a fifty-fifty split was fair.

She disagreed, "They're your songs. Songwriters always make the most money. There's a reason for that."

"Well, there's another way to solve this," I replied.

I cleared my throat. "J.J..." the silence became quite loud. Actually, deafening. I heard ringing in my ears.

"What are you thinking?" she replied, looking at me sideways.

"If, just if, we got married, the money would be ours together."

"Get out of here!" she screamed.

"I'm serious. I..."

"Adam, marriage shouldn't be a business decision," she frowned.

"It's not," I said emphatically. "That's not why I thought about kind of, almost, unofficially, proposing. I mean, don't tell anyone, but just between you and me, I love you."

These were words I never used, and would never write in a song. The whole "I love you" thing was so over-the-top cliché, it meant absolutely nothing anymore to anyone we knew.

"It just feels like the right thing to do," I continued. Then I broke out laughing. "Come the fuck on, Jenna."

I got down on one knee, holding an invisible rose in my hand. I'm not sure she knew what it was. Maybe she thought it was a microphone.

"Get up off the floor, fearless leader. When the time comes, I'll be the one kneeling!"

"Then why wait?"

"Adam, shit, what if I got pregnant right when we went on tour? Wouldn't that be a wonderful launch?"

"Yeah," I laughed. "Everyone at Chart would kill themselves. We'd make a fortune selling them loaded guns! But look, we'd just stay as careful, like we are now. We'd plan that kind of thing way down the road. At the right time."

"That's my point, Adam. It's just not the right time. And it might be a long time until it's the right time."

She kissed me. "Look, I'm twenty-one, dude. The baby thing is for thirty-year-olds. Let's hold off talking about this at least until the tour is over, please? Remember the tour? Then when we get back home, we'll see. Maybe make some plans. Maybe big plans. Ok?"

"Yeah. That makes sense."

I suppose marriage felt like a way to slow things down for me. The idea of a national tour wasn't all that appealing. I just wanted to write and record my songs. But Jenna's reaction came from a very different place. What if marriage turned us into "them," meaning her parents?

Then she would have lost everything, including me.

It was time to surrender to the future that had been laid out before us. Life as we knew it was coming to an end.

Chapter Seventeen

We had a few battles with Chart before signing the contract. They wanted to add the new song we played for them onto the CD. I was okay with that, but I wanted to use the band for the recording, and use the same studio we used before, and use Jay Lofgren as the mixing engineer. I wanted to make sure the sound of the CD stayed cohesive. They wanted to hire “a perfect producer” for this one song, and record it in L.A. with “the best studio musicians in the world.” They smelled a hit. I guess our city was just full of amateurs in their minds.

Another big problem was that they wanted to use L.A. players for the tour. The L.A. guys “knew how the game went.” They had the pro look on stage, they had the moves, and were great performers in their own right. They could match Jenna’s energy.

Our guys had dropped everything to come to L.A. with us and get us signed. They took a huge gamble. But now Chart was implying that they were not quite what they were looking for. One exec said Jenna can’t make it with a bunch of Grunge guys backing her up on a big stage. They imagined their L.A. hired guns up there, center stage, bumping against each other under a single spotlight, smiling, taking perfect sanitized solos. It was taking the worst of their banal instincts and making it all come together into one great corporate vision called unit sales.

They were also thinking ahead to the video. It was all about creating Jenna’s image. All they really had to do was let Jenna’s image take care of itself, but they couldn’t see that. They couldn’t stand to think that they were useless and unnecessary. They had to get their hands on her, figuratively and maybe even literally if someone got lucky. They had to mold her into their image and play God of the Music Industry. Those who didn’t want to become a Clive Davis had never heard of him.

Jenna was adamant about keeping our guys for the tour. They were loyal friends and great players. It would also force the company

to use them for Sky High in the studio, since they would be touring it with us.

I agreed with that tactic and told Elliot to fight for us. And if they pushed too hard, we'd walk -- again.

Elliot said, "Choose your battles, man."

I said, "If Wharton and Chart both wanted to sign us, then Jenna is no fluke. If they don't sign us on our terms someone else will. Tell them that!"

In the end, we agreed to a compromise. We would record Sky High in L.A. where they could oversee it, but I would produce it, we'd use our band for the recording, and be allowed to take them on the road. Their caveat, written into the contract, was -- Okay, but if the first leg of the tour isn't going well, they wanted the right to replace everyone in the band except Jenna and me. Elliot went to work carving out legal wording that defined, "isn't going well" Trust but verify.

We told the guys what was going on, and that suddenly they were auditioning all over again, this time in the studio in L.A., and on the first part of the tour. We told them to dress the part in the recording studio, act friendly to the execs, but have a bit of a swagger. Swagger was easy for Stef and Neal, but the bass player, Rob, was such a humble kindhearted guy, I really didn't think he could pull it off. He had no idea how to fake it. The only time I saw him with swagger was when he was allowed to play a \$10,000 six-string bass in a music store. He started playing that thing, turned to me with a wild look in his eyes, and let out a scream that made everyone in the entire store stop and turn their heads. Other than that one time, you would have sworn Rob was a human puppy.

The studio in L.A. was massive, with none of the intimacy of the studio we'd used back home. I was changing the arrangements for Sky High at the last minute, typical of my producing style, which the execs interpreted as me not knowing what I was doing.

I liked to work for ten hours straight to stay focused. The young execs liked to party. But amidst the chaos, the band and I were able to focus and work, almost despite them.

When it came time for Jenna to sing over the final tracks, all the execs flooded into the control room and became very silent. The band

members squeezed in as well, standing in the back corners. Everyone wanted to watch and listen.

The engineer insisted she sing in the tiny padded vocal booth for separation and quality of sound. He was being paid to hand the mixing engineer clean tracks, without technical problems. I didn't want to tell anyone that she sang in the big tracking room for the other songs on the CD—it might have spooked them and made us seem like amateurs. They'd go back to the original master and start hearing things that were, yes, well, very questionable quality by their standards. And off we'd go down that road.

But Jenna didn't like tight places, like airplane bathrooms and vocal booths. She was always a bit claustrophobic. So even though the first take was pitch perfect, it didn't have the emotional power we wanted.

I asked for another take, which the execs expected, simply because no one did a lead vocal in one take.

I went into the vocal booth with her, so now there was no room for either of us. I said, "Do you want me to stay in here with you for a take?"

She smiled, "Sure." I could see she was happy I joined her.

There was one small window, just big enough for her to have eye contact with the control room. All they could see from behind their precious heirloom 1976 Nieve soundboard was her 414 mic, and her face. So I put my hand on Jenna's leg, just below her short blue silk dress. Black lace around the neckline, more black lace on the bottom; lace was her trademark now.

She could have given me a dismissive flick of the hand and asked for the tape to roll. Instead, she pushed up against me. They were cueing up the tape. They needed a minute, they said. She was smiling casually through the little porthole, acting like we were just waiting with nothing to do. All they saw was her face beaming at them, although it was becoming oddly flushed.

When they told her over the headphones that they were ready for the take, she said, "Okay, I'm good to go." She sounded totally at ease despite the pressure.

"Kill it, J.J.," I whispered. "Show 'em what amazing sounds like."

She closed her eyes and, pretending she was singing in front of twenty-thousand adoring fans at The Coliseum, every word took on a life of its own.

Applause arose from the control room after her last note faded. We calmly exited the little room, a room lined with a thick gray rug, with black Styrofoam on the walls and ceiling to keep things dead and echo-free – lifeless on purpose. Creativity was hard to birth in a place like that, but she did it. I guess I could take a fraction of the credit that one time, we did it.

During playback the band and I realized that, somehow, Jenna's voice had transcended the deadness. Something special had just happened.

We didn't know it at the time, but we had just made our first hit song.

Chapter Eighteen

The tour started off well. Record sales were decent, picking up momentum along the way as we went from city to city across the Midwest. The crowds were growing larger, and Sky High was starting to get steady airplay on a few major stations nationally.

I didn't have time to think too much, which was a good thing. The guys were fun to hang out with. And Jenna stayed close to me, despite a twenty-four-hour-a-day demand for her time. This was her saving grace as a budding star -- she knew how and when to say no, as she always had -- even to "important" people that Chart would beg her to see. They would always ask her to do one more crucial interview before moving on to the next town; or one last big photo shoot.

Oh there's one really important party you have to attend. Jenna, they can take the bus and you can meet them there tomorrow by plane.

No.

But, Jenna, this dude can get you airplay all over the northwest.

No.

Our road manager, Ned Blakely, was also aware of balancing our time, and Jenna's time, in particular, making sure we didn't burn out before we peaked. To his credit, he was the one who allowed her to say no. He worked for Chart but made decisions that weren't always in their short-term interests. Chart would usually defer to him. Ned had been a road manager for Chart bands before. After years of being on the road with new and established bands he knew what Jenna and I discovered during our "us" period back home. Less could be more. Less access could mean more buzz if your star is already rising. Suddenly there is more of an aura about you. But Ned also knew he had to be careful not to offend his media contacts, all of whom were constantly begging for favors.

After the first few weeks of tour dates we didn't have a set travel schedule. Ned was taking the shotgun approach. Any city where

major radio stations would put Sky High on heavy rotation was a candidate for a gig a few weeks later. We were traveling the country in a zigzag, promoting our first potential hit song and the CD in general.

Three months into the tour, Ned felt we were ready, so we headed for New York. Chart was thrilled. Suddenly they saw the financial wisdom of accepting our CD the way we originally made it. We had finished it under budget for about forty-five thousand dollars. Sky High alone cost another thirty thousand dollars doing it their way. Now they were drooling over the profits from the full CD. They had already quadrupled their investment.

New York was crazy, of course. We were playing at The City Zoo, a two thousand seat theater. Modest by New York standards. But we knew we could sell it out with hardly any advance advertising, and that was Ned's key objective. He wanted a few thousand people to be stuck without tickets at every gig. He wanted them to beg. He wanted to see overflow crowds, scalpers waving tickets outside the hall at show time, the press and city VIPs begging to be let in on a guest list.

Jenna was more tired than usual the day of the gig. Her throat felt sore from singing almost every night, and she wasn't getting enough sleep. We told Ned we needed a break after New York, but he said he'd already scheduled a week down the east coast. After that, he promised. Ned told us we were on the verge of breaking big and we couldn't afford to turn down gigs and major interviews now, even for a few days. We were one step away from landing on the moon. He didn't want us to get stuck in orbit.

I wouldn't call the New York gig our finest moment on stage, but it was a decent representation of what we did. The reviews were favorable. Airplay increased all up and down the east coast.

The next day Ned informed us he was setting up a European tour one month out. Big clubs and small halls. The same strategy working in the States.

We asked him how much time we would have off before we went. Maybe three days, he said.

After the final east coast leg of the tour there was no travel scheduled, there were no interviews, no special press luncheons. Jenna slept almost fourteen hours straight. She slept in a separate

hotel room from me, turned off all the phones, put a Do Not Disturb sign on the door, and basically died for a day and a half.

Chapter Nineteen

Jenna awoke past noon feeling drugged. She couldn't move. She was chilled. She thought maybe she had come down with the flu. The shades were closed, and when she opened the curtain back a few inches the sun hit her like a shotgun between the eyes. She laid back down feeling disoriented, disconsolate, lost. She was back to not knowing herself – again – exactly where she'd been the day she'd officially become a runaway.

She remembered what I had said before all this happened -- maybe the life we were having was as good as it gets. Now she was living this other life far away from her garden, and her pottery shed, and her secret sculptures, and her only two girlfriends, Allison and Joy. She remembered those sweet little gigs we used to play once a week in front of a few hundred loyal fans whose names she mostly knew, whose faces she could recognize on the street, and who would sing along with the words if she held the mic out to the audience. On cue, she would hear the song sung back to her by people she knew loved her. She wanted that life back when she awoke on that off-day afternoon.

"It's too late, Jenna," I told her. "We're under contract. We have to tour for nine months before we can stop the wheel. We're only in month three."

"Oh my God, Adam! I can't do this for another six months. That's insane! I can't. I have nothing left. They've sucked everything out of me. I'm ready to jump off a bridge, I swear." She started crying. It was the first time she ever cried in front of me, this tough kid, this runaway. They'd broken her.

"J.J. I feel the same way you do. Really. But we have to at least play this contract out so we can't be sued and lose all the money we're making. We need to think about our financial future. Then, after this is over, we can quit. I don't care. We can go back to who we were."

"How much are we making?"

"It's hard to tell. Elliot hired an accountant for us. They're working out all the numbers and auditing everything. We won't get ripped off. Elliot will make sure of that."

"You didn't think of any of that before now? Where's the money going? Into what account? Under whose name?"

"Elliot said he took care of that. It's under an account called, Jade LLC. We're owed what we're owed. They'll figure it out. And then once the clock strikes twelve, we're out if you want to stop."

She was talking mostly to herself now, "You were right, as fucking always. This is what it comes down to. You saw it before it happened. You, on the other hand, haven't changed one bit! The great song writer, Adam Devonshire, working behind the scenes, TO KILL ME apparently! To destroy everything he created, to destroy us." She was sobbing out of control. "Screw the contract, Adam. I can't take another day of this. I don't care about the money or anything else. I'm really sick. I feel like I'm gonna die. I have to stop."

I should have pulled the plug. I should have said, okay, screw the money. Fuck the contract and all of the momentum we've created. I'm with you, J.J. I'm for you. Not for them. I've never been on their side. On that side. We quit. Right here and now. Pack your suitcase, we're going home.

That's what she would have done for me. She'd always been there for me, no matter what the cost seemed to be at the time.

Instead, I thought about the flight we had to catch two nights from now. And how we'd be blackballed from the industry forever if we quit, and got sued, we'd short-circuit potential stardom right as the light switch was being turned on.

Then I thought, if we quit now, she'll regret it. I know she will. Then she'll want to try all over again, but it'll be too late. If I push her just a little now and she doesn't thank me for it in a day or two, then I'll say, okay, you tried. We're done.

If I was truly honest with myself, I would also have admitted I was deeply invested in all this, literally. The money was important to me. Going almost broke when we were making the CD had shaken me up. I got scared. I was relieved we had money in the bank again. That's the truth. I was convinced we needed money to live a good

life. To support us maybe having kids someday, without having to work an office job, like a lot of the musicians we knew. If we were to quit now there was no telling what Chart would do – withhold royalties, sue us to get the advance back. We'd be in deep trouble. We could go bankrupt. Elliot would have a heart attack. Ned would quickly hook on to another band and be back on the road, managing everyone else's life but his, and never look back.

And the guys in our band would be devastated. They'd lose everything. We weren't big enough for the press to even know their names yet. So far this was all about me and Jenna. Mostly Jenna. But they were still nobodies making sideman money.

There were also memories I couldn't escape. Like the hours I would spend at home putting new strings on my guitar. And calling clubs, sometimes almost begging for a gig if it was big enough. Proving myself over and over again, even to myself. And all the days and nights writing songs that ended up being thrown out, lyrics being crumpled up and thrown against the wall in frustration. All the time – sometimes years of time – searching for the right chord, a melody no one else seemed to hear, until that one stubborn song was finally right. I wanted some kind of payoff now for all the effort and sacrifice. I wanted the songs to shine. And I wanted to shine. Ego. Greed. Fear. More ego, even if it was to protect myself. It was all there. I'm not going to lie about it.

Chapter Twenty

The next morning, after another long night's sleep, Jenna began to brighten. She came to our hotel to hang out with us. We ate a big dinner at a noisy Italian restaurant, watched a few mindless TV shows with the band, and she played some insanely stupid video games with Neal. We slept back at her hotel that night. We took a run that next afternoon. She happily signed some autographs, surprised at being recognized. She was trying her best to rejuvenate.

* * *

Then it was on to the European leg of the tour. Things slowed down a bit for us. We had more travel time, less gigs. Ned was trying to make things a bit easier for Jenna. He even involved her in the scheduling strategy from time to time.

We hung out for a few hours at the Spanish Steps in Rome, watching tourists, and teens kissing, artists painting, guitarists picking, gypsies begging, and drunks sheepishly looking at their tattered coat sleeves.

We ate at a great little restaurant right outside our hotel and drank way too much wine. Way way too much, sleeping the next day away.

Late that night I listened to the church bells in the distance, tolling three times at 3 a.m. Something felt wrong. Even with days off between gigs, this was not feeling any better to me than it had before. I was the one feeling lost now. I hadn't seen my friends outside the band in almost four months. I didn't even know who my friends were anymore. And they didn't know who I was anymore. I started feeling sick. I caught the same tour disease Jenna caught back in New York. But I didn't wake her up in a panic. I didn't tell her. I just stayed up all night freaking out.

On our last day off before the tour became grueling again, the whole band decided to see the Roman Coliseum. Stef joked

that maybe we would play it one day. We were all in this crazy trip together. The band and the tour were all we could think about.

Tomorrow the madness would start again. Jenna was ready to rock. She looked radiant, refreshed. She had accepted her destiny. She wanted to prove she was strong enough to do this.

* * *

We began to hit our stride again in London. I was successfully ignoring the poison that was circulating through my brain. But the truth was, the only time I was having fun was when we were sight-seeing, drunk, watching TV, or fucking.

But the band sounded great. The reviews — no longer needing Chart to translate them into English now that we were in England — were great. Ned was definitely earning his money. That was for sure. He was singularly focused around the clock. Emotionally steady. Unflappable in times of crisis, and making mostly good decisions. One night I asked him, “How do you handle life on the road like this? Don’t you get lonely? Don’t you want to actually live somewhere? Fall in love? Have normal friends?”

He said: “Yeah, but I’m still young. Once I hit forty, I won’t be able to do this anymore. I won’t have anything left. But right now, the money is good. The sex is worth the price of admission. The alcohol is top shelf. And, hey, I like the music. I like your music, Adam. And Jenna, well, honestly, she’s a pleasure to work with most of the time, especially compared to some of the fucked-up flaming egomaniacs I’ve had to deal with through the years. And, what a voice! So hey man, don’t worry about me, I’m okay.”

* * *

When we got back to the U.S. for the next leg of the tour, one of the first things I did was contact the accountant Elliot had hired. According to the initial projections I was going to make a serious amount of money from the songwriting royalties. Elliot announced that a publishing deal with Chart was also waiting for me when I had time to sign it.

Jenna was making a lot of money too. But because I was the songwriter and producer, I was making most of it. This was more

than ironic, of course, and obviously unfair. She was working twice as hard as I was. And I told her that.

I continued to follow the plan. I did what I was supposed to do like the good little soldier I had become. Around month seven Chart and Ned decided the first CD had gone as far as it could. Our songs were on the radio all over the world. I was getting richer by the day, as was Jenna, albeit more slowly. But I knew by the final night of the tour that I was done.

The contractual obligations were over for this CD. Chart was under the assumption that we'd get back into the studio with new songs and start all over again. We were hot. There was no time to lose.

We had an option for a second CD, but we had an opt out clause. As long as we didn't sign with another label for three years we could be released from all future obligations.

Had Chart known how big we were going to be they would have given us a far bigger advance and locked us up for three or four CDs. But luckily, they didn't. They were skeptical about our "home-made recording," as they put it. So they went for a cheap one-CD deal with an opt-out. Legally we could stop right now.

At first, I decided to tell Jenna the news. But instead I found myself asking her to marry me again. I guess I was skipping ahead. Or going backwards -- since I imagined us going back to our past life, except with a lot more money in the bank.

She said, "Adam, you're my guy. I want you to know that. Nothing has changed. You're my lover, my confidant, my best friend. All the way. But I'm still years away from wanting kids, and I don't want to turn the great thing we've got going into what my parents had, and what they then fucked up on their way to destroying themselves. So excuse me if I'm just a little gun shy. Just please wait, okay? Let's just enjoy this time for what it is."

Chapter Twenty-one

After the tour ended Jenna decided to stay in L.A. for a few days with her friend, Merryll Marquez, an up-and-coming sound engineer she'd met on the road. We met a lot of celebrities on tour. Many would come backstage to make their presence known. But Jenna connected with Merryll almost immediately. They liked each other as people, but also mutually respected each other's work. The timing was perfect. Merryll was coincidentally in between projects, and Jenna wanted to find a place to stay that wasn't a hotel. Her plan was to decompress, get a few massages, take a dance class or two, and get some beach time.

Of course, in between there were a half dozen interviews.

I wanted to be free of everything that had happened. All of it.

I went back home by myself, alone with my thoughts, with the phone ringing off the hook. I didn't answer any of the calls. Jenna and I had private numbers on separate cell phones. Only we knew those numbers.

But she didn't call, and I didn't call her. We needed a break from each other after almost twenty hours a day of eight straight months on the road.

Jenna. Everyone had fallen under her spell. Everyone wanted to get into her world. I had come to feel like a single spoke in her electrifying wheel. The wheel was rolling at max speed, out of control, no direction known.

Other than wanting to love her, I had no idea what I wanted. I was beyond burned out. I had allowed this journey to happen to both of us. In fact, this was all my creation. I pushed ahead with Chart. I talked Jena out of quitting out there in, I couldn't even remember the city it happened in. Everything was a sickening blur. I wanted the game to stop. But the game wasn't going to stop itself. The game was playing us now.

Meanwhile, I was starting to feel like a caricature of myself. “The writer with nothing left to say.” From here, it would all be mostly faking it, and milking it, and taking from it everything I could steal. (Paraphrasing Dylan’s, “Like a Rolling Stone.”)

This was going to turn into a game of who was controlling the game.

I loved the magical process of writing songs, pulling them from the air, finding lyrics that said something real, recording the sounds and textures the way I heard them in my head, jamming with friends, improvising on piano at home by myself. But the touring, the corporate control of every hour of my life, those things were nothing I ever wanted to repeat. And if I did, I had zero faith that it would turn out well.

The ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus observed you can’t step into the same river twice. I knew staying home could never be the same as before, even if Jenna was with me. Changes carried us upstream. And the river keeps moving. But I had an opportunity to free myself from the only thing about my life I didn’t feel connected to and that didn’t feel right. If I missed this chance, I would be signing on for at least five more years of basically writing on demand and living on the road. Owned. Homeless. My mind said no. More than that, my body refused to even consider it.

Jenna arrived a few days later, face aglow, wearing a sunflower yellow hat. She looked straight out of a magazine. Hugs. Wild stories about L.A. “There’s a great new band Elliot had me check out,” she said. She handed me a set of earphones. It was already plugged into her phone, ready for me to hear. “Listen to this! Just one track,” she pleads.

The band she turned me onto definitely had energy. And had their own sound. Cool song. Good production. They would be going all the way up to the top of the rollercoaster with the right backing.

I said, “Okay, so they’re gonna make it.” I handed the phone back to her. I didn’t even let the song play all the way through.

“Are you alright?”

“Tired.”

"I can imagine. Adam, I have to come right out and ask you this. Did you have an affair in L.A. after I told you I wouldn't marry you?"

"What? No! Of course not. Where the hell did you get that idea from?"

She stared into my eyes for a moment and knew I was telling the truth. "I read it in some music rag laying around Elliot's office. Someone was just trying to sell a story, I guess. It said some local diva was looking for a hit song. So apparently she fucked you to get one of yours!"

I laughed. "Wow, that's creative."

She was upset that I thought it was funny.

"Everything will be okay, Adam, but I have something to tell you now."

I tensed up.

"I don't want to be your roadie anymore," she smirked.

"That's perfect. Because I don't need a roadie anymore. I'm done."

She laughed.

I didn't laugh back.

"You mean you're going to drag your own equipment around on the next tour?"

"I mean I'm not doing any more tours. We don't have to, Jenna! There's an opt-out clause in the contract."

"You know what? Try hanging out in L.A. for a week," she laughed. "That would be enough for anyone to want to get back on the road."

"Jenna, I'm serious. I don't want to. You can go back out on the road if that's what you want. But I've seen what I needed to see out there. I've tried too much of everything and experienced too much of everything. It's nothing I ever want to repeat."

She shook her head. "I don't believe you. You just need some time to..."

"Jenna, come on. I'm just a songwriter, you know that. I'm not an entertainer. You know I don't get energized from the crowds like

you do. I like privacy and quiet. I like to read and think and take hikes and write stories. I just can't imagine travelling in the dark from city to city for months at a time ever again. It's not good for me. Or us. The opt out gives us a chance to be free again!"

She was staring at me like I was a Martian.

"I've decided that's what I want... I wanted you to be the first to know."

She sat down on the couch and closed her eyes for a moment. She shook her head, smiling, then looked straight at me and said, "That's too bad, Adam. Because Chart just offered us a new deal for a second and third CD with a three-million-dollar advance! I wanted you to be the first to know."

She expected a wildly positive reaction from me. Not because I couldn't resist the money. But because I couldn't resist her. But she didn't get what she wanted.

"I don't want to. I can't."

"Adam, how can you, what are you talking about? We're just starting to make it! Your songs are being hummed on every street corner in the universe! You've made a wheelbarrow full of money, and that's just the beginning. Or... is that what the sudden change is about? You've made as much money as you'll ever need, and now unless I marry you, I'm stuck with my share of it?"

"You can have half the money they gave me, Jenna. I haven't spent any of it. It's just a number in an accountant's spread sheet to me. I don't care about it."

"It would buy us a hell of a lot of fun!"

"Fun starting when? Three years? Five years? Until then we're on the road. Wasting years of our lives, with me hating what I'm doing. That isn't worth the future fun."

"We had fun on the road too, Adam. Great shows, cool times with the guys... ."

"The road almost killed you, Jenna! I saw it up close, firsthand. And I hardly wrote at all. What the hell was there to write about? Except touring, and getting fucked up on some nameless drug, and being fucked with by the overlords, and not fucking you as much as

I wanted to. That's not an album's worth of new lyric material. And even if it was, I wouldn't want to be the one to write it, and I sure as hell wouldn't want to tour it."

"Chart would take anything you write at this point. They started off wanting me, but I think they realize you're what makes us tick. I may be their golden goose, but you're their cash cow."

"Sounds like we're just a bunch of caged animals."

"Okay, my metaphors aren't as good as yours... "

"Why? They're accurate."

"Adam, what's so bad about people loving us? And didn't you have a good time with me on our days off in Rome? Paris? No good times at all?"

"I'm not saying that I didn't. I'm saying that overall it was... "

"Because I won't marry you? Is that what this is really about?"

"No! That's not it at all. I burned out! Just like you did for a while! Don't you remember? Except I can't pull myself out of it like you did. You found your second wind somehow."

"Maybe you'd find a second wind on the second tour! Maybe your internal rhythm is just slower than mine." Her eyes glazed and sparkled for a moment in that joyous way that had always melted me.

She put her suitcase in our bedroom. She wanted me to know she wasn't going anywhere. "You really would be okay if I went on tour without you?"

"You will tour without me, Jenna. You're their new superstar in the making. Their job is to make that happen. For a few million bucks advance, they know they'll make tens if not hundreds of times that. And their reputation as diva-makers will make them little mini-Gods that every wanna-be diva will be chasing after. And all they're asking you to do is travel around the world, and sing and sing and sing, and give everything you have, non-stop, until no one wants to hear you anymore! Maybe they'll even get five years out of you, if they're profoundly lucky, until you flame out. But I don't want to sign off on that. And you don't have to either. We don't owe them anything right now. We're free!"

“Would you change your mind if I married you...?” There was no spark in her voice, no glisteny look in her eyes. Only the challenge of putting everything she had on the line.

“The road would break us up, Jenna, we’d just grow further and further apart.”

If she had picked up her suitcase and walked out the door right at that moment, she had a thousand places to stay, a thousand places to go. She didn’t need me to become a superstar anymore. The fuse had been lit.

Maybe what she saw when she looked at me at that moment was a cynical, somber, beat-up twenty-eight-year-old, having celebrated my birthday on the road in a hotel in Minneapolis, the city where she was born and raised, and the city she ran away from. And now I was running away too.

Compare this to how I saw Jenna on this night—a luminous, streetwise sex symbol at twenty-two, having celebrated her birthday on stage during a concert in London. When I announced it to the audience the entire hall started to stomp their feet, then spontaneously sang her “Happy Birthday.”

“I’m not sure what I should do,” she said quietly.

“Well, I can’t tell you... .”

“We have to work this out.”

She went into the bedroom and fell dead asleep on our bed, still wearing the clothes she wore on the plane from L.A.

She slept until noon the next day, about twelve hours straight. This is how Jenna processed tough times. She would sleep when she was sad or confused. For me, it was a long sleepless night.

When she finally awoke, she came into the kitchen and consumed the breakfast I’d made for her.

“Adam,” she took a sip of tea, “I have a new idea. I’ve decided I want to go back on the road. But what if we took the new deal with Chart, and happily accepted their three million dollars, and I went out on the road with the band, plus two players to replace you, and you stayed here, writing all the songs? And we stay together. You could meet me on the road for fun any time you wanted, for as long as you

wanted. Not to play in the band, but to play with me. You know? And then, when I come back next time, I'll..."

"You want me to stay back here, but write for you? And visit you once in a while if I can intersect your orbit?"

"You'd write for us. You and me. Yes!" The shine came back in her eyes. She thought it was a beautiful and simple solution. And in many ways, it was. Except...

"Even if I met you on the road every few weeks, we'd become strangers. You know that, don't you?"

"Then come with; change your mind!" she said. "Or just come on the road and write, and stay in the background instead of dragging yourself through it on stage every night. Oversee the band, the music, the money, even control the schedule if you want. You'd be our muse and our guiding star!"

"I couldn't just watch you go on stage every night and applaud from the sideline. I'd be sucked in. You know that."

"I want to suck you in." She smiled, then came closer and kissed me. "Right here, right now."

I kissed her back and it felt good. Very good. But I felt we needed this conversation continue until we figured things out.

"You know I love you, Jenna. But I can't go out there and start the wheel turning all over again. And I don't want to play any part in convincing you to do it either. I already asked Elliot if we could sign for less money, and spend less time on the road. But he said the tour was the money. It was far more profitable than record sales. Usually, it's the opposite. But this is different, because..."

"Because what?"

"Because people want to see you in person. He said the energy created live is what sells us. And the sales that happen before and after we play each city is how the gears get turned."

"I know that. I'm learning about the business side of things."

"I'm glad. But you know, there's also an emotional component to 'the business side of things.' That's the subtle part. That's the part they don't want us to think about. But we have to. Look, I would do

almost anything else you asked me to do, Jenna. Name it. I'll do it. But there's no way I'm going on tour again, ever."

"Then write for me and stay here. Because I'm asking."

I closed my eyes, trying to fight off the sinking feeling in my stomach. "You're sure that's what you want?"

"For now."

"For now? By the time I write the songs and you record them that could be six months, or even a year from now. And when you finally come back from the tour after that, 'for now' could be another year on top of that."

She started to cry, but she hardened herself and wiped her tears on her sleeve. "Adam. I've been given this wild opportunity. I have no idea why. You offered me the first apple off the tree, says Eve. And I took the bite you offered me. And I've traveled down this path with you, in and out of Eden. But you led the way. I'm only twenty-two. We have time. We have decades of time ahead of us. And right now, I really want to see where this goes. And with all the money we make, we could buy a big house some day and... three million dollars, Adam! And far more than that by the end of the tour. Maybe ten times that!"

"So then what? We buy a nice cozy little fifteen-thousand square foot mansion in Belvedere?"

She took my hand. "If you want to... . Adam, I love you, and that's not going to stop because of any of this."

I thought back to my own life six years ago. At twenty-two would I have been ready to turn this down? At twenty-two, if I was on top of the world, a King, the newest God of Rock, would I have been ready to give it all up and get married? To anyone?

I groped around through my own private darkness until I realized there was only one way to keep her in my life. Maybe her idea wouldn't turn out as badly as I feared. But it probably would.

"Where would you stay while I was writing the CD?"

"What do you mean? Here, of course. With you! Where else? Do you need to be a fucking hermit to write now?"

“So we would live the life I want for us while I write, and while you rest, and gear up for the next super nova?”

“Of course.”

“And what if I wrote really really slowly?” I laughed. “You could be stuck with me here for years and years! I could get writer’s block. I could go on strike every night you don’t fuck me.”

“There wouldn’t be a lot of those nights. You know that.”

I was silent for way too long.

“Look at it this way, Adam, the sooner you write the songs, the sooner I’ll be out on the road, and the sooner I’ll be home, and maybe I’ll be ready next time... for other things. With you. Us. Maybe we’ll go through another “us” stage again, but it won’t be just about the music next time, it’ll be forever next time.”

“Forever Next Time... . Sounds like a title for a new record.

“Adam, come on, come on, let’s not mess this up!”

Chapter Twenty-two

There's a road in the heart of the city that reflected what was going on with Jenna and me. It's a zigzag road on Lombard Street that goes straight up a steep hill and ends at the top of Van Ness. Its crooked path is very sharply angled, hard to drive, but beautiful along the way. Gardens and bright flowers and pastel colored houses line the red brick pavement. It's a pleasant but very adventurous journey. Especially if you look in your rear-view mirror from the top. It's a long way down if your brakes don't work. The other problem is, once you're at the top, the street that it drops you onto is so busy, with traffic zooming by, horns honking, homeless dudes in their long gray overcoats staring at you from across the street, that you begin to wonder why you drove up the beautiful zigzag path to begin with.

Maybe you did it because the journey to the top was like no other drive you'd ever known before. And because you wanted to share an adventure with her, and because she wanted to be in the car with you.

But at the top, you suddenly realize the only place you really want to be is back down at the beginning. You want the time back. You want to end up somewhere else -- over a bridge maybe, or across an ocean, far away from Lombard Street.

But time doesn't work that way, says the Queen to little Alice, that's just not the way the game is played in Wonderland.

* * *

I decided to give Jenna what she wanted. I wouldn't play games about it. She wanted me to write; I'd write. I knew once the first song came others would quickly follow. That's the way it seemed to work for me. I just needed that first clear vision of what this next CD was going to sound like.

The unspoken stipulation, a kind of devil's bargain, was that during the writing of the CD she would be my muse. She would be

mine completely. We would make love, take day trips up and down the coast, eat breakfast in bed at noon. She would work in the garden, sculpt beautiful figurines down in the shed, in-between a million phone calls and interviews and photo shoots, and sing with me for old times' sake. Although I knew every time we sang together she would be trying to reel me back in.

I let her take over the business end of things since I really didn't care anymore. And she only sang on the days we sang together. Her voice still hadn't fully recovered from the tour.

A few of the sculptures that she made long before we recorded our first CD now sat cobwebbed and forlorn on the shelf of the pottery shed. They were like ghosts with stories to tell. What had happened here since we'd been gone? "And what happened to you?" they seemed to ask.

The main difference between "back then," and now, was everything was focused on Jenna and her budding stardom. It was no longer "us" on stage.

The record company was more than willing to make it all about her. At times they saw me as a wall between them and their superstar. They thought I had too much power and control over her. They didn't like that, because that's what they wanted. So, when they heard about the new plan they were thrilled. I would write the songs and stay behind. I would be the wizard behind the curtain – using my songs to propel her, and create an image to dazzle the world with. "Jade" was dead. Our business and our home had turned into a new company called "Jenna James, Inc." There was no rest from it. And the next CD would simply be called "Jenna."

I hungrily took the love I could get from her during those days and months home. I wrote the songs I knew she would want to sing, and should sing. But every time I finished one, and sang it to her, and saw her eyes light up, I could see the New Year's ball dropping a little bit lower on the tower. Time was taking her away from me. And the insane truth was, the more creative I got, the faster she'd be gone.

* * *

The last song I wrote for the CD was a ballad about a girl that had gone to the big city to make it on her own, but realized in the

end she'd made a mistake, the city had beaten her down, and all she wanted now was to go back home to the one person who still loved her. (No one would wonder where I got that idea from.)

New York Journal

*New York's fabled night life wears no mask tonight.
Just an endless yellow blur of storied lights
Reaching up a thousand feet in the sky like anxious arms,
But I'm walking away.*

*And what drew me back here draws me to the dark inside.
Even though I came to light another spark inside.
It's time I stop fooling myself that New York's a part of me.
It's parting me.*

*And I promise babe I won't look back this time,
I can't believe I was pulled away from you.*

*In a beat up cab with my bags jammed inside
I take one more look at billboards framed in light.
They may as well be written by a thief
Whose clever lies seem to steal life.*

*And I promise babe I won't be back this way.
I can't believe I had to go.
Sometimes it takes a lot to look inside,
sometimes you just know.*

*Here at the airport your eyes call to me.
I see them through the clouds beneath my feet.
I'll see them and I'll know that I truly have arrived,
Far from this last New York night.*

*And I promise babe I won't look back this time.
I can't believe I was pulled away
from the love you gave me every day.
No need to pretend anymore
I'm coming... home.*

* * *

The new CD was scheduled to be recorded in L.A. with the same band, our guys. I'd play my parts in the studio, and they'd replace me with someone on the road. Chart was anxious to finish the project as soon as possible and get Jenna back on the road. They had three-million riding on this one. The game had become a lot more serious. Momentum was being lost by the day. Surprisingly, they tried to persuade me to change my mind just before the recording and join the band. They knew Jenna and I had a chemistry on stage, as well as off stage. And I had my own following of songwriter junkies that wanted to see the writer up there next to Jenna, while singing harmonies and directing the band. The company started to have some trepidation that without me things might not be, or look, the same. It was kind of a Where's Ringo? thing. Besides, maybe I was the one person who could handle Jenna emotionally and keep her from falling off the edge when things got rough. They heard how I'd "come through for her" on the last tour.

Jenna tried to get Chart to persuade me as well. She was all for having me change my mind at the last minute. But in the end, the more I took part in the recording and hung around the record execs, and even Elliot to some extent, the more disgusted and bored I got, and the more put-off I felt. It made no sense for me to repeat what I'd hated before thinking this time I'd hate it less.

I didn't envy Jenna in the slightest for what she was going to have to go through. I built the rocket. She was being strapped in, risking everything. I was going home as soon as the rocket was launched. I'd be watching her through a telescope, orbit after orbit.

They agreed to let me produce the CD, but this time with a co-producer named James Haley, a famous rock mogul that I actually had no problem working with.

Jenna was all business. There were execs everywhere. Others were begging for special access, including a few celebrities that had become "Jenna fans," as well as wanna-be Jenna's who were climbing into rockets others had built just for them. They were all trading favors, wanting to get a glimpse of her singing in the studio.

The madness continued day after day. Budding young singers tried to make their presence known to the Chart executives at

inappropriate moments, or they'd barter their way in somehow, to drop a CD demo into James Haley's lap.

James was a pro. He took it all in stride. People were politely shuttled in and out while we focused on our work. We had a budget and we stuck to it. The ten-song CD was locked and loaded forty-five days later.

Chapter Twenty-three

A few hours before dawn, Jenna was doing some last-minute packing. Her level of confidence in her own abilities was beyond ego. She knew she was going to become mega-famous in the next few months, and there was no stopping it. She loved my new songs, she loved the new CD, and she knew what she could do with the songs on stage. Her eyes sparkled like back-lit crystals when she began to sing these days. I was the writer of her favorite songs, and the one person on earth she could totally trust. As for me, I was hoping I hadn't committed homicide with my ego holding the knife.

We didn't make love the morning she left. It was too frenetic. She was packing for a trip that might never end. I thought to myself, this could be the last time we would ever be in this house together.

I was writing in my notebook, trying to prevent myself from going insane, though what I was writing suggested I might have already gone insane. Words and thoughts I would never share with anyone were filling page after page. Of course, she invited me to meet her on tour anywhere anytime. I could stay for as long as I wanted. I could play on stage with her any night I wanted. But I knew that our time on the road would come down to a dinner with ten other people, then a few hours of sleep. The rest of the time Jenna would be lost to me, like a cloud crossing the moon. I had to get my life back.

The limo arrived. I kissed her goodbye at the door. Her eyes held no sadness, no regret. I thought of the irony of her singing "New York Journal" for the next year or more of her life, when in reality she actually wanted to be there, not here.

Chapter Twenty-four

I did harbor one odd secret hope – that the tour would flop. Maybe the second CD wouldn't be as good as the first in the eyes of the all-knowing press, and the tour would die before hitting the east coast. Maybe the press would even point to the fact that I was no longer in the band, and that without my presence on stage the band just wasn't the same. I had enough money saved to stay comfortable for a long time. Maybe forever. Plus, I was continuing to get royalties from the first CD. I'd rather have Jenna coming home disillusioned, ready to quit. That was my ridiculous secret hope – one I felt too embarrassed about to even fully admit to myself.

No such luck. The momentum from the first tour carried over. Jenna was going from an up-and-coming new artist, with national name recognition to a full-blown rock icon. Chart Records was thrilled. They called me often to congratulate me. The songs were a critical part of Jenna's success, they knew that now. They had to have me onboard. A lot more money would be coming my way now that a second song from the new CD had broken into the Top Ten.

Jenna was everywhere. Videos were being pumped out in between concerts. There were photo shoots for women's magazines and teen magazines. Jenna's new publicist was trying to decide between a hundred different TV commercials being offered to her for cosmetics, clothes, food, fragrances. She agreed to be a model on a runway wearing clothes by a famous French clothing designer the day before her Paris concert. Maybe they'd name a candy bar after her in New York, who knows? The J.J. Bar. Who wouldn't want to eat her up?

Jenna would call me a few times a week, breathless, happy, wiped-out. She would ask me my opinion on dozens of business and image issues. Choices she had to make. We would say that we missed each other.

Then the phone calls got less frequent. The East Coast had swallowed her up.

Then rumors started surfacing in certain magazines – gossip rags – that Jenna and a “to-be-named” movie star were “in a hot romance.”

The following week the name of the movie star was revealed. It was a handsome young actor sensation named Dean Dellehome. Apparently, he had been following Jenna’s tour while he was waiting to start his next film. Basically, he was stalking her.

I didn’t want to believe it. I remembered the lies the gossip rags had written about me. The truth didn’t really matter out there in superstar fantasy land. But it broke me down. Just the thought of it being true turned my mind as black as the inside of an abandoned coal mine. It’s not true, I would call out from the bottom of the mine.

But it was true.

The next time Jenna called, the first thing she did was apologize for the rumors, but then she also admitted she had been seeing him.

“I slept with him a few times, Adam. I’m sorry. But he helped me through a lot of emotional things these last few weeks. He’s experienced so much of this shit himself, and he gave me some good advice about how to find some sanity, and privacy, and how to pace myself. Anyway Adam, I still care about you so much. You’re still my favorite person in the world. You’re still my best friend. You really are!”

“Best friend. Okay, that’s nice.”

“Are you seeing someone too?”

“No. No... . Not yet. But I will, if I meet the right... don’t worry about it.”

“I would understand if you did. But I just want you to know, I’m not seeing him anymore. I swear. It was just a thing. He was a bit over-the-top as a person, if you want to know the truth. Fame killed a part of him. I saw that. I’m trying not to let it happen to me”

“Has it already happened?”

“I really have to go.”

“Fine. You’re the star. You can go whenever you want. And do whatever you want. Unless they say you can’t.”

Here's what I realized: My stoic attitude -- holding back my feelings when we spoke -- wasn't working. And being upfront about how I felt hadn't worked either.

Conclusion: Nothing worked. Not anymore.

Chapter Twenty-five

I went for a five-hour walk around the city after we spoke on the phone. I didn't care if I ended up back home that night or not. If I met someone, and if she recognized me, and praised me, and got me drunk enough, and took me home to wherever she lived, then drugged me with whatever she had in the nightstand next to her bed, and I woke up half-unconscious, or three-quarters dead with her fucking me, fine. Whatever.

I ended up getting home late that night without having met or talked to anyone, knowing that, just like the rest of the entire world at this point, I couldn't think of anyone but her, even for a few hours.

I wrote her a letter at 4 a.m. Of course, I didn't send it. I'm not that stupid.

* * *

An interesting Christmas arrived. Jenna and the band were playing a concert at the Oakland Coliseum, but this year as the headliner. Tickets for her show sold out months ago in fifteen minutes.

She had just been featured in "Spark," the new rock magazine geared for the young hip female demographic. Jenna was on the front cover, her face framed in light, her blue-green eyes photoshopped to look pure crystal green, like starlight seen through a prism. There was the thematic lace around her collar. Inside was another picture of her, full-length. Over her white dress she wore an even whiter leather jacket, unbuttoned, ending at the waist, with sleeves long and flared at the wrist. There was a gold heart embroidered ever so subtly onto the right breast jacket pocket.

The article began, "Imagine combining innocence with raw eroticism and you will have the ingredients for the delicious ultra-hip rock 'n roll mega-star named Jenna James. But this is also a star with a message... "

It went on to describe me, and how I neatly fit into her life, “Her husband/songwriter, Adam Devonshire, quit the band to focus on writing for Jenna, finding constant inspiration from her beautiful spirit.”

“Husband /songwriter?” Where did they get that from?

As I went back to staring at the picture of her on the cover, stunned once again by the sheer unreality of it all, the phone rang. My private cell. I could tell from the caller I.D. it was her.

“Hey, Adam.”

“Hi there, astronaut. How’s life in outer space?”

“Stratosphere Adam, pretty much crazy all the time. No way down.”

“The local show is tonight, yes?”

“Tomorrow! We came in a day early. Everyone in the band is excited to see their friends and family.”

“... That’s good.”

“Adam... can I come by?”

“You still have some clothes you left here, not that you’d wear that stuff anymore.”

“Not true! How’s the garden?”

“Stone dead.”

“Nice, Adam. Way to go.”

“Black thumb. You know that. I don’t understand plants. They don’t understand me. All I can do is write songs at your command.”

“Okay. Well, do you want me to come over at your command?”

“It’s still half your house. Speaking of which, you’re behind on your share of the rent.”

“Sorry, I’ll bring a pocket full of hundreds when I come.”

The time dragged by as I cleaned the house for reasons that made no sense, really. Why should I care? I expected a few war stories from the tour. Maybe dinner, and an awkward hug goodbye. Part of me was dreading it.

That night at 10 pm she hopped quickly out of a sedan limousine in a gray hoodie and rushed up the stairs, hoping to avoid anyone that might recognized her.

Underneath the hoodie she was wearing a skimpy white dress with black sneakers.

She came in and went over to the picture window without saying hello and pulled down the shade. Then she came back to where I was standing and gave me a long drawn out kiss.

“Hello,” she said, breathing heavily.

Her kiss stunned me. I had no idea what she was thinking.

“Adam, let’s go into the bedroom right now. Don’t say no.”

She pulled my hand forward until I followed her, then she pulled more shades as far down as they could go. She carefully removed my guitar from the bed and placed it against the wall.

Then she looked back at me. “You don’t have a girlfriend, do you? I mean, someone that you really care about... Do you? Because I wouldn’t want to...”

“No.”

She reached down to pull the hoodie off of her head.

“In bed?” I raised my eyebrows. “You never make love in a bed, at least you never did with me.”

“Well, this is the closest thing we can lay down on that won’t ruin my thousand-dollar dress,” she smiled.

She unzipped the hoodie, and flung her sneakers into the corner one at a time. What she was wearing now looked more like a negligee than a dress. Or maybe it was an actual negligee. Who could tell the difference lately? She pulled the straps off of her shoulders and let the dress slip to the floor. She laid down and waited for me to lay next to her.

“It’s been a long time. So many realities long, Adam. Fuck, no one’s ever in their right mind anymore.”

She covered her face with her hand. “No one wants to admit it.” She put her mouth closer to my ear, “He was... he was shooting up,” she said. She began to sob, “He scared me sometimes,” she grabbed

hold of my arm. "I didn't find out until we were... way too close.... And I felt humiliated, Adam, I was so fucking stupid. I only know one damn thing, and not much else."

"What damn thing is that?"

"I want you back."

"Oh. Well, don't tell the tabloids," I whispered, "but you never lost me."

She started laughing, then she cried again. She hugged me for a long time. We made love. Then she fell asleep. Sometime before morning we made love again, slower this time, until it seemed as if it was the way it used to be, a decade of months ago.

She awoke at noon, cheery and dressed in her old clothes that had still been hanging on her side of the closet.

"Slept in too late. I've gotta go, Adam. Sound check. Come, please?" She reached out for my hand.

I smiled, "Okay."

A limo was waiting outside. Ned always knew where to pick her up, and when.

We made our way across the bridge to Oakland and got to the Coliseum. Only the road crew and the band were there, Neal, Stef, Rob. There they were, on stage, checking out their gear. It was surreal. When they saw me they immediately ran off the stage and gathered around me.

They were starting to become stars in their own right now. Each one of them. I was still the writer and producer for the band, but I was seen as a recluse, a strange, moody, stubborn hermit in the eyes of the press.

They had a guitar player that had replaced me, Erin Rudd. He came over and showered me with praise and told me how happy he was to meet me. I had heard him play on a few other records. He was a great musician. He played my songs well, left plenty of room for Jenna's voice, added his own tasteful touches at the right moments. Great tone, especially in big venues. He was the consummate L.A. professional, and a good guy.

The sound check went well. The crew was phenomenally on top of things. They'd gotten a lot better this tour.

Dinner was brought in from an up-and-coming three-star restaurant in the city. I looked around for Jenna after I declined dessert, but she'd already been whisked away. Her hair had to get done. Makeup applied. The guys were joking about something, sitting back drinking beer. They were no longer sidemen in a tight little rock band on their way up. They were entertainers on a world tour. I wandered around by myself for a few hours.

The opening act droned on. I remembered all of us in the same situation as they were just a few years ago. We were the hungry opening act on a big stage, scared that no one was listening. Just like then, no one paid much attention to this band either. Jenna was the only thing people would remember when the night was over.

By the time she walked on stage the crowd was in a frenzy. The screams were almost deafening. But the sound system was more than capable of drowning out the crowd right from the opening chord. Her voice was amazing as always, but I noticed the arrangements of the songs had changed from the CD. They were a little more pop-oriented. Not as rough-edged as they should have been. Chart was targeting teenage girls now. The lyrics weren't spotlighted like they used to be. Jenna had learned some subtle dance moves, looking sexy on purpose, posing in certain moments. The audience roared. She teased the crowd with her smile. Everything was a bit too overt. She was a pro, doing what pros do. But I saw through it. Something was a little off. The songs weren't translating to me.

I went backstage after their three well-rehearsed encores. My gold backstage pass parted the waters through a sea of security guards. Everyone in the band was already drinking. The press was everywhere. People were running around trying to take selfies on their cell phones.

I finally caught a quick glimpse of Jenna, mobbed. Everyone wanted to get near her. Touch her. Breathe her. Touch a piece of her clothing. She scribbled a note and reached past the crowd to hand it to me. It said, "Meet you back at the house. Wait up for me."

She mock-frowned and shrugged her shoulders. I nodded and waved goodbye. It took me nearly half an hour to get out to the parking lot because I was recognized by a few members of the press.

"Why did you leave the band, Adam?"

"I've answered that many times before." I tried to smile, but otherwise seem emotionless, and give the most stock answers I could so they'd leave me alone. "I just don't like being on the road. It's as simple as that."

"But why not at least give interviews?"

"With you guys? If you were me, would you give an interview to you?" They got the joke and wrote it down.

"Did you have a fight with one of the band members? And if so, why is he still in the band?"

"No."

"Did Stef sleep with her, Adam? Is that why you won't tour?"

"No." They were trying to get me riled up. They waited for me to say more, but I tried to yawn.

"Are you and Jenna back together?"

"How did you feel about her and Dean Dellehome being together?"

"Great. I felt great about it. He's a super guy."

"Really? Why?"

"Adam, are you gay?"

"What?"

"Did that have anything to do with Jenna leaving you?" The reporter who asked the question had shoved his way in front of the others. He was one of the bad boys in the press. Always trying to dig up something evil. He saw he'd touched a nerve.

I stared at him coldly and refused to answer.

Another reporter shouted out behind him: "Can you just answer the question, Adam? Are you gay? Is that why. . .?"

"Look, for the record, there's nothing wrong with being gay. Obviously. If I was gay, I'd be proud of it. But I'm not."

I finally made it out of there and took a cab back to the house. I took a long shower to try to wipe off the slime -- the press had gotten to me.

Jenna came in quietly at 3 a.m. She knew where to find the hidden key. I heard her opening the front door.

I sat up quickly.

"Hey, were you asleep?" she whispered.

"Napping."

"Well, go back to sleep. I don't want to disturb you."

"Are you drunk?" I cocked my head, sensing something was amiss.

"Had a nip," she smiled broadly. "But not to worry."

She flopped down a little too hard on the bed and closed her eyes with a groan. "Fuck, I gotta sleep. Let's hang out in the morning."

When she finally awoke it was 1 pm. She came out of the bedroom in a rush. "Oh God, I'm late," she said. I looked out the window. The limo was waiting. The driver was standing outside the car looking at his watch.

"Are you coming back later, or...?"

"I can't, baby. I have to catch a plane."

"Where to next?"

"I have no fucking idea!" she said. "Remember, we never had any idea? Well now, I could easily find out, but I don't want to."

I heard the limo driver climbing the steps.

"Oh God. Bye sweetie," she said, looking at her watch.

A quick kiss and a touch of her hand on my face. No teary eyes. No longing embrace.

The limo pulled away. I went back to writing in my journal.

Chapter Twenty-six

I decided Jenna and I were done. I didn't like who she was turning into. I didn't even want to write songs for that new person anymore. I had to figure out a way to move on.

A week later I wrote a new song about a break-up, except the girl didn't know that it was about to happen. I sent it to my new publishing company. This was the first song I was giving to a publisher that hadn't already been sung and recorded by Jenna.

I told them to find someone big to sing it, and make it a hit. I was becoming a mercenary.

A few weeks later some young exec from the publishing company called to tell me excitedly that a superstar had bought the exclusive rights to the song for an enormous amount of money.

"Great," I said. I was hoping it would be someone whose music I at least respected. "Who is it?"

"Jenna James!" he said beaming.

Did he even know who I was?

"Fuck!" I screamed.

"But she's a great singer! And she bought it for a crazy amount of money, up-front. You won't believe how much she paid."

Three months later the song hit the airwaves with Jenna's voice on it. The band stayed in New York three extra days just to record it.

A month after that, it became another Jenna James hit. She was singing about the break-up to me now, instead of vice versa. She had taken my goodbye song and thrown it right back in my face.

Chapter Twenty-seven

I had to get away. I was getting twenty or thirty calls a day. Execs calling from the publishing company wanting more songs, record companies asking me to sign with them as a stand-alone artist, the press asking for interviews. I needed an agent to handle all this – but, no problem -- agents were calling too.

So I played the hermit card. I decided to move to Kauai. I wanted to live as far away from the craziness as possible but still be in America, although I had to think about that in measured terms as well, politics being what they were.

I heard Maui was also beautiful. So I decided I would spend time in both places and choose between them. Or maybe I'd buy a big house in both places. Why not?

I declared myself retired. No one believed me until I threw away my business cell phone... . Done.

Before I left, I hired accountants and attorneys to take over my finances, with a request to leave me alone as much as possible. I gave Elliot power of attorney. I wouldn't even have to sign anything anymore. Even my tax returns were signed with a signature stamp. They made them quite realistic these days.

A few weeks before I left our house in San Francisco behind, Jenna called me on my private cell. I told her I was moving and asked if she wanted to take over the rental payments. But she didn't seem particularly interested. She said she'd think about it, but didn't even bring up the subject on our next call a few days later. So at my insistence, a crew of her people came to the house to get her things. Jenna no longer lived anywhere, except from hotel suite to hotel suite on the road. There was no home to go back to now.

When I first told her I was breaking up with her, all she said was, "We'll see." But now, finally, she had to take me seriously. She had no choice. There was no longer a hidden key. And the locks had been changed.

* * *

Jenna was now officially mega-rich, homeless, and without anyone who truly loved her. Not so bad on paper, I guess. Especially at twenty-three. And I couldn't imagine her caring all that much. She didn't have the time to care.

When I landed in Kauai, where Jenna and I took our mini vacation after the first CD was recorded, a flood of memories came back to me. I felt like it wasn't the new start I was looking for. Too many images and memories of her were rekindled. So I made a quick change of plans and headed to Maui.

After a week of being there, something great happened. I found myself loving it. People left me alone. I could walk on the beach and no one stopped me. I could shop in stores and no one knew me. It was warm. It was enormously beautiful. I'd found exactly what I wanted.

I impulsively bought a house in Wailea. I bought a Bosendorfer grand piano, and a red convertible with six gears. One morning I got inspired for the first time in months to write a song. I felt the urge overtake me. But just as I was beginning to write lyrics that were swirling around in my head, my cell phone rang. Only Elliot knew the number. And he knew not to call me unless it was urgent.

I picked it up. But it wasn't Elliot. It was Jenna. Her words were almost inaudible when she spoke.

She had hit burn-out again, but this time it wasn't going away. She felt like the end of her life had come.

Her voice was weak, "Yesterday I told Ned I wasn't going to sing again until I was good and goddamn fucking ready, which may be never. And when he brought up the fact that I had a huge amount of legal and financial obligations I screamed at him and pushed him against a wall. He almost fell down a flight of stairs."

Her voice was shaking now. "Then I put my face right next to his. I told him that he had pushed me over the edge further than I had pushed him. He'd dangled me from his little high-rise window for the second time in two tours. I told him he should have known better. I told him I wasn't a fucking robot. And he was supposed to be working for me, but he was working for them, and he knew I was telling the truth. He tried to deny it, but I said, "No more fucking

lies!" And then I fired him. I told him to get out and not come back. He left last night. He's gone."

She started crying hard. "And then... I fired the band! I kissed them each goodbye. I hugged them and told them to go home. It was time to go home. I told them I loved them, but it was all over. I was done. I told them I was drowning, and I couldn't breathe anymore. And they couldn't save me."

There was silence on the line while she tried to calm herself down. "Then I went to a different hotel and checked in under a fake name so no one would find me. And now no one knows where I am. I'm not sure I do either. And I'm so cold. I'm so so cold."

Her teeth were chattering.

"Okay, listen, what hotel are you in? Where are you Jenna?"

"In a bad bad place."

"No, I mean, where are you? What city? What hotel?"

"I'm not sure. I don't want to know how many shows I've missed, or what kind of legal trouble I'm in. All I know is that I never want to sing again. And also, one other thing... I need you to help me, Adam." She said that last phrase in a whisper that was so soft I thought it might be her dying words.

"If you want me to come, I need to know where you are."

No answer.

She sounded drugged. She was mumbling. Then it finally came out—she'd gotten a few bad reviews, more than one, in fact. They said she'd lost her magic, her innocence, she'd lost her edge by trying to be a pop star, but she couldn't dance. She wasn't a real dancer. The "losing her edge" part rattled her.

"It wasn't just the reviews, Adam. The shows have gotten crazy. A few nights ago, some fan got past security and climbed on stage and grabbed me. He pushed me back into a guitar amp and reached his hand up my dress before Stef walloped him in the fucking face. The security guards peeled them away from each other then dragged the him off stage. I think Stef broke his jaw. Then after the gig I had to file a criminal complaint. I'm in too deep."

"Where are you?"

“And now, I’ll be sued by the concert promoters, Adam, and Chart too! After all the money I made them, they’ll probably want it all back. So this is what it comes down to... . You knew.”

She was hyperventilating, choking for breath.

“Save me from drowning into myself,” she cried.

I thought about telling her to get on a plane and come to Maui, but she wouldn’t have been able to make it to the airport.

“Send me a lifeline,” she began to sing a lyric from one of my songs, but had a coughing fit half-way through.

What I wanted to say was -- I should have stopped this when you burned out the first time. But I pushed you to stick it out back then I dared you to. I had my own selfish reasons. Then, next time, you had yours.

She finally calmed down enough to say – “Um, wait, I think I’m in Chicago. Yes. Chicago. In a hotel. I can’t remember the name.” Then she either hung up, or the phone dropped out of her hand.

I called Elliot on his emergency cell, who got hold of Ned, who revealed to me the name of the hotel she probably went to since it was across the street from the one they were staying in, and she was too fucked up on something to even hail a cab. And the false name she was using was probably Harriet Jones. I didn’t have time to get into the rest of the drama, even though Ned tried to tell me his side of the story. He was pretty shaken up. I hung up on him mid-sentence and immediately booked a flight to O’Hare. I was hoping she would still be alive when I got there.

I caught a cab to the hotel, got Harriet Jones’ room number from a young girl working at the reception desk, flew up three flights of stairs and knocked on the door. No answer.

“Je...” I started to scream out her name, but I realized that might not be a good idea. I looked around. No one was in the hallway. I knocked again, harder this time. Still no answer. There was a “Do Not Disturb” sign on the door. Maybe she thought I was a maid wanting to clean the room. So I decided to knock in a rhythmic way, using both hands to play a four on five polyrhythm. Something I once taught her.

More silence. “Harriet!”

Then suddenly the door opened.

“Oh God, Adam! I wasn’t expecting you for another few hours. What time is it?”

“Time to invite me in,” I said, pushing past her and closing the door quietly.

She looked at me and smiled shyly. It was the old “Jenna look” from long ago, before her self-confidence turned into a cold monolithic thing.

Her eyes were blurry. It was eerie seeing her so still, so quiet, standing there in front of me.

I sat on the unmade bed. She seemed frozen with fear. The room was dark. The blinds were closed. Lights off.

“Ok, J.J. What now?”

I thought maybe she would say, “I have an idea!” and beg me to go back on the road with her. But as soon as I thought that I realized she was way past that. She was in survival mode.

“Do you want to come to Maui with me? It’s where I live now. We can leave tomorrow.”

“Need time to think,” she whispered. “I don’t know, Adam. Are you really here? What day is now...?” She was falling asleep.

“Hey, you. Hey!” I shook her.

She got up from the bed where she was sitting and turned to me. Maybe she was about to put her arms around me and tell me all the reasons why I was moving just a little too fast, which she always told me when I did impulsive things like this – but at that very moment a bottle of pills fell on the floor. They had been lying in bed beside her.

She quickly reached down to pick it up but I got there first. A label on the brown plastic bottle had been partially torn off.

“You dropped your, uh...”

“Comfort food.”

“Very funny.”

As I looked around through the dim light there seemed to be another bottle of pills near her opened suitcase, right next to a bottle of Jack Daniels.

"Jenna. What's all this?"

"I really needed to stay calm, that's all. They're low doses. They just take the edge off."

"And what edge is that?" I was raising my voice a little too loud.

"They've helped me think things through."

"Jenna, you call this thinking things through? Looks to me like they've sunk your soul to the bottom. How do you figure this shit is helping you when you're close to killing yourself?"

"Adam, look, I'm okay. I didn't take that much."

"Who gave you this stuff?"

"Adam, I said I'm okay!"

"Who gave you this?" I held the bottle of pills up to her eyes.

"Ned." Her lip started quivering.

"I can't believe..."

"I had a show to do. I was freaking out. He had to."

"Look around, Jenna. You're all alone, sitting in a dark room in a hotel you don't even know the name of, with these pills and an empty bottle of Jack Daniels. Is this what you've always hoped for? You wanted to show them you could make it, right? You could beat the system and end up stronger than they were? Well, this is how that game turned out."

"No! You don't understand," she moaned and flopped back onto the bed.

"Jenna. I haven't been totally honest with you."

"What, what are you talking about?" Her eyes were still half-closed.

"I thought I'd lose you by telling you straight out. But it doesn't make any difference anymore. Because I've already lost you."

"Have you found someone?"

"Found someone? I've lost someone. And I'm still pissed about it. I'm pissed at you for fucking up your life. Our life. My life."

"That's pretty funny!" she screamed. "You set this up in the first place! You abandoned me by not coming on the tour. You sat home

making most of the money while I was screaming your precious words out to the world every night! I've been the... the carrier pigeon. I'm your little song bird. While you..." her voice trailed off.

All I could think to myself was, checkmate -- "Okay. I did set this whole thing up. I admit it. I blew it. Right from the beginning."

She slammed her hand down on the bed and said, "Shit, I didn't mean it like that! I'm not blaming you. That's fucking crazy and you know it."

"The first time you hit burn-out I should have let you quit. I was too caught up in it, just like you are now. I gave you the whole 'we'll get sued' crap, the same crap that Ned threatened you with. So I talked you into sticking it out. And lady, you did. You kept your head, and kept it going, even when you didn't have to. Committed all the way. But they finally broke you. And here you are, lost in hell. Like I felt after the first tour was over. And I'm so sorry."

She was hearing me, I knew that because she was sobbing again.

"But that's still not what I was scared to tell you."

"So then what is it? You're in love with some girl you met at a club, and she's a singer, and you're writing songs for her now. Right? Did I guess right?"

I shook my head and laughed. "No, baby. It's harder for you to hear than that."

A look of fear came over her.

"Jenna, I found out something living by myself this last year. I found out I don't need to be amazing to be okay. I met this girl long ago, and I loved her from the minute I set eyes on her, and I still love her. I wanted to marry her. I wanted to live a life with no other meaning that needs to be attached to it, and with nothing else to accomplish. That's what I wanted. And that's all I still want. You. That's the lazy unambitious truth I've always been afraid to tell you. Because why wouldn't you run as far from that as you could? You always have."

Her eyes were closed, and her body was motionless. I thought she might be passing out. But then she said, "Right. I know that."

"I know you know. I knew you knew. Still..."

"I'm young, I'm idolized, I'm a, a superstar. Why throw away all that to live a normal life with a guy who decided to give up? And what the hell is a normal life anyway? All I remember from my normal life was growing up with fights, a divorce, and no one to talk to. Better to just fade away or run away, or explode like a super nova, then have to face all those ghosts again."

"Right. I know that," I whispered.

She squinted her eyes at me as if to say, why do you think you have the right to throw all that in my face? But instead she said, "I never liked it down there on the ground." She started to laugh, "But it sucks up here in outer space too!"

The air in the room was dead. But there were no windows that would open on the tenth floor. "Man, I feel like we're hanging out in a giant coffin," I said.

"The thermostat is across from the desk. We're in a controlled atmosphere."

"That's your life in a metaphor."

"I've always loved your metaphors," she smiled, her eyes closing again.

I took her phone, went to my favorite travel site and typed in my credit card after choosing a flight.

"Jenna, you can meet me at the Maui airport on a first-class flight from O'Hare three days from tonight. The email confirmation just hit your in-box. You'll need a damn good disguise flying on a commercial flight by yourself. But I'll let you figure that part out. In fact, dress like you are now. No one would ever believe it's you.

"Meanwhile, I'm going to stay with you tonight. That way I'll know you're still alive in the morning, and thinking straight-ish. I'm going to give you a bath after I throw these fucking pills away. And I'll order us some food. But I'm flying back tomorrow."

"Okay. But no food."

I laid down next to her.

She said, "So the songs can't free us, and fame can't free us. And escaping everything by going on tour can't free us. And love can't free us... Sounds pretty fucked up."

"Jenna."

"What?"

"Time to come down. You're running out of oxygen up here."

"I know," she cried.

"A few days should be enough time for you to straighten out what you can business-wise. But I'm not going to do it for you. I'm not going to let you sit here stoned out of your fucking mind in the dark while I try to save you from yourself. And I'm not going to drag you out of here with me just to have you change your mind again and say it wasn't your choice. You have to get yourself out of here, without my help, so nobody can drag you back in."

She shook her head, trying to reason something out with herself. "Maybe it would be easier to just finish the fucking tour, then stop."

"That's up to you, Jenna. Don't ask me to get into all that."

She stood up and began to pace, suddenly agitated, "Adam, I'm trapped. If I just stop, they'll come after me and I'll lose every dime I've made! Maybe they'd take some of your money too."

"We can work out the legal stuff, J.J. None of that matters."

"But Ned said..."

"Fuck Ned, Jenna, it doesn't matter anymore. If you can't live the way you want when you're a superstar, then what's the fucking point?"

"I overheard someone at Chart call me a 'super slave.'"

"Yeah, well why should you care about them now? Look, as my girlfriend, Eve used to say, 'I have an idea!'"

"Do you?" She perked up. A new and honest smile was born on her face. "What is it?"

"Ready?"

"Wait. This isn't something you know I know, right? No lectures."

"No. It's a brand-new fucking idea."

"What is it?"

“Quit at the top! Quit while you’re a mega-star! That’s how you win! Don’t you see? You’ll immortalize yourself!”

She nervously ran her fingers through her hair, waiting for me to say more.

“That’s it?” Her eyebrows furrowed.

“That’s it! That’s all. That’s the answer, Jenna. I made most of the money from this crazy game anyway. It doesn’t matter if you break your part of the contract. We’re not married. They can’t sue me! I’ll give you half of everything I have when the dust settles if that’s what you need to walk away from this. Meanwhile, you’d be the one that got away. The one that broke free of the machine and escaped! They’ll write you up as the great rock icon who played the game her way until she didn’t want to play anymore! You played them! It will be awesome!”

She started crying and laughing at the same time.

“Quit at the top, Jenna! It would be the entertainment headline of the year! You’d be immortalized instead of just drifting off into the superstar graveyard a few years from now.”

I pulled her close to me, “J.J., you won’t even have to be around to spin the story. It would take on a life of its own. You’d disappear from the scene in a puff of smoke, and because you walked away on your terms, no fanfare, no interviews, they’d make you a bigger star than you ever could have been. The C.D. would probably go platinum because you quit, not because you toured, and you wouldn’t even have to die to make it happen.”

“But am I still at the top?”

“You’re still at the top, Jenna.”

“I don’t think so. What if they say I couldn’t handle a couple of bad reviews and that I quit as a failure?”

“Numbers don’t lie, J.J. Units, filling every seat everywhere you play, and airplay, remember? The holy grail of superstardom. They’re the only things that count. You’re making superstar money with overflow crowds. The CD sounds great. How many hits have we had this time out? It’s absolutely sick...! You’d kill them if you quit, J.J. The Chart execs would look like lemmings, standing in line waiting to jump off a cliff. And we’ll both have a good laugh when they beg

you to come back, and tell you to go ahead and book less tour dates, take a year off, anything you want. Which, of course, they will say. But you see, J.J., you won't do it! You'll tell them, keep jumping off the cliff, you bastards, because it's too late. It's over. Then you can take the million net in tour money, or whatever you made, and throw the whole damn truckload of it in their face... . It's perfect!"

"I don't know if I can do it, Adam! What if you're wrong? What if it just ends up screwing up my entire life?"

"Isn't that what just happened?"

"I mean worse!"

"Worse how? Jenna, remember after our first tour? I was scared to stop too. I was scared to turn off the rocket engine just as we were making a name for ourselves. But it turned out that the rocket was just an illusion. And look what you've done now? You stopped it! It wasn't pretty! But you've just ejected at sixty-thousand feet. Just like I did. And all you need now is a parachute, and a lifeboat to pull you out of the water when you land. Right?"

"Yes," she said, almost trance-like. Her eyes were staring deep into mine. "Say more."

"Okay, so then maybe you'll want me there in the boat -- to throw you a lifeline. Or maybe you won't want me there. Maybe you won't want anyone there, so you can swim to shore on your own. But Jenna, you're not going to sink to the bottom if you quit. I promise."

Her eyes were frozen globes of blue, searching for something.

She was wearing a worn-out pair of blue jeans and a sweatshirt that was way too big on her — it may have been given to her by a band member to help disguise her. She wore no makeup. Her hair was uncombed.

I said, "Hey. You look more like a roadie tonight than a superstar. I fell in love with a roadie, you know. Long ago."

She nodded and wiped her eyes. "Yes. She was a beautiful girl."

Chapter Twenty-eight

The sky is lit up tonight; a million diamonds pulsing. Sometimes the stars in Maui seem to burn right through the atmosphere like lasers.

My reverie is broken and I come back to the present. I look at my watch. I see a plane flying in the night sky, looking like a red and white firefly, flickering, blinking, and then suddenly, it grows bigger as it falls to the earth, rattling things around it as it roars onto the runway.

The airport window reflects my face while I look out at the landing strip. I don't know if she'll be on that plane tonight. I haven't heard a word from her since I left Chicago. I guess she had a lot of things to take care of, a lot of decisions to make. Maybe she wasn't sure right up to the final boarding call. Or maybe she wanted to surprise me. She's always full of surprises.

I look through the thick glass, out to the light wands being waved up and down by marshallers in their yellow and orange jackets. Others are driving little empty trucks back and forth, as if hypnotized.

I'm watching a crystal television with only one channel, only one show: The plane is taxied in and comes to a stop. It looks like an enormous sleeping animal. It was born to travel endlessly from city to city, following commands, never questioning, with every moment of its life observed and controlled.

I know what I'll do if she's on that plane tonight, if I see her walk through the gate.

I'll bring her over to this window for a final look, and I'll say: "Just think, Jenna James, if you were still a superstar you'd be on a plane just like that one, except flying in the opposite direction, travelling everywhere, going nowhere. But you made it out alive. You found your way. You're home."

The End

~ GM