

S T I C K S

B Y L E W I S S H I N E R

H_E HAD A 12” Sony black-and-white, tuned to M T V, that sat on a chair at the end of the bed. He could barely hear it over the fan in the window. He sat in the middle of the bed because of the sag, drumming along absently to Steve Winwood’s “Higher Love.”

The sticks were Regal Tip 5Bs. They were thinner than 2Bs—marching band sticks—but almost as long. Over the years Stan had moved farther out over the ends. Now the butts of the sticks fit into the heels of his palms, about an inch up from the wrist. He flipped the right stick away when the phone rang.

“Stan, dude!” a voice said. “You want to work tomorrow?”

“Yeah, probably. What have you got, Darryl? You don’t sound right.”

“Does the name Keven Stacey mean anything to you?”

“Wait a minute.” Stan switched the phone to his other ear. “Did you say Keven *Stacey*? As in Foolsgold, Kevin Stacey? She’s going to record at C S R?”

“You heard me.” Stan could see Darryl sitting in the control room, feet up on the console, wearing double-knit slacks and a T-shirt, sweat coming up on his balding forehead.

“This is some kind of bullshit, right? She’s coming in for a jingle or a P S A.”

“No bullshit, Stanley. She’s cutting a track for a solo album she’s going to pitch to Warner’s. Not a demo, but a real, honest-to-Christ track. Probably a single. Now if you’re not interested, there’s plenty of other drummers in L A ...”

“I’m interested. I just don’t understand why she wants to fuck with a rinky-dink studio like yours. No offense.”

“Don’t harsh me, bud. She’s hot. She’s got a song and she wants to put it in the can. Everybody else is booked. You try to get into Record One or Sunset Sound. Not for six months you won’t get in. Even if you’re Keven Stacey. You listening, Stan?” He heard Darryl hitting the phone on the edge of the console. “That’s the Big Time, dude. Knocking on your door.”

J U S T T H E N I G H T B E F O R E Stan had watched Foolsgold in concert on HBO. Everybody knew the story. Keven used to fuck the guitar player and they broke up. It was ugly and they spread it all over the *Goldrush* album. It was soap opera on vinyl and the public ate it up.

Stan too.

The set was blue-lit and smoky, so hot that the drummer looked like he’d been watered down with a garden hose. Every time the lead player snapped his head back the sweat flew off like spray from a breaking wave.

Keven stood in the middle of the stage, holding a thin white jacket around her shoulders like there was a chill in the air. When she sang she held on to the mike stand with both hands, swaying a little as the music thundered over her. Her eyes didn’t go with the rest of her face, the teased yellow hair, fine as fiberglass, the thin model’s nose, the carefully painted mouth. The eyes were

murky and brown and looked like they were connected to brains and a sense of humor. And something else, passion and something more. A kind of conviction. It made Stan believe every word she sang.

STAN FINISHED HIS DR. PEPPER and went into Studio B. The rest of Darryl's first-string house band was already there, working out their nerves in a quiet, strangely frenzied jam. Stan had turned over his drums to Dr. Jackson Sax, one of the more underrated reed players in the city and a decent amateur on a trap set. Jackson's trademark was a dark suit and a pork-pie hat that made him look like a cross between a preacher and a plain-clothes cop. Stan was one of the few people he ever talked to. Nobody knew if he was crazy or just cultivating an image.

Stan himself liked to keep it simple. He was wearing a new pair of Lee riders and a long-sleeved white shirt. The shirt set off the dark skin and straight black hair he'd inherited from his half-breed Comanche father. He had two new pairs of Regal Tip 5Bs in his back pocket and white Converse All-Stars on his feet, the better to grip the pedals.

The drums were set up in a kind of elevated garden gazebo against one wall. There were boom mikes on all sides and a wooden rail across the front. If they had to they could move in wheeled walls of acoustical tile and isolate him completely from the mix. Stan leaned with his right foot up against the back wall.

There was some action in the control booth and the music staggered and died. Gregg Rosen had showed up so now everybody was looking for Keven. Rosen was her producer and also her boyfriend, if you paid attention to the gossip. Which Stan did. The glass in the booth was tinted and there was a lot of glare, but Stan could make out a Motley Crue T-shirt, purple jams, and glasses on a gold chain. Rosen's hair was crewcut on top and long enough at the sides to hit his shoulders.

They each gave Rosen some preliminary levels and then cooked for a couple of minutes. Rosen came out on the floor and moved a couple of microphones. Darryl got on the intercom from the control room and told them to shut up for a minute. He played back what he'd just taped and WhiteBread Walker, the albino keyboard player, started playing fills against the tape.

"Sounds okay," Rosen said.

"Uh, listen," Stan said. "I think the hi-hat's overmodulating."

Rosen stared at him for a good five seconds. The tape ran out and the studio got very quiet. Finally Rosen circled one finger in the air for a replay. The tape ran and then Darryl came on the speakers, "Uh, Gregg, I think the top end is, uh, breaking up a little on that hi-hat."

"Well, fix the fucking thing," Rosen said.

He walked out. As soon as the soundproof door closed there were a few low whistles and some applause. Stan leaned over until his cheek rested against the cool plastic skin of his riding tom. He could feel all the dents his sticks had left in it. Wonderful, he thought. We haven't even started and I've already pissed off the top producer in L.A.

WHEN ROSEN CAME BACK Keven was with him. Jorge Martin, the 15-year-old boy wonder, fiddled with the tailpiece on his Kramer. WhiteBread pretended to hear something wrong with the high

E on his electric piano. Art, the bass player, cleaned his glasses. Stan just went ahead and stared at her, but tried to make it a nice kind of stare.

She was small. He'd known that, but the fluorescent lights made her seem terribly fragile. She wore high heeled boots, jeans rolled up tight at the cuffs, a fringe jacket and a white ribbed tank top. She looked around at the setup, nodding, working on her lower lip with her teeth. Finally her eyes met Stan's, just for a second. The rest of the room went out of focus. Stan tried to smile back at her and ended up looking down at his snare. He had a folded-up piece of newspaper duct-taped off to one side of the head to kill overtones. The tape was coming loose. He smoothed the tape with his thumbnail until he was sure she wasn't looking at him any more and he could breathe again.

“THE SONG IS CALLED ‘STICKS,’” she said. She stood in front of WhiteBread's Fender Rhodes, her hands jammed nervously into her jacket pockets. “I don't have a demo or anything. Sorry. But it's pretty simple. Basically what I want is a real African sound, lots of drums, lots of backing vocals, chanting, all like that. Okay. Well, this is what it sounds like.”

She started playing. Stan was disarmed by her shyness. On the other hand she was not kidding around with the piano. She had both hands on the keys and she pumped out a driving rhythm with a solid hook. She started singing. Suddenly she wasn't a skinny, shy little blonde any more. She was Keven Stacey. Everybody in the room knew it.

Stan's stomach hurt. It felt like ice had formed in there. The cold went out through his chest and down his arms and legs.

One by one they started to fall in. Stan played a roll on the hi-hat and punched accents on the kick drum. It sounded too disco but he couldn't think of anything else to play. It helped just to move his hands. After one verse Keven backed off and let WhiteBread take over the piano. She walked around and nodded and pointed, talking into people's ears.

She walked up to the drum riser and put her forearms on the railing. Stan could see the fine golden hair on her wrists. “Hi,” she said. “You're Stan, right?”

“Right,” he said. Somehow he kept his hands and feet moving.

“Hi, Stan. Do you think you could give me something a little more...I don't know. More primitive, or something?”

“More toms, maybe?”

“Yeah. More of a ‘Not Fade Away’ kind of feel.”

Buddy Holly was only Stan's all-time favorite. He nodded. He couldn't seem to look away from her. His hands moved over to the toms, right crossing over left as he switched from the riding tom to the floor toms. It was a bit of flash left over from the solos he'd played back when he was a kid. He mixed it up with a half-beat of press roll here and there and let the accents float around.

“That's nice,” Keven said. She was watching his eyes and not his hands. He stared back and she didn't look away.

“Thanks,” he said.

“I like that a lot,” she said, and flicked the side of the high tom with her fingernail. “A whole lot.” She smiled again and walked away.

THE BASIC TRACK of drums, bass, and guitar went down in two takes. It was Stan's pride that they never had to put a click track on him to keep him steady. Keven and Rosen listened to the playback and nodded. Then they

emptied the percussion closet. Stan put down a second drum track, just fills and punctuation, and the rest of the band loaded up another track with timbales, shakers, bongos and congas. Keven stood on top of a chair, clapping her hands over her head and moving with the music.

The tape ran out. Everybody kept playing and Rosen finally came down out of the booth to break it up, tapping on the diamond face of his Rolex. Keven got down off her chair and everything went quiet. Stan took the wing-nuts off his cymbal stands and started to pack his brass away.

"Do you sing?"

Stan looked up. Keven was leaning on the rail again, watching him.

"Yeah, a little bit. Harmonies and stuff."

"Yeah? If you're not doing anything you could stick around for a while. I could maybe use you later on."

"Sure," Stan said. "Why not?"

ROSEN WRAPPED THE SESSION at ten that night. Stan had spent five hours on hard plastic folding chairs, reading *Entertainment Weekly* and *Guitar for the Practicing Musician*, listening to WhiteBread and Jorge lay down their solos, waiting for Rosen and Keven to tinker with the mix. Keven found him there in the lounge.

"You're not doing the vocals tonight," he said.

She shook her head.

"You weren't even planning to."

"Probably not." She was smiling.

"So what am I doing here?"

"I just said I could maybe use you. I didn't say for what."

Her smile was on crooked and her shawl hung loose and open. Stan could see a small mole just below her collarbone. The skin around it was perfect, soft and golden. This isn't happening, he thought.

There was a second where he felt his life poised on a single balance point. Then he said, "You like Thai food?"

HE TOOK HER to the Siam on Ventura Boulevard. They left her car at the studio and took Stan's white CRX. The night air was cool and sweet and ZZ Top was on KLOS. The pumping, pedal-point bass and Billy Gibbon's pinched harmonics were like musk and hot sauce. Stan looked over at Keven, her hair blown back, her eyes closed, into the music. There was a stillness in the very center of Stan's being. Time had stopped.

Over dinner he told her about the sensitive singer-songwriter who'd gotten his start in junk food commercials. The guy always used pick-up musicians and then complained because they didn't know his songs. The only thing he actually took along on tour with him was his oversized white Baldwin grand piano.

The gig was in a hotel ballroom. Stan and the lead trumpet player were set up next to the piano and got to listen to his complaints through the entire first set. During the break they collected sixteen place settings of silver and laid them across the piano strings. The second set was supposed to open with "Claire de Lune" on solo piano. After the first chord the famous singer-songwriter walked offstage and just kept walking. Stan would have lost his union card over that one, only nobody would testify against him.

Keven had done the same sort of time. After high school she'd been so broke she'd played piano in one of those red-jacket, soft-pop bands at the Hyatt Edgewater in Long Beach. When she wouldn't put out for the lead player he kept upstaging her and sticking his guitar neck in her face. One night she reached over and detuned his strings, one at a time, in the middle of his solo on "Blue Moon." The stage was so small he couldn't get away from her without falling into the first row of tables. It was the last song of the night and the audience loved it. The manager of the Hyatt wanted them to keep it in the act. Instead Keven got fired and the guitarist found another blonde piano player from L A 's nearly infinite supply.

Halfway through dinner Stan felt the calf of her leg press gently against his. He returned the pressure, ever so slightly. She didn't move away.

The chopsticks fit in Stan's hands like Regal Tip 5Bs. He found himself nervously playing his empty plate and water glass. Keven put the dinner on her American Express and told him Warner's would end up paying for it eventually.

In the parking lot Stan walked her to the passenger side of his car and stopped with his hand on the door. His throat was suddenly dry and his heart had lost the beat. "Well," he said. "Where to?"

She shrugged, watched his face.

"I have a place just over on Sunshine Terrace. If you want to, you know, have a drink. Or something."

"Sure," she said. "Why not?"

SOME OF THE HOUSES around him were multi-million dollar jobs, sprawling up and down the hillside, hidden behind trees and privacy fences. Stan had a one-bedroom apartment in a cluster of four, squeezed in between the mansions. Everything inside was wood—the paneling on the walls, the cabinets, the louvered doors and shutters. Through the open windows the cool summer wind rattled the leaves like tambourines.

Keven walked slowly around the living room, touching the shelves along the one wall that wasn't filled with windows, finally settling in an armchair and pulling her shawl around her shoulders. "I guess you're tired of people telling you how they expected to find your clothes all over the place and junk food boxes in the corners."

"People have said that, yeah."

"I'm a slob. My place looks like somebody played Tilt-A-Whirl with the rooms. And all those goddamn stuffed animals." Word had gotten out that Keven loved stuffed animals so her fans now handed them up to her by the dozen at Foolsgold concerts. "What's that?"

"It was my grandfather's," Stan said. It was the trunk of a sapling, six feet long, maybe an inch and a half in diameter at its thickest, the bark peeled away, feathers hanging off the end. Stan took it down from the wall and handed it to her. "It's a coup stick."

"Acoustic? Like a guitar?"

"Coup with a P. The Indians used it to help exterminate themselves. They thought there was more honor in touching an enemy with one of these than killing him. So they'd ride into a bunch of cavalry and poke them with their coup sticks and the cavalry would blow their heads off."

"Is that what happened to your grandfather?"

"No, he burned out his liver drinking Sterno. He was supposed to have whacked a cop with it once. All it got him was a beating and a night in jail."

"Why'd he do it?"

"Life in the big city, I guess. He had to put up with whatever people did to him and he couldn't fight back or they'd kill him. He didn't have any options under the white man's rules so he went back to the old rules. My old man said Grandpa was laughing when the cop dragged him away. You want a beer?"

She nodded and Stan brought two cans of Oly out of the kitchen. Keven was rummaging through her purse. "You want a little coke with that?" she asked.

"No thanks. You go ahead."

She cut two lines and snorted them through a short piece of plastic straw. "You're a funny kind of guy, you know that?"

"What do you mean?"

"You seem like you're just waiting for other people to catch up to you. Like you're just waiting for somebody to come up and ask you what you want. And you're ready to lay it all out for them."

"I guess maybe that's so."

"So what do you want, Stan? What you do want, right this second?"

"You really want to know? I'd like to take a shower. I really sweated it up in the studio."

"Go ahead," she said. "No, really. I'm not going anywhere. We took your car, remember?"

THE HEAT FROM THE WATER went right into his muscles and he started to relax for the first time since Darryl's call the day before. And he wasn't completely surprised when he heard a tapping on the glass.

She was leaning on the sink, posed for him, when he opened the sliding door. Her hair stuck out to one side where she'd pulled her tank top over her head. Her small, soft breasts seemed to sway just a little. One smooth hip was turned toward him in a kind of unconscious modesty, not quite hiding the dark tangle of her pubic hair.

"I guess you're tired of people telling you how beautiful you are."

"Try me," she said, and got in next to him.

Her mouth was soft and enveloping. He could feel the pressure of her breasts and the small, exquisite muscles of her back as he held her. Her small hands moved over him and he thought he might pass out.

Later, in bed, she showed him what she liked, how to touch her and where. It seemed to Stan as if she'd offered him a present. She had condoms in her purse. He used his fingers and his tongue and later came inside her. She was high from the cocaine and not ready to sleep. Stan was half crazy from the touch and scent of her and never wanted to sleep again. Sometime around dawn she told him she was cold and he brought her a blanket. She curled up inside his arm, building an elaborate nest out of the pillows and covers.

They made love again in the morning. She whispered his name in his ear. Later they showered again and he made her coffee and toast.

Stan offered her one of his T-shirts but she shook her head and dressed in yesterday's clothes. Time seemed to pick up speed as she dressed. She looked at the clock and said, "Christ, it's almost noon. Gregg is going to be waiting on us."

HE STOOD IN A CIRCLE with the other singers, blending his voice on an African chant that Keven had played them from a tape. He knew the gossip had started the minute he and Keven came in together. Rosen was curt and irritable and everybody seemed to watch Stan out of the corners of their eyes.

Stan couldn't have cared less.

When the backing tracks were down, Keven disappeared into the vocal booth. Jackson packed up his horn and sat down next to Stan. "Got to make a thing over at Sunset. You working this evening?"

"I don't know yet."

"Yeah," he said. "Be cool."

Rosen put the playback over the speakers. The song was about break-ups and betrayals:

*...broke down all my fences
And left me here alone
Picking up sticks...*

As she stretched out the last word the percussion came up in the mix, drowning her in jungle rhythm. The weight of the drums was a perfect balance for the shallow sentiment. Together they sounded to Stan like number one with a bullet.

She nailed the vocal on the third try. When she came out of the booth she walked up to him and said, "Hey."

"Hey yourself. It's going to be a monster, you know. It's really great."

"You think so? Really?"

"Really," he said. She brushed his cheek with her hand.

"Listen," he said.

"No. I can't. I've got a dinner date with Warner's tonight. Gregg's dubbing down a cassette and we're going to play it for them. So I'm tied up until late."

"Okay," he said.

She started to walk away and then came back.

"Do you sleep with your door locked?"

HE MANAGED TO FALL asleep. It was an effort of will that surprised Heven him. When he heard the door open it was three a.m. The door closed again and he heard a slightly drunken laugh and a gentle bumping of furniture. He saw a darker shadow in the doorway of the bedroom. There was a rustle of clothing. It seemed to Stan to be the single most erotic moment of his life.

She pulled back the covers and slid on top of him. Her skin was soft and cool and rich with perfume. When she kissed him he tasted expensive alcohol on her breath.

"How were the Warner Brothers?" he whispered.

"They loved me. I'm going to be a star."

"You're already a star."

"Shhhhhh," she said.

HE OPENED HIS EYES in the morning and saw her fully dressed. "I've got to go," she said. It was only nine o'clock. "I'll call you."

It was only later that he realized the session was over. He'd never been to her place, he didn't even have a phone number where he could call her.

IT WAS LIKE he'd never had empty time to fill before. He spent most of the afternoon on the concrete stoop in front of his apartment, listening to Buddy Holly on his boombox. A mist had blown in from the Pacific and not burned off. His hands were nervous and spun his drumsticks through his fingers, over and over.

She called late that night. He should have been asleep but wasn't. There was a lot of traffic noise in the background and he had trouble hearing her. "I'll be by tomorrow night," she said. "We can go to a movie or something."

"Keven..."

"I have to go. See you tomorrow, okay?"

"Okay," Stan said.

SHE WAS SITTING on the stoop when he came home from a session the next afternoon. She was wrapped in her shawl and the clouds overhead all seemed to be in a hurry to get somewhere.

She let him kiss her, but her lips were awkward. "I can't make tonight," she said.

"Okay."

"Something came up. We'll try it another night, okay?"

"Sure," Stan said. "Why don't you give me your number?"

She stood up, took his hands as if to keep him from touching her. "I'll call you." She stopped at the gate. "I'm crazy, you know." She wouldn't look at him.

"I don't care."

"I'll call you," she said again, and ran across the street to her bright red MG. Stan held up one hand as she drove away but she didn't look back.

AFTER TWO DAYS he started to look for her. Darryl reluctantly gave him Gregg Rosen's unlisted number. Stan asked Rosen for Keven's phone number and he just laughed. "Are you crazy, or what?"

"She won't care if you give it to me. I'm the guy from the CSR session—"

"I know who you are," Rosen said, and hung up.

He left a call for her at the Warner offices in Burbank and with Foolsgold's agent. He tried all the K. Staceys in all the LA area codes.

He called Rosen again. "Look," Rosen said. "Are you stupid, or what? Do you think you're the only kid in town that's had a piece of Keven Stacey's ass? End to end you guys would probably stretch to Tucson. Do you think she doesn't know you've been calling? Now are you going to quit hassling me or are you going to fuck over what little career you may have left?"

THE CHECK FOR KEVEN'S session came in the mail. It was on CSR's account and Darryl had signed it, but there was no note in the envelope with it. On the phone Darryl said, "Face it, bud, you've been an asshole. Gregg Rosen is way pissed off. You're going to have to kick back for a while, pay some dues. Give it a couple months, maybe you can cruise back."

"Fuck you too, Darryl."

LA dried up. Stan hit the music stores and the musicians' classifieds. Most of the ads were drummers looking for work. The union offered him a six-month tour of the southern states with a revival of *Bye Bye Birdie*.

Jesus, Stan thought. Show tunes. Rednecks. Every night another Motel 6. I'm too old for this.

The phone rang.

Stan snatched it up.

"Stan. This is Dave Harris. Remember me?"

Harris was another session drummer, nothing special. He'd filled in for Stan a couple of times.

"Yeah, Dave. What's up?"

"I was, uh, I was just listening to a cassette of that Keven Stacey song? I was just wondering, like, what the hell were you doing there? I can't follow that part at all."

"What are you doing with a cassette of that song?"

"Uh oh."

"C'mon, Dave, spill it."

"They didn't tell you? Warner's going to use it as the first single from the album. So they're getting ready to shoot the video. They didn't even tell you? Oh man, that really sucks."

"Yeah, it sucks all right."

"Really Stan, I didn't know, man. I swear. They told me you couldn't make the gig."

"Yeah, okay, Dave, hang on, all right? I'm trying to figure something out, here."

STAN SHOWED UP at the Universal lot at six in the morning. He cranked down his window and smelled the dampness in the air. Birds were chattering somewhere in the distance. Stan had the pass he'd gotten from Dave Harris. He showed it to the guard and the guard gave him directions to the Jungle Lot.

A Port-A-Sign on the edge of the road marked his turnoff. Stan parked behind the other cars and vans under the palm trees. A crew in matching blue T-shirts and caps was positioning the VTRs and laying down an Astro-turf carpet for the band.

He started setting up his drums. This was as far as his imagination had been able to take him. From here on he'd have to wing it. His nerves had tunneled his vision down to the wood and plastic and chrome under his hands and he jumped when a voice behind him said, "They gonna fry your ass, boy."

Stan turned to face a six-foot-six apparition in a feathered hat, leopard scarf, chains, purple silk shirt, green leather pants, and lizard boots.

"Jackson?" Stan asked carefully.

"Something wrong?"

"Jesus Christ, man, where did you get those clothes?"

Jackson stared at him without expression. "I'm a star now. Not trash like you, boy, a *star*. Do you know who I was talking to yesterday? Bruce. That's Bruce *Springsteen*. He says he might need me for his next tour."

"That's great, Jackson. I hope it works out."

"You laugh, boy, but when Rosen see you, he gonna shit a picket fence."

Rosen, Keven, and some blond kid pulled up in a Jeep. Stan slipped deeper into the shade of a palm tree to watch. Keven and the blond kid were holding

hands. The kid was dressed in a white bush jacket and Bermuda shorts. Keven was in a matching outfit that had been artfully torn and smudged by the costume crew. The blond kid said something to Keven and she laughed softly in his face. The director called places and the rest of the band settled in behind their instruments.

"Where the fuck is the drummer?" Rosen shouted.

Stan stepped out from behind the trees.

"Oh Christ," Rosen said. "Okay, take ten everybody. You, Stan Shithead. Off the set."

Stan was looking at Keven. Say the word, he thought. Tell him I can stay.

Keven glanced at him with mild irritation and walked away. She had hold of the blond kid's hand.

Stan looked back at Rosen. A couple of grips, ex-bikers by the size of them, were headed toward him. Stan held up his hands. "Okay," he said. He put his sticks in his back pocket and pointed at his drums. "Just let me..."

"No way," Rosen said. "Leave them here. We'll get them back to you. Right now you're trespassing and I want your ass *out* of here."

On the other side of the road was a tall, grassy hill. Stan could see Keven and the blond kid halfway up it. "Okay," he said. He walked past Rosen and got in his car, started it, and got back onto the road.

Past the first switchback he pulled over and started up the other side of the hill on foot. He was still a hundred yards away from Keven when she spotted him and sent the blond kid down to cut him off.

"Don't even think about it," Stan said. The blond kid looked at Stan's face and swerved downhill toward the jungle set at a run.

"Keven!" She stopped at the top of the hill and turned back to look at him. The blond kid would be back with the bikers any minute. Stan didn't know what to say. "You're killing me," he said. "Rosen won't let me work. Did you know that?"

"Go away, Stan," she said.

"Goddammit," he said. "How was I supposed to *not* to fall in love with you? What the hell did you expect? Do you ever listen to the words of all those songs you sing?"

A hand appeared on his shoulder, spinning him around. Stan tried to duck and ended up on his back as Rosen's fist cut the air above him. No bikers, then, Stan thought giddily. Not yet. He rolled a few feet, off balance. One of his drumsticks fell out of his pocket and he grabbed for it.

Rosen's looked more annoyed than anything else. "You stupid piece of shit," he said. Stan scuttled around the hillside on his palms and his ass and his feet, dodging two more wild punches. The slope made it tricky. Finally he was up again. He kept moving, letting Rosen come after him. He outweighed Rosen by at least 40 pounds and had the reach on him besides. And if he actually hit Rosen he might as well throw his drums into the Pacific. On the other hand, if he waited around long enough, the bikers might just beat him to death.

It was what his grandfather would have called a classic no-win situation.

Kill me then, Stan thought, and to hell with you. He stepped inside Rosen's next swing and tapped him, very lightly, on the chest with his drumstick. Then he stepped back, smiling, into Rosen's roundhouse left.

“HEY, SITTING BULL,” a voice said. It was Keven, kneeling next to him. “I think Custer just kicked your ass.”

Stan propped himself up on his elbows. He could see Rosen walking down the hill, rubbing his knuckles. “Who’d have thought the little bastard could hit so hard? Did you call him off?”

“I wasn’t going to let him kill you. Even if you did deserve it.” She took his face in both her hands. “Stan. What am I going to do with you?”

Stan didn’t have an answer for that one.

“This doesn’t change anything,” she said. “It’s over. It’s going to stay over.”

“You never called me.”

She sat back, arms wrapped around herself. “Okay. I should have called. But you’re a scary guy, Stan. You’re just so...intense, you know? You’ve got so much hunger in you that it’s... it’s hard to be around.”

Stan looked at his hands.

“I wasn’t, like, just playing with you, okay? What there was, what happened, it was real. I just, I changed my mind. That’s all. I’m just a person, you know. Just like anybody else.”

She believed that, Stan thought, but it wasn’t true. She wasn’t like other people. She didn’t have that fist in her stomach, pushing her, tearing up her insides. Not any more. That was what made her different, but there wasn’t any point trying to tell her that.

She stood up and walked away from him, breaking into a run as she moved downhill. Rosen was there at the bottom. She took him by the arm and talked to him but Stan couldn’t hear any of it. He watched the clouds for a while then headed down.

Rosen walked over, holding out his hand. “Sorry I lost my temper.” Keven was back at the jungle set.

Stan took his hand. “No hard feelings.”

“Keven says she wants you to do the video.” Rosen clearly didn’t like the idea. “She says nobody else can really do that drum part. She says there won’t be any more trouble.”

“No,” Stan said. “No more trouble.”

THE WORST PART was hearing her voice on the radio, but in time Stan even got used to that.

Her album was out just before Thanksgiving and that week they premiered the video on MTV. It opened with Keven and her boyfriend in their jungle suits, then cut back and forth between a sort of stylized Tarzan plot and the synched-up footage of the band playing under the palm trees.

The phone rang. “Dude, you watching?”

“Yeah, Darryl. I’m watching.”

“Totally crucial video, bud. I’m serious.”

“Good drummer,” Stan said.

“The best. This is going to make your career. You are on the map.”

“I could live with that. Listen, Darryl, I’ll see you tomorrow, okay? I want to catch the rest of this.”

Stan squatted in front of the TV. Keven sang hard into the camera. Stan could read the words of the song on her face. She turned and looked over her shoulder and the camera followed, panning past her to the drummer, a good-looking, muscular guy in his middle thirties, with black hair that hung straight to his collar. The drummer smiled at Keven and then bent back to his work.

The clear, insistent power of his drumming echoed through the jungle afternoon.

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