



The Master Planets

**"A magnificent,
mysterious book."**

Thomas Perry,
best-selling author

Past and present collide in a wrenching story of revenge and broken dreams.

Donald Gallinger

The Master Planets

R e v i e w

“Donald Gallinger has written a remarkable book.

It has just about everything you can imagine,
and throws it all together in a rather brilliant novel of humor,
suspense, music, history—and family.

In the middle of the story Gallinger writes:

“Families, like countries, tell myths about themselves.”

That’s actually where *The Master Planets* begins.

And it ends after a whirlwind ride in which we see
extraordinary connections made between
seemingly disparate worlds. It’s a dazzler.”

Ted Chapin, best-selling author of *Everything Was Possible*,
president of Rodgers and Hammerstein and
president of the American Theatre Wing (Tony Awards)

R e v i e w

"The Master Planets is a magnificent, mysterious book.
Near the end I wished it had been less unforgettable,
so I could sit down and read it again."

Thomas Perry, best-selling author



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L A R G O , U S A

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To Doni



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The Lord's hand was upon me, and he carried me out by his spirit and set me down in a plain that was full of bones. He made me pass among them in every direction. Countless in number and very dry, they covered the plain. He said to me, 'O man, can these bones live?' I answered, 'Only you, Lord God, know that.'

Ezekiel 37: 1-3

Chapter 1

The Israeli ambassador shook hands with me and I remembered the firm, tough grip from the last time we met, a year or two after my mother's death.

I didn't see any point in prolonging my answer. Out of respect for his friendship with my mother, out of respect for what they had accomplished during the war, I had come in person to the New York consulate to tell him "no." Afterwards, I planned to see the new exhibit at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, something about the impressionists, or perhaps it was the neo-impressionists. Then an appointment book crowded with anxious clients awaited me back in New Jersey. They all wanted legal advice on the best way to bludgeon a decayed warehouse district out of existence and into the sunny prosperity of upscale outlets and cafes.

"My sister and I will not attend the memorial tribute," I said. "We'll send the foundation a note thanking them for the honor."

The ambassador smiled at me. "Sit down, Peter."

I hesitated. Then I sat down and said, "Please understand that we are grateful. But we're tired of all the ..." I stopped. I didn't know how to explain to him the incongruity, the strange emptiness of my mother's legacy as a war hero and survivor and her relationship to us, her family. "I don't know what to say to these people anymore. They cry and want to touch our faces and hands. They want to thank somebody that we never knew. You have no idea the requests made

of us over the years, everything from writing forewords for doctoral dissertations to chaining ourselves to a wall in Poland.”

“How is your sister?”

I looked at him. “Penny’s sick. But you knew that, didn’t you?”

“I heard she did some fine work in Africa.”

I didn’t want to talk about my sister with him. He knew that Penny’s career as a surgeon was probably over. He also knew that if he asked her, she would rush off to New York for the ceremony. Of course, after the ceremony she would promptly return to her home in New Jersey where she would then lapse into another “episode.”

“She saved a lot of lives,” I said.

The ambassador looked at me, assessing, I was sure, the changes in the boy who had opened the door for him on a warm day in May, 1973. The ambassador had certainly changed. The powerful frame of his body, the thick neck and broad shoulders that had made me wary of him when I was a boy—in fact, had made many people wary of him—had begun to shrink into the soft, shapeless posture of old age. I couldn’t imagine the youth he told me he had once been, the studious, sensitive brick layer’s son who longed to be a physician. Then again, I couldn’t quite imagine the person he claimed my mother was, the person he had fought beside in the forests of Poland.

“This was hard on you and your sister,” the ambassador said.

I didn’t respond.

“How’s your law practice, Peter? Are you still with the same firm?”

“I’m on my own now.” I was amused and irritated by the question, by the shift in tone. He didn’t ask simple questions, even if the questions sounded simple. Ambassador Gilaad—formerly General

Gilaad—had served as a security chief in the Mossad, Israel's secret service, for many years.

I grinned at him and said, "You've changed, General, did you know that? Your eyes don't have the same look anymore. Why, you could be, oh, I don't know—a retired rabbi."

He laughed. "Maybe I should have been." Then, without preamble, he said, "You know, there will always be a place for you and your sister in Israel, Peter. Have you ever thought about it?"

Momentarily startled, I gave a light laugh. "I'm an American, General," I said at last. "This country is my home."

We were silent. I should have left then, shaken hands with him, said, "Thanks, no, forget it, I'm done," but the truth was that I found myself pleased to see him again, even if our meeting was a carefully scripted event.

"You know what I don't understand?" I said. "I don't understand why my father never even got a lousy tree planted in his honor. He not only saved my mother's life, he had to eat her rotten cooking all those years. He also had to pretend that she was perfectly sane. Isn't that worth one lousy tree?"

"Your father was a fine man. A very brave man."

I nodded my head and the ambassador said, rather gravely, "I remember how brave you were during that business with Colonel Meissner."

I remembered. Of course, that's what he wanted me to do—to remember, so I would relent and play my part in a complex, highly politicized public relations campaign.

"Did you ever hear about the robber who came into my mother's flower shop?" I asked him.

The ambassador's eyes opened a little wider. He appeared intrigued. Another pretense, I'm sure.

"I didn't know the whole story until years later," I said. "When I was no longer a kid. When people thought it was okay to tell me things."

"What happened?" he asked.

I smiled at his politely interested expression. "I'm sure you've never heard this before." I leaned back in my seat. "She just narrowly missed getting prosecuted herself. Fortunately, my father knew the district attorney and the whole thing got hushed up."

"Really," he said.

"Yes, really." I shook my head—amused, disgusted, sad—remembering. "I was about fourteen, I think. There were a lot of phone calls that day and there were detectives in the house. I remember how angry my father was—and my father didn't get angry very often. Apparently, a kid of nineteen or so, a junkie, came into my mother's shop around three in the afternoon. He asked for a bouquet of flowers. When my mother returned with the flowers from the back of the store, the kid pointed a gun at her. He wanted all the money in the cash register. He told her to hurry up. He said, 'Give me the money fast, you fucking bitch!'"

I stopped and looked at the general. He knew what was coming. I couldn't identify the expression on his face. Was that indignation? Surprise? Perhaps it was pity masked as anger.

"Aside from my mother and the kid there was only one other person in the shop, a Mrs. Greenberg, the president of the local Hadassah. The kid told Mrs. Greenberg to sit her fat ass on the floor and not to move unless she wanted to get shot. Meanwhile, my

mother had opened the cash register and put the money on her side of the counter, so the kid had to reach a little to get it. I guess because he was junked up, he didn't realize how calm my mother seemed. Mrs. Greenberg, on the other hand, sat on the floor, weeping quietly and shaking back and forth. She begged the kid not to hurt them.

"The kid reached over to grab the money. A glass vase shattered on the floor behind the counter. The kid's attention must have wandered for a second. I doubt my mother needed even that.

"Mrs. Greenberg said she was looking right at them, but she couldn't make out how anyone could move that fast. All she knew was that the kid's gun was out of his hand, and the hand bent back on the counter. My mother gave the hand an odd twist. Mrs. Greenberg heard a bone snap; my mother did something else—another bone cracked. The kid uttered sharp, high screams. My mother came around the counter with his gun. She reached over, took the kid's mangled hand, put it back on the counter, and slammed the gun down on his fingers. Mrs. Greenberg held her face between her hands, as if she needed a frame to believe what she was seeing. She tried to shout at my mother to stop, but the words came out in soft, drowning sobs. The kid wasn't shrieking anymore. He moaned, 'Oh, Jesus, lady,' he begged her. 'Don't hurt me no more. Please, God, please, don't hurt me!'

"According to Mrs. Greenberg, my mother smiled at the kid. She took his hair by the back of his head and gave it a firm jerk. Then, still holding his head back, she forced the gun between the kid's lips, so that the barrel tapped against his chattering teeth. 'I'm not God,' she told him, an inch from his face. She moved the gun down his throat. The kid made choking sounds. Then he lost control of his bowels and bladder.

“Later my mother explained to the police and Mrs. Greenberg that the dumb kid had never taken the safety off his gun. They were never in any danger. When the infuriated cops asked my mother why she didn’t just give the kid the money and avoid the risk of getting herself or Mrs. Greenberg hurt, my mother shrugged and said, ‘I’ll defend myself.’ When the lead detective investigating the case said, ‘Mrs. Jameson, you broke the kid’s wrist and two of his fingers. You also stuck a gun down his throat and threatened to kill him. Were you just “defending” yourself?’ my mother again shrugged. ‘Some people you can’t talk to,’ she said.

“The local Hadassah stopped inviting my mother to serve on its committees. I understood. Mrs. Greenberg and the other ladies knew that my mother was a victim of the Holocaust. What they didn’t know, at least not until the flower shop episode, was that she was also a violent and dangerous victim.”

I folded my hands across my lap and smiled a little at the general. “I found all this out years later from Rich Greenberg, Mrs. Greenberg’s son. At the time, he was interested in finding a divorce lawyer. I have no idea why he thought I practiced that sort of law. But we had lunch and caught up on old times. I think I heard from someone that Rich decided to stay married. He probably found out how expensive a divorce can be when you own a car dealership.”

The general shifted a few papers on his desk. He smiled.

“You were brought up before the Bar Association’s Ethics Committee a few years back. How did that turn out?” he asked.

“Pretty well,” I said. “My standing with the Bar is still intact and the real estate for that shopping mall was sold at a fair market price. Would you like to open a cookie franchise? I could probably arrange

it, General.”

“Please reconsider, Peter,” he said. “Your mother took at least thirty people off that train headed for Majdanek. She helped disrupt German operations in that part of Poland for nearly two years and she terrified people who weren’t used to being terrified—certainly not by a Jewish woman. I have fought in five wars and I’ve seen every imaginable human response to almost every imaginable situation. Your mother suffered as millions of other people suffered but with one difference: she got the chance to fight back, to fight for some meaning in the midst of the world’s horror. There are thousands of people alive, and thousands more who will be born to them, because your mother had the chance to give of herself. I knew your mother and I know this: she was repulsed by her ability to kill. She admired gentleness and kindness even though she believed none existed in herself. There are many who wish to thank her for their lives, for actions that she never credited as brave or heroic. Will you honor these people? Will you honor your mother?”

For a guy whose native language was Polish, the old general made a very nice speech in English. I had heard quite a few of his speeches, and this was one of the better ones. I also knew that as Leah Dansky’s son, my presence at the memorial tribute in New York would be an important piece of a much larger effort to secure financial aid for the state of Israel.

The general changed his method of attack. “My grandson wanted me to ask you a question,” he said.

I raised my eyebrows. His grandson? What was this about?

He shrugged in an apologetic way. “I really don’t know much about rock music.” The general put his reading glasses on and looked

around his desk for a piece of paper. “Now where did I put that?” he murmured. He rummaged underneath what looked like a pile of reports on his desk. “Oh, here it is,” he finally said, pulling out a slip of paper.

I had forgotten the general’s many devices. The absent-minded old man ploy was a bit overwrought, I thought.

“How old were you,” he said, reading off the paper, “when you wrote ‘The Battle of Britain’ and ‘Oh, Laurie!’”?

He took his glasses off.

The bastard.

Chapter 2

I loved rock'n'roll because it made me the hula-hoop man spinning on the top of the world. I loved the way my fingers caught bright, flash sounds and burned them to smoke on my guitar.

I was nine years old.

Penny and I were fighting over an illustrated book called *The Story of Man*. Our parents believed in education and my sister and I were routinely dragged off to museums, art galleries, concerts and plays. Sometimes Penny and I were interested, sometimes we were not. But we always fought, regardless of our interests; it helped pass the time. On this day, a raw December day in 1963, we were coming home on the train from New York, where our mother had made us see a new exhibit for children at the Museum of Natural History. The exhibit showed mankind emerging from caves and forests and eventually standing upright, as if some collective mother had shouted, "Stand up straight!" and the species had complied, albeit after millions of years and probably with a sulky look on its face.

Penny was losing her grip on the book our mother had bought for us in the museum gift shop. I could see the mounting tension in her face.

"Get—your—stinking—little—paws—off!" Penny grunted. She was about to lose. There was panic in her eyes. One more pull and ... she elbowed me right in the solar plexus. I couldn't catch my breath—I lost my grip on the book.

I should have seen it coming.

"That's enough," my mother said.

Penny had reclaimed possession of the book. Our mother had told us to quit. Time out—for now.

My sister, twelve years old and a very dirty fighter, glanced down at me with that smug, "too bad for you" look.

"Hey, Penwad," I whispered. She pretended not to hear. She turned the page on a group of Neanderthals, their spears raised, as they circled a saber-toothed tiger. "You won't know when it's coming. It could be the middle of the night. It could be ..." I thought hard. What would be a terrifying moment? "It could be when you're sitting on the toilet!"

My sister wouldn't look at me; she was clearly unmoved by the bathroom threat. Slowly she turned another page on *The Story of Man*. Then, without even a glance in my direction, she made a fist and brought it right up under my chin. "Go ahead," she said. "I'll be waiting for you."

I was about to scorn this latest threat with a cutting riposte. I had recently learned "Oooh, I'm shaking" to express my utter contempt, and I was about to use it on my contemptible sister, when I noticed a couple of teenage girls sitting across the aisle from us, laughing and giggling. They were huddled over a transistor radio. Sometimes they made little squealing sounds. Their shoulders and necks moved with some sort of rhythm, and their hair, two puffs of blonde and red, bobbed up and down whenever their shoulders sank or thrust forward to the radio's melody. They fascinated me. I got up from my seat.

"Peter, where are you going?" my mother asked.

I wasn't sure how to answer. "I want to ask those girls a question."

"Don't bother them," my mother said. "Sit down, Peter."

The girls jerked their arms back and forth over their heads. They were nearly dancing!

"Mom, I want to know what song they're listening to. I won't bother them, I promise."

My mother hesitated. She would indulge almost any interest in music. "All right. One question and then come right back." She warned me again, "I don't want you bothering them."

"Okay, okay," I said.

Penny rolled her eyes. "They don't want to talk to a little creep like you. They're gonna tell you to get lost."

"Oh yeah?" I said.

"Oh yeah," Penny said.

I walked over to the girls. "Hi," I said. "What are you listening to?"

They stared at me. Then they burst into hysterics. I was not put off. When you're nine years old and headed for a career of exhibitionism, having women laugh at you doesn't seem like such a bad thing.

I stood there. "What are you listening to?" I repeated.

The blonde—I guessed she was about fifteen—said, "The Beatles."

"Who are the Beatles?" I asked.

The redhead regarded me with wonder and pity. "The Beatles are ..." She looked at her friend. How could they explain this to a little boy?

Suddenly the blonde burst from her seat and did a weird shimmy

in the aisle. The redhead squealed and joined her friend. The radio's volume was up. They sang and danced together.

God's cool cousin, the Almighty Rhythm and Blues, smiled into my shocked eyes and said, "You're the one."

The girls pulled me toward them. I began to dance.

I felt it way down where the bass note tickles your sternum. My feet stamped. I threw my head back. I swiveled. The girls laughed at me. I didn't care.

"You're good," the blonde said, and she moved beside me and arched her hips forward. I mimicked her motion.

"Try this," the redhead said, and she shimmied so that her breasts did a little hula show.

I shimmied. The girls laughed.

We rolled our shoulders, did a vibrato move with our hips, and shouted, "Whoo, whoo!"

By now I was intoxicated with myself, dancing with the girls as if I had been the one to pull them to their feet on a train rolling through New Jersey. Oh, I loved my life. The little creep my big sister reviled with such nicknames as "Puke" and "Putrid" had found love on the tracks with rock 'n' roll music and teenaged girls. And stranger still, my mother was laughing! My mother never laughed—or if she did, it was a very quiet, very soft laughter. Not like the way she laughed now.

The train slowed and the music stopped. I heard applause. The people on the train, all seven or eight in our car, clapped and laughed—for me!

Penny looked as if a piano had fallen on her head.

"What's your name?" the red-haired girl asked me as she pulled a

schoolbag over her shoulder.

"Pete," I said. But then I looked at her bubble-gum chewing mouth and I said more formally, "Peter Jameson."

The blonde slung her bag across her shoulder and then patted me on the head. "You're cute," she said. "And you can really dance."

The girls leaned down. They kissed me.

"Bye, Pete," the redhead smiled. The train stopped and the girls got off. That would have been a perfect day, one of those snapshots from childhood that you share with your family in later years, laughing at your youthful behavior as a harbinger of the adult you have become.

After the girls got off the train, I sat down next to my sister. I preened with memories of my performance and the touch of the girls' kisses on my cheek. Penny shook her head in disgust. "You are so obnoxious," she said. "You are so embarrassing."

"Don't care." I shrugged. "It's not my fault that you can't dance."

"I can dance. I can dance very well. I can do the Mashed Potato and the Frug."

I laughed. "I've seen you dance. That's not dancing, that's—" I searched for an appropriate image—"that's a frog or a toad or something jumping out of a pond. That's not dancing."

"Shut up," Penny said.

"No, you shut up," I said.

"No, you shut up," Penny said.

My mother laughed. Again the sound startled me, as I'm sure it startled Penny. "You're a very good dancer, Peter," my mother said in her soft, Polish-inflected accent. "When Daddy comes home tonight, show him how you dance."

"Mom, don't encourage him," Penny protested, "he's already so

conceited. You'll just make him worse."

My mother didn't answer; she resumed looking out the window with the curiously focused gaze I had seen so often on her face.

"Can't dance," I whispered to Penny. She gave me her best exasperated, completely-out-of-patience sigh and eyeball roll.

We rode in silence for another few stops. My sister finally settled down to read *The Story of Man* while my mother continued to stare out the window at the passing trees.

For some time I had been aware of a woman sitting near the front of the coach, facing in our direction. She kept pinching the skin between her fingers and glancing at my mother in a nervous manner. I was used to people staring at my mother. She was tall and slender with a great mass of strawberry blonde hair and gray-green eyes. She walked with a sort of balance and grace that made people step back and watch her. I had heard people refer to my mother as "glamorous," although I didn't understand the term until I was much older. But the woman staring at my mother looked uncomfortable, almost frightened; there was a furtiveness about her that I associated with someone not American. I had seen the same careful watchfulness in my mother—the quality of being alert, of being on guard—and I had come to regard those traits as peculiar to foreigners.

By now the woman stared openly. Slowly she got up from her seat and moved down the aisle, clutching the tops of the chairs for balance as she walked toward us. She stopped. She was obviously trying to speak, but no words came from her trembling lips.

"Pardon me," she finally said. Her voice was nearly a whisper. Penny and I stared up at her. The intensity of the woman's gaze, the look in her eyes—of awe, of something close to terror—made Penny

and me move together on our seat.

My mother seemed unperturbed. "Yes?" she said to the woman.

The woman—she looked older than my mother—continued to stare. "I think I know you," she said and began to shake with some deep emotion.

I heard it then, the English spoken with a Polish accent, my mother's accent.

"I think I know you," the woman repeated, her voice rising.

My mother shook her head. "You're mistaken. I don't know you."

"But ... I ..."

My mother leaned forward. She spoke in a voice of ice, a voice of terrible self-control and restrained violence—a voice Penny and I had never heard before.

"You're frightening my children," my mother said. "I told you I don't know you. Now go back to your seat."

The woman made a soft moaning sound; I thought she was going to burst into tears.

My mother snapped off a few sentences in Polish. The woman shook her head back and forth as if she couldn't understand. My mother stood up. Suddenly the woman's mouth opened and she gave a little scream. She stared at the sleeve on my mother's blouse. The woman dropped to her knees. She grabbed my mother's hand and pressed it to her cheek. She wept and babbled phrases in Polish, all the while kissing my mother's hand and staring up at her as if my mother were a shrine.

Penny and I watched, terrified. My mother grabbed the woman's shoulders and lifted her to her feet. She shook the woman a bit—she was nearly shouting in her face. The woman didn't seem to understand

her. She kept crying and pointing at my mother's sleeve, and I realized that she wasn't pointing at the sleeve at all, she was pointing at the numbers tattooed on my mother's arm.

My mother glanced at Penny and me. We were rigid. She looked back at the woman and spoke more Polish at her. Finally, she took the woman's arm and led her to an empty seat where she made the woman sit down. She whispered in the woman's ear. The woman shook her head. My mother whispered something else. The woman's face turned white. With a sort of frozen expression, the woman rose slowly from her seat. She walked up the aisle, not looking back. She walked to the connecting doors, opened them, stumbled a little, and then, with the crashing sound of iron wheels around her, walked through to the next compartment and disappeared.

Everyone in the car looked at my mother. She sat down next to us and picked up a magazine.

"Who was that lady?" I finally asked. "What did she want?"

My mother shrugged. "No one. Another lost soul from the camps."

"Mom, did she know you?" Penny asked.

"She was mistaken. She didn't know me."

"Then why did she keep looking at you like that?" I said. "Why did she act so nuts?"

My mother turned to Penny and me. "When you've lost your life, you sometimes think other people know where it went. That's a mistake."

Penny and I pondered that incomprehensible statement.

We were silent all the way home.

Chapter 3

Sea Ridge is a pleasant community on the Jersey shore. We moved there from New York when I was two years old, although I don't remember the move. We lived in a three-story house with a pool in the backyard and balconies off the upstairs bedrooms that faced the sea. On summer nights, it was nice to watch the boats as they moved over the water, the red and blue navigation lights dipping up and down in the warm darkness. Even now, if I wake up very suddenly, I feel as if the sea is across my left shoulder, beyond the French windows, in the room where I slept as a boy.

We lived on the south side of town, where the beach houses drift further and further apart and the sand stretches out before an empty curve of ocean. Each morning my mother got up at dawn and ran for miles on the beach; during the warm months she ran her miles and then swam long, regimented laps in the pool. After her daily exercise, she would play the piano for two hours, and then leave for her flower shop, where she usually worked until six.

My father kept long hours too, although his schedule varied depending on whether he was seeing patients in town or at the hospital in New York where he also kept a practice. Somehow, he always seemed to be around. In retrospect, this would have been unlikely, given his successful career as a neurologist, and yet, in my memories, my father was a constant presence in the house.

My father was the kind of guy who came home from work, sat

down in the den with a martini in his hand, and stared blithely at the TV, oblivious to the football, baseball, or basketball that whizzed a millimeter over his head. My friends and I could shake the house off its foundations and my father wouldn't seem to notice or care until actual glass shattered or a lamp fell over; then he would finally look up from the TV and bellow, "What are you kids doing? Where do you think you are? How many times have I told you not to play football in the house? Look what you've done! Pick that up! Are you deaf?"

My father was Presbyterian, a fact that meant nothing to us except that he was exempt from our mother's exercise campaigns. But since our mother was Jewish, we were Jewish, as she would often remind us, and we were therefore subject to various programs she designed, all intended to keep Penny and me in hard, robust physical shape. I'm sure my mother meant well. I'm sure she was trying to prepare us for any eventuality—flash flood, street crime, a German blitzkrieg across the Garden State Parkway—but at that time we didn't know how she had spent part of the war. We didn't know how her extraordinary skills and stamina had aided in her survival and certainly not in her acts of revenge. All we knew was that we were tired of running, jumping, swimming, pulling, lifting and stretching.

I remember one summer morning. We had been running along the roads that follow the back-bay swamps, and Penny and I were dragging our feet and swatting the bugs that swarmed about our necks and shoulders. We wanted to stop and catch our breath, but our mother insisted that we finish the course because, as she warned us, "There will be times in life when you can't rest, and then what will you do?"

You couldn't argue with my mother. And you couldn't expect my

father to intervene on your behalf, either. Whenever we complained to our father about another “program” our mother had developed, he would utter the two sentences that he had perfected over the years: “You heard your mother” and the very popular, “Don’t upset your mother.”

So Penny and I ran. And as we finally came to a sweaty halt on that summer morning, I remember wondering, in a rather dark and bitter way, why Dad got to sleep late on Sundays while we, his offspring, had to run through swamps and clouds of mosquitoes and then, for a grand finale, do twenty-five pushups in the backyard. Once I had even broached the subject of lineage with my mother in order to effect a compromise in our exercise routine. “How come,” I asked her, “we gotta do so much running and swimming and stuff? Since Penny and me are only half-Jewish, shouldn’t we only have to run half as much?” I had thought this was rather clever. My mother’s response was, “Pick your feet up. Don’t swing your arms so much. Keep running.”

As Penny and I lay gasping for breath on the backyard lawn, I muttered, “I can’t take being Jewish any more. There are too many laps—of everything. I want to be Protestant, like Dad, so I can take it easy.”

My sister, who hated exercise even more than I, rolled over on her back and gave out a great sigh. “Oh, wouldn’t that be nice,” she said. “I’d love to be out of shape.”

My mother’s gym classes ended when I was eleven or twelve. I’m not sure why. Around that time I also began to write songs with Billy Warwick, my friend from school. I met Billy in the third grade. Then his parents got divorced and I didn’t see him again until the seventh grade, when his mother remarried and returned to Sea Ridge. Billy

and I both played guitar and we both wanted to write songs that people would sing along to on the car radio. Our first collaboration was an up-tempo rocker called “Baby, You’re So Lame.” We thought the chord progressions and lyrics were brilliant. At thirteen, we didn’t believe in self-criticism.

I look back on those years with wonder and regret. Wonder that I found the desire to create lovely sounds, and regret that my talent and ambition to be “heard” was all that I knew or cared about.

I wrote the “Battle of Britain” when I was seventeen years old. Two years later, Billy and I recorded the song, along with our bandmates, Tommy Leeds and Royce Hart, on a small label that quickly went out of business. That first album—our only album—also included “Oh, Laurie!” A couple of years after that, Cold Star, a rather uninspired pop band with a few minor hits in the ’70s, re-recorded “The Battle of Britain” and “Oh, Laurie!” If you’ve ever sat over a few beers in a bar or worked out in a gym with a sound system, you’ve probably heard my work and Billy’s—it’s now called “classic rock.” We called it artistic rape, given Cold Star’s arrangements and performance.

I don’t talk very much about my early accomplishments as a musician. I don’t want to seem like one of those middle-aged men who secretly believe that they lost their best selves down some dusty high school corridor. What’s closer to the truth is that I was simply selfish back then. I was also silly, driven, and utterly without shame. Here’s something I’ve never discussed—except with my sister: I wrote the “Battle of Britain” as a kind of rock imprint of my mother’s screaming in the middle of the night from one of her habitual nightmares. Her screams finally meant less to me than how those sounds might inspire a great song, and how I could use that to advance my career.

Did I have fun in those days? You bet. I was nineteen years old. My band was the opening act for Power Train during the summer of '73. We were going places.

Chapter 4

There is no substitute for confidence. That sounds fairly obvious and yet, as with most truisms, the actual truth behind the statement is quite a bit more complex.

From the moment I picked up the guitar, I played constantly, joyfully. I also sang, mimicking the pitch and resonance of voices as varied as Paul McCartney's and Chuck Berry's. On my guitar I played popular bread, candy, and aspirin commercials; I sang the theme songs from westerns and private eye shows. Every melody was a challenge, a secret, a lovely surprise. Eventually, I began to hear how to construct a song; I sensed the way rhythm and melody could be strung together to make happy little pops or swooping lunges. I felt the next note and I knew when it was good.

We called ourselves The Master Planets. I once calculated the number of gigs we played, from the time Billy and I started the band when we were thirteen, until the time we stopped, when we were twenty. Including private parties, clubs, concert dates and the occasional local television spot, we played over five hundred performances.

We were a great band—we never doubted that.

Billy was tall and lanky in those days, with a shock of black hair that he wore down to his shoulders like a sort of layered, medieval helmet. He was incredibly fast on the guitar, able to hit sixteenth notes, even thirty-second notes, with a clean, graceful speed. Not quite as fast, I was, perhaps, a bit more inventive. Most of the time I played rhythm

guitar to Billy's lead, and occasionally I played keyboards. We often traded licks during an arrangement, and this blend of melodies, half lead solo, half rhythm section, created a richer, more exciting sound. But if The Master Planets were a great band, then what made us special wasn't our instrumentals, it was our harmonies. Some voices vibrate in a peculiar way. When we sang, our voices leaned together in a sweet, funky, choral shout. We sounded like the best night of your life.

We were also "cute" guys. We spent a lot of time on our hair.

It's not strange, really, that I ignored my mother's alcoholism back then—in fact, all of her dangerous behavior. Family life is at least as much about ignoring people as it is about paying attention to them. Anyway, I was young, talented, ambitious and handsome. I was busy being glamorous.

My mother almost succeeded in killing herself on the night my band played Ashcroft, Pennsylvania. I remember that night very well for a number of reasons: I discovered how little my mother valued her own life; I learned that my father was having an affair; I knew The Master Planets could sell millions of records.

Ashcroft, Pennsylvania is a green, hilly place somewhere north of the Pocono Mountains. This is where the Savage Huns hold their annual biker convention. The Savage Huns are part of a loose confederation of East Coast biker gangs. Each year, they celebrate their freedom from societal norms, such as rational thought and common decency, in a lovely green wood.

The Savage Huns agreed to pay us seven hundred and fifty dollars for a four-hour gig—a fortune in those days. I don't remember any more how they knew us or why they wanted our band to play. It's

possible they heard about us from some befuddled gang member who got lost at the Jersey shore and saw us perform before an unarmed audience.

Our contact for the Ashcroft gig was Roger “Rap” Coutrell. Roger was an oily, acne-scarred “glad-hander” who shoved four hundred dollars into our hands as we began to unpack our equipment behind the bandstand, a hastily erected lattice-work of boards, beams and steel mesh that resembled a gallows.

“I heard good things about you little faggots,” Roger said. We stopped unloading our gear and stared at him. Roger smiled with two front teeth missing. I couldn’t tell whether he was joking or not, so I decided to smile back with my whole set of teeth.

“We’re not faggots,” Royce Hart said. He had put down his cymbals and glared at Roger. Royce was the “small” guy in the band, five ten and with a quick temper.

Roger laughed.

“When do you want us to play?” Billy asked. His voice was tight.

Roger ignored the question; he pointed to the hundreds of bikers and their girlfriends wandering through the fields in front of the bandstand. Most of them wobbled as they walked and uttered shrieks of laughter. In the darkness, they looked like wounded crows flapping damaged wings and giggling at their deformities.

“Now, you might see some strange shit tonight,” Roger informed us, “so don’t pay any attention to it. Just keep playing. We’ve got a lot of people who are going to be initiated into the Huns and there could be some things you’re not used to.”

“Like what?” I asked, still showing my full set of white teeth.

“Like mind your own fucking business and rock out,” Roger said.

"That's all you gotta do—if you want the rest of the money." The mention of the money reminded us that we didn't have to like Roger or the Savage Huns.

We set up our equipment, did a quick sound check and then took our places behind the bandstand. After ten minutes or so, we peeked around the corner of the stage. Where was Roger? Wasn't he going to introduce us?

We saw a large crowd huddled near a torch. We heard shouts and cheers and then the yellow flame flickered over a row of naked girls sitting primly in lawn chairs. Each girl had a head bobbing up and down between her spread legs.

"This is bullshit!" Billy exploded. "These assholes are eating pussy! I'm not going to sing for people who are eating pussy!"

We stared at the line of lawn chairs—the girls looked like they were giving birth to huge, rat-haired, squirming babies.

"What the hell are you guys waiting for?" Roger had suddenly appeared out of the darkness. "Rock out, man!"

I tried to be as diplomatic as possible. "Roger, people are having sex out there. They don't want to listen to music."

"That ain't sex," Roger said, "that's guys going down on girls who are on the rag."

We stared at each other. Finally, our bass player, Tommy Leeds, said, "Why? I mean, why?"

Roger looked exasperated. "To show commitment to the Savage Huns. To show respect for our beliefs."

"By going down on girls having their period?" I said. "How does that show respect?"

"I'm not going to discuss our traditions with little faggot boys

from Jersey,” Roger said.

“We’re not faggots,” Royce said, “and if you—”

“If you don’t play right fucking now, rock stars,” Roger said, “then about five hundred guys and their pissed-off girlfriends, some of them on the rag, are going to come up on this stage and beat the living shit out of all of you.”

I made a quick decision. “We want an extra two fifty or we don’t play at all.”

Roger narrowed his eyes. “You think you’re fucking shaking me down for more?”

“Fuckin’ A,” I said. “We’re The Master Planets. We’re the best band in Jersey.”

“No, you’re fucking not,” Roger said, “there are these guys in Asbury Park—”

“They’d charge more and they’re not here,” I said. I looked directly at Roger. “It’s up to you. What’s it going to be?”

Roger stared back at me. Then he said, “All right. But if you don’t play good, we’ll stomp the shit out of you.”

“Fuck you,” I said.

Roger looked at me again. Then he smiled. “Okay. Do you guys take breaks?”

“Ten minutes every hour,” I said. “We play for four hours.”

“Okay. Do you need anything else?”

“No, thanks,” I said.

We took our positions on the bandstand and made one last sound check. As we tuned up, Billy said, “Sometimes I can’t believe you. Where does this balls-out attitude come from?”

My B string was a little flat. I tightened it. “Roger’s not that tough.

He's dealing with the entertainment, isn't he?"

By now the lawn chairs were empty. We saw darkness move out beyond the stage, a tide of drifting bodies that swarmed and murmured like strange sea life. Then spotlights hit the bandstand. Rows of bikers and their girlfriends stumbled forward and backwards. They shouted and cursed. Finally there was silence. A legion of dirty hair stared up at us.

I nodded at Royce. He raised his drumsticks.

I felt the excitement then, the weird frenzy and fearlessness whenever I played to an audience. I could feel myself dancing on top of them all.

I heard my voice, my band's voice, gather around me, and the sound we made boomed off into the trees and into the night air.

If you are lucky, you will create ecstasy in your life and you will know this feeling from the way you stand in your life and the way you are positioned to see the world. I was never so happy as when I played and sang with my friends. All the money I've made, and all the degrees I've earned, have been background chatter against the rock 'n' roll we played with three simple guitars and a drum set.

We opened with "I Thank You," and quickly segued into "Mississippi Queen." By the end of the first set, I was nearly stomping a hole into the stage boards with my boots. The Savage Huns and their girlfriends danced and howled. I saw their eyes through the dark and their bodies jerking to the music. That night, after hundreds of gigs, I knew we were destined to record and play for millions. How did I know? Well, I know how much I believed in our talent—it was just a matter of time, I reasoned, before the world came to its senses and threw roses at our feet.

We closed the show with “Am I Sure?” an old ballad by the Young Rogues that we performed as a tight, three-part harmony. At the reprise, we all put down our instruments—aside from Billy’s guitar—and sang a cappella. The bikers, their menstruating girlfriends, and even Roger, whom I saw swaying in the front row, sang along with us as we reached up to the Pennsylvania hills with our voices: “I’ll never find someone like youuuuuuuu ...”

We did two encores, “Oh, Laurie!” and “The Battle of Britain.” The Savage Huns tried to hump their girlfriends to “Oh, Laurie!” They tried to perform surgery on each other’s heads to “The Battle of Britain.” Then the police arrived and it was time to go home.

We rode the Jersey Turnpike, and then the Garden State Parkway, in a fulsome haze of pot smoke and good cheer. We had a thousand dollars locked away in our guitar cases. We also had the number of a guy who ran the Jersey Summer Concert Festival, a sort of talent competition for bands who might open for big national acts.

Roger had given us the number; after the show he appeared backstage with his huge, toothless grin. “You guys were fucking unbelievable,” he said. He raised a bloody palm. “You see this? That’s from squeezing a beer bottle so hard when you did that last number.” Roger smoothed back a string of filthy hair that had fallen over his eyes. He left a swath of blood on his forehead. “What was that song? Something about Spitfires and Nazis? It was fucking dynamite.” I was about to tell him the song was called “The Battle of Britain,” but just then four heavily tattooed women with blotchy skin and swastika earrings pushed their way past Roger. They stared at us. Then they punched our arms. Then they offered to blow us because we “rocked so fucking hard.” Roger beamed with pride. “This is a real honor,” he

informed us, “these chicks never blow outsiders.” I didn’t need to look at my band mates. I knew what they were thinking. We didn’t want to offend Roger or the girls; we still hadn’t received the rest of our money. Again, I made a quick decision. I apologized to the girls and made certain I looked crestfallen. “I’ve got the clap,” I said, “I’m supposed to take penicillin for another five days.” I glanced over at Billy, Tommy, and Royce. They immediately understood; they all murmured, “Clap ... yeah ... we got the clap ... hurts to piss ... fuckin’ college girls.” The girls looked disappointed. Roger commiserated with us. Then he gave us the name and number of the guy who ran the summer concert festival. “Tell Aiden Sewell I sent you,” Roger said. He squeezed my shoulder in a painful grip. “But get your money up front. Aiden’s a fucking coke-head.”

By the time we reached the Jersey shore, it was nearly four in the morning. We stopped at a diner. The red booths and silver walls glowed with a harsh, metallic light. I liked the sense of visiting earth after a spin around Mars. I also enjoyed the stares of people when we walked into a place after a performance. With the exception of Royce, we were all at least six foot two, and with our two-inch heels, our shag-cut, shoulder-length hair, our tight black pants with the sequins sewn down the sides, we presented (or at least I thought so at the time), a vaguely sinister, carnival-freak appearance. I remember no sense of irony in those days whenever I slid into my sequined jeans or applied eyeliner and mascara to my face.

“Did you see those mutants?” Billy asked as he chewed on a mouthful of pancake. “After tonight, I’m not sure I can ever have sex again.”

We all laughed. We had witnessed riots, mob-frenzied drug use,

but never anything as disgusting as the Savage Huns' initiation rites.

Tommy drank his milk shake. "Those chicks after the show reminded me of the *Night of the Living Dead*."

"Well, they scared me," Royce added. "One of them looked like Jed Clampett."

We were quite amused by our recent experience. We were used to girls—all sorts of girls—coming on to us at our performances. Of course, we only bothered to talk with the better-looking ones. My present girlfriend, Joanne Larkin, was a tall, slender blonde with hair down to her waist and the clear, open expression of a Clairol girl on her way to the park. The rest of the guys went out with similarly tall, slender blondes. I don't remember any of the girls' personalities, what they liked or didn't like, what they studied in school, what intrigued them or bored them. I do remember Joanne as a sweet girl who liked skinny-dipping in the ocean and making love behind the dunes.

Before we left the diner, I called Joanne and told her about the biker gig. I also told her about Aiden Sewell and the chance to win an opening act slot with a nationally known band.

"Oh, that's so great, Peter," Joanne said. I could tell she had been asleep. Still, I could hear the excitement in her voice. "Are you coming home now? Do you want to sleep? I want to hear all about it."

"Meet me by the jetty," I said. Then I added, "Bring a towel—and a few joints."

She laughed. "Do you want something to eat? Should I bring something?"

I talked to her for a few more minutes and then hung up. I had no idea how much she liked me. I was too young and self-absorbed to appreciate her warm, spirited affection.

My family's home was about a hundred yards up the beach from a rather isolated stretch that narrowed to a strip of sand that swept up to a long, low bank covered in thick reeds and yellow, waving grass. Late at night or just before dawn, Joanne and I would take our clothes off behind the tall beach grass and then run down to the ocean.

Joanne was waiting for me when I returned home. She stood near the jetty of rocks, a basket in her hand. She waved at me and smiled then walked toward me.

She wanted to hear about the performance, so we sat on the beach and I told her about the gig, omitting details that I thought might disturb her. After a while, we took our clothes off and dove into the sea. The sky was pale gray over the waves and Joanne's blonde hair streamed over her shoulders as she rose from beneath a breaker. In another hour or so, pink clouds would gather over the horizon.

I pressed Joanne's body against mine. We tried to kiss, but the waves knocked us down and we came up sputtering and laughing. Eventually, we climbed out of the surf and ran shivering for the blanket that Joanne had spread out among the reeds. A moment later, I felt the warmth of her stomach as I moved over her. Her legs spread apart and she made a little sound near my ear. Later, I felt a hot, panting breath on my right buttock.

I leapt off Joanne. Our family dog, Chloe, stared at me. She also drooled a little on my leg. She barked.

Joanne laughed. "I think she's jealous, Peter."

Chloe was a large, black standard poodle that followed my mother around from the time my mother got up in the morning until the time she went to sleep. We all loved Chloe, but she was clearly my mother's dog.

"Chloe, what are you doing here?" I said. "Go back home. Who let you out?"

Chloe whined and pushed her nose into my chest.

"Go home, Chloe," I repeated. "I'm busy."

Joanne laughed again. Chloe barked, making a sharp, high-pitched sound. She nipped my arm with her teeth. She made a half turn, bouncing off her hind legs as if she were preparing to jump a hurdle.

I grabbed my shorts and put them on. "Something's wrong," I said.

Chloe ran and I ran after her. Joanne was close behind me. Within a few moments, I saw a shape near the shoreline. The shape rolled back and forth in the surf.

Chapter 5

When I reached her, she was limp. Her hair flowed back with the rushing tide. Chloe nudged her and made snuffling sounds that she punctuated with piercing howls.

I picked my mother up, cradled her head in my arms, and moved her up the beach. I smelled the alcohol on her as I gently put her down. I felt a faint pulse where my hand touched her neck, but she didn't appear to be breathing. A few years before, when our mother trained Penny and me for some indeterminate commando mission, she had also forced us to take a life-saving course at the local yacht club. Now I prayed that I remembered the vital steps we learned that summer.

"What happened?" Joanne cried. She stared down at me as I straightened my mother's limbs and pushed her wet hair away from her face. "Is she—?"

"Go up to the house," I told her quickly, "Call an ambulance."

Joanne whispered, "Is she—?"

I pinched my mother's nose; then I put my hand under her jaw and opened her mouth.

"Get the ambulance!" I yelled at her. "Do it now!"

She looked like she was about to cry, but she ran for the house.

I bent down over my mother and blew four short breaths into her lungs. I waited four seconds then I blew another breath. I repeated this process at least five times. Finally, I felt a sharp intake of air rattle

through her chest, which rose and fell. Her eyes flickered open. She said, "Zinni." Then she groaned, turned over on her side, and threw up sea water and alcohol.

While my mother vomited, Joanne came running back from the house, this time with Penny running after her.

From her pale face and puffy eyes, I could see that Penny had spent another long night studying. Although she was on summer break from medical school, Penny didn't waste time lying in the sun. She knelt by our mother and took her pulse. Then she pushed my mother's eyelids back and stared at her pupils. "Mom, who's the president of the United States?"

Now finished retching, my mother looked at Penny with a puzzled expression. "Why are you asking me such a stupid question?" she said. "Is that what they teach you in medical school? To ask stupid questions?"

Penny's eyes filled with tears.

"What's the matter?" my mother asked. "I'm fine. I fell asleep on the beach, that's all."

"What's the matter?" Penny answered. The beginnings of a smirk twisted across her face. "Are you asking me what's the matter, Mom?"

My mother tried to get up from the sand. She swayed a bit and I saw that she was about to fall. I grabbed her under the arms and helped her to sit down again.

The enormity of the last few moments finally hit me. I had saved my mother's life. But did my mother know, or even care? What if Chloe hadn't found me? What if I hadn't taken the life-saving course? What if I couldn't run that fast? I would be looking at my mother now, but she would be dead.

"Mom ..." I said. I didn't know how to say what I feared.

My mother attempted to pat Penny's hand. Penny jerked her hand away. She stared at my mother with disgust.

My mother sighed. I saw how tired she was, but I also saw something else, a glint of amusement in her eyes, as if my concern and Penny's were a matter to be viewed with some vast, detached irony.

We heard the blaring siren of an approaching ambulance. Penny turned and ran up the path to the driveway. She spoke briefly to the paramedics then they rushed down the beach with a stretcher, an oxygen mask, and other equipment. The paramedics asked my mother a series of questions: What had happened? Did she feel dizzy or nauseated? Was she having trouble breathing? Had she taken any drugs or alcohol? My mother insisted that she was fine and that there was no need for a doctor or a visit to the hospital. The paramedics told her that when someone stops breathing, even for a few moments, she needs to be tested for brain damage. When they lifted her onto the stretcher, my mother made a dismissive motion with her hand. "What a lot of nonsense. I don't need to go to the hospital. I took a walk and then fell asleep, that's all." My mother reached out to touch my hand. "You're a good boy, Peter. Don't worry."

"Mom, what is Zinni?" I asked. "You said the word Zinni."

My mother seemed puzzled. Then, in an aggressive voice, she said, "Who? I don't know any Zinni." She looked up at the paramedics. "All right," she told them. "I didn't fall asleep. I was drinking and I passed out. I'm an alcoholic."

She turned her head then and smiled warmly at Joanne. "I'm so glad to meet you. I apologize for my behavior. Please have dinner with us sometime soon."

Joanne stared at her. Joanne had been staring from the moment I rolled my mother onto her back and forced her to breathe, right through to her casual admission of being a drunk who passed out on the beach and nearly drowned in front of her children.

"I'll ride with her," Penny informed the paramedics as she adjusted the straps on the stretcher. "I'll take her blood pressure and temperature. She should also be given oxygen." The paramedics glared at her. They told her to leave the stretcher alone. They told her that she could ride in the ambulance, but she could not administer any medical procedures for legal reasons. Penny insisted that she was a medical student; she certainly knew how to take a patient's blood pressure. The paramedics told her to sit down and keep her mother calm on the way to the hospital. "This is ridiculous," Penny bristled, "how dare you tell me that I can't even take my mother's blood pressure!"

"Penny, keep quiet!" my mother said. "Let them do their work."

"I'll take the car and follow you to the hospital," I said.

My mother lifted her head up from the stretcher and called out to Chloe. Our poodle came forward and put her head down near my mother's outstretched hand. My mother whispered a few words to her in Polish. Chloe barked, then ran toward the house. "Make sure you feed her," my mother told me.

"I'll call Dad," I said. My mother shook her head "no" as the paramedics lifted her into the ambulance and then closed the doors.

My father was not in his office. His answering service told me that he could be reached at the hospital in New York, but when I called the hospital and asked that he be paged, the nurse on duty told me that my father was not scheduled to see patients that day and that I should call his office in town.

"But I just called his office," I told the nurse, "and they told me that he was at the hospital."

"Dr. Jameson is not here."

"This is his son. My mother's had an accident. She's in the hospital and I need to get in touch with my father."

"Wait a moment," the nurse said, "I'm going to connect you to a different department."

I heard the click of an extension being dialed. Then another voice came on the line. "Neurology."

I explained again.

The voice, a kindly sounding woman, said, "Dr. Jameson may be attending patients at a clinic across town. I'll page him for you."

I waited five or ten minutes. Finally the phone rang and when I picked it up, my father was on the line. He sounded strange, as if he were half asleep.

"Peter, are you all right?"

"I'm fine, Dad, but it's Mom. She's in the hospital."

"What happened?"

I told him, this time adding that I thought she might have deliberately tried to hurt herself.

"All right," he said. "I'll call the hospital and talk to the attending physician. It doesn't sound like she's in any real danger anymore."

"Yeah, but Dad, I think you should talk to her. I think she—"

"You did a good job, Peter," my father said, "I'll call the hospital and assess the situation."

I heard whispered words in the background. For a moment, I thought I recognized a woman's voice. It sounded familiar, but I couldn't identify it.

"Dad, where are you?" I asked. "They said you weren't at your office or the hospital."

There was a long silence. My father said, "Peter, I do volunteer work once a month at various clinics. Sometimes it's difficult to reach me."

"Oh." Suddenly I remembered whose voice I thought I recognized. "Dad, is that Mrs. Griffin with you?" Mrs. Griffin was my father's office assistant, a cheerful, slightly plump, middle-aged woman with graying hair that she wore in bangs. Mrs. Griffin had worked for my father for years. She was a widow with several grandchildren. Penny and I liked Mrs. Griffin. She reminded us of an elementary school teacher who smiles at you as if you are the best boy or girl in the world and then pastes blue and yellow stars on your homework.

"Peter, I'm going to call the hospital right now. Don't worry. It sounds as if Mom's going to be okay. I'll come home as soon as I can."

After I hung up, I realized that Joanne had been sitting at the kitchen table with an empty glass of orange juice in front of her. She looked up at me with an odd expression. I had almost forgotten that she was there.

"Do you want to go home?" I asked her. "I know this must have been pretty awful for you."

Joanne shook her head.

"I'm sorry you had to see my mother like that. It's really embarrassing."

"You're a good person, Peter," she said. "You saved your mother's life."

I didn't know what to say. No one had ever called me a "good

person” before. I’m not sure I even knew what it meant. Most of my conversations with Joanne, at least so far as I remember them, concerned my hair. Joanne loved to stroke my hair and I loved having her stroke it and every once in a while we discussed split-ends and conditioners. Now she was sitting at the kitchen table and looking at me with a new respect and admiration. I felt very uncomfortable.

“I’m not that good,” I said, avoiding her gaze. Then I shrugged. “I never tried to stop my mother from drinking.”

Joanne got up from the table and put her arm around me. “I could never have been so calm—I could never have been so brave.”

She kissed me and pressed herself against me. My hands reached up to touch her breasts. I smelled her long blonde hair as it fanned across my cheek. She arched her hips forward and murmured something indistinguishable in my ear, and then began to stroke my hair. My hands dipped below her panties, and I squeezed her rear end just as the phone rang. It was Penny.

“Where the hell are you?” she said. “I’ve been down here at the hospital. They’re running tests on her for brain damage.”

“Oh,” I said, still breathing hard, “I called Dad and it took a long time to find him.”

“Isn’t he at his office?”

“No, he’s at some clinic in the city doing volunteer work.”

“Dad doesn’t work at other clinics. He treats all his emergency and Medicaid patients at the hospital.”

“Well, I don’t know. He said he was. I think he had Mrs. Griffin with him.”

There was a muffled sound, as if the receiver had bumped against the wall.

"Did you say Mrs. Griffin was with him?" Penny asked.

"Yeah, I think so. I don't know. What's the big deal?"

I heard Penny's breath escape in a long hiss. "God damn it," she said. "God damn it to hell."

"What's your problem?" I said.

"When you're through screwing your girlfriend, maybe you could find the time to come down to the hospital to see your mother."

"Hey, screw you. I saved her fucking life."

"Mom will be okay," Penny said, ignoring my anger, "but you've got to come down now. I have to talk to you before they release her."

Joanne went home. We promised to meet toward evening by the tall beach grass near the jetty.

Penny was reading a magazine in the emergency room lounge. A wisp of blonde hair fell over her eyes as she turned a page, and she absently pushed the strand back behind her ear. Like me, she was tall and slender and had inherited our mother's gray green eyes. She was a beautiful girl who, it seemed to me, had made herself unattractive through sheer force of will. Penny generally wore clothes that looked as if they had spent the night in the hamper; she wore an expression that said she had been egregiously wronged and all sorts of people were going to pay for that mistake.

She stood up when I entered the lounge and came over and kissed me.

"Are you all right?" I said, startled. Penny never kissed me.

"Sit down, Creepo," she said. "There are some things you should know."

I was immediately on guard. I sensed that Penny was about to tell me something that would interfere with my summer.

"Mom's going home in an hour," Penny said. "There's no evidence of brain damage. She'll be fine—thanks to you."

I shrugged and said, "That's great."

"However, her drinking is not so great. And it nearly killed her this morning."

We all knew that our mother drank too much. For years she had been drinking late at night in the music room, where she now usually slept until it was time for her get up for work. She still exercised every day; she still practiced the piano; she still put in her customary ten or twelve hours at the flower shop. My father was aware of her habits. If he wasn't worried, why should I be?

"Maybe she should go into a program," I suggested.

Penny smiled and drew me away to a corner of the waiting room where we would not be overheard.

"What do you really know about Mom?" she asked me.

I frowned. What did I know about my mother? I thought for a few moments.

"Well, some things," I finally said. "Why?"

"Like what?" Penny said. "What things do you know?"

I thought some more. "Well, she's a very good athlete. And she plays the piano very well."

"Anything else?"

I thought some more. "She's a hard worker," I added.

"Anything else?"

The fact that our mother was in a concentration camp during the war, that her entire family had been killed by the Nazis, that there were some very odd things about her, such as complete strangers, for one thing, dropping to their knees in front of her and kissing

her hand, didn't automatically strike me as noteworthy. I had grown up with my mother and therefore had a relative sense of what was considered normal.

"Penny, what the hell is this about?" I said. "You know Mom. She's, you know, Mom."

Penny sighed. Then she said, "Dad's been having an affair with Mrs. Griffin for years. Mom knows about it. And that's the least of her problems."

I stared at Penny. Then I started to laugh. I couldn't stop laughing at the sheer absurdity of the image evoked by her words.

"Get the hell out of here," I said. "That's the funniest thing I've ever heard."

Penny didn't laugh. After a while I got control of myself and managed to say, "Are you serious?"

Penny nodded.

"But that doesn't make any sense." I felt as if my smile were now pasted to my face. "The whole idea of Dad with another woman, much less Mrs. Griffin, is crazy. And anyway, how do you know this?"

"I caught Dad in bed with her last summer."

I looked around the emergency room. I looked back at Penny. "It must be a mistake," I said, "Dad's not capable of that." My eyes filled with tears.

My father was the squarest man in the whole world. I knew what he was going to say before he said it. I knew all his jokes because he'd repeated them so many times. He was an army doctor during World War II and had nursed my mother back from near death in a displaced persons camp.

"I didn't actually catch them in bed," Penny said. "He was on top

of her in his office—on the couch near his desk.”

I put my hand up; I didn’t want the image to form in my mind. “Okay, that’s enough. I don’t want to know.”

“You should know. Mom’s getting worse and I can’t watch her this summer. I’ve gotten a small research grant. I’ll be back in the city next week.”

Suddenly I was furious. “Why do I have to watch her?” I shouted. “Why can’t Dad do it? He married her, for Chrissakes. It’s his fucking responsibility, not mine!”

Penny grabbed my arm and pulled me out of the emergency room and outside a little way, toward the parking lot. “Grow up. Dad doesn’t care any more. Don’t you understand?”

I shook her hand off. “I don’t care either. Maybe Dad can watch Mom while he’s fucking Mrs. Griffin. He’s a pretty capable guy.”

“That’s helpful,” she said. “Now look, all you have to do is be in for the night. You don’t even have to get home early. Just by midnight or so.”

I felt outraged. My band, my music, my career—what was I supposed to do? Throw it all away so I could baby-sit my drunken mother? And who the hell was Penny to tell me what to do? Why didn’t she turn down her research grant and stay home with Mom? And finally, why didn’t my father, the lying, cheating bastard, take care of his own wife? Screw his unhappiness.

I couldn’t speak. I shook with anger. I turned away from Penny and walked toward my car. I would not be trapped in a situation I had not created.

“I refuse to do this alone!” Penny shouted after me. “You’re going to help me, you little shit.”

I didn't turn around. I heard Penny crying. I stuck my middle finger up in the air and kept walking.



A light fog drifted from the sea. The air glowed in the gray mist and I could feel the salt collect in tiny cold droplets along my arms and legs and moisten the hair that fell across my back. I did not go home that day or even later that night. I didn't want to see anyone. I had driven up the coast a way and walked for hours on the boardwalk. Then I came back to Sea Ridge and sat by the jetty, smoking joint after joint, until all I could see before me was the lit end as it traced a fiery path through the fog.

I knew that when I got up from the sand and walked back to my house, I would not be the same person. I would not be able to look at my father in the same way—I would no longer be able to see my mother as just “Mom.” Knowledge had cost me an old and comfortable view of my family. I feared this new vision would somehow jeopardize my career. I was meant to float above an audience, not be dragged down by gravity—or family problems—into the midst of the crowd.

As a grown man, I look back on my younger self with a certain compassion, and definite amusement. Nothing in my home ever should have convinced me that all was well. My mother was an expert with firearms; she kept several guns locked up in drawers around the house. Once a week she practiced her marksmanship at a local firing range. Beyond the simplest facts of her early life, at least the life she constructed for her children's benefit, I knew very little about her. I knew she was born in a small village on the outskirts of Lodz. Her

father was an electrician and her mother was a housewife. Then the Nazis invaded Poland and she became separated from her parents who died in one of the “reorganizations” imposed by the occupiers. I knew that in addition to her native language, Polish (and, of course, English), she also spoke fluent Russian, German and French. She never elaborated upon where or how she knew these languages, aside from a rather vague explanation that she “picked it up here and there.” I knew that she could not remember the names of the camps where the Germans had held her prisoner for the last three years of the war. She seemed to have landed in America with the barest outline of a past, but an assortment of skills, some of them quite deadly. None of these details disturbed me or raised suspicions in my mind. I was concerned about my father’s affair—I was afraid my parents might get divorced.

But my parents did not divorce. And I did not confront my father about his infidelity nor did I monitor my mother’s drinking habits. The following week, Penny left for the city to work on her research grant. My mother resumed drinking, although she confined herself to the music room while doing it. My father came home every night and cracked the same jokes. It was fairly easy to push my family away from my personal horizons. I began to regard them as damaged, self-indulgent people who could not comprehend my inner light. They were a great disappointment to me. I decided I had to cut them loose.

Chapter 6

I left the consulate around four in the afternoon. My meeting with Ambassador Gilaad had lasted no more than twenty minutes. I had agreed to see Gilaad in New York, instead of Washington, because I couldn't afford the time away from my clients. I was already late for my appointments.

On my way down the stairs, I was approached by a few embassy personnel. They wanted to shake hands with me and express their appreciation for my mother's actions during the war and then later, in the Rudolph Meissner incident.

"Thank you," I said hurriedly. "I know how much that would have meant to her."

I hailed a cab and then picked my car up at a garage near Penn Station. As the attendant drove the car up from an underground lot, I noticed a slight scratch on my Jaguar's right front fender. I decided I wouldn't use this garage again.

When I turned onto the Jersey Turnpike, I thought about the words I had spoken to strangers so many times after my mother's death: I know how much that would have meant to her.

What else could I say?

Penny would understand. I hadn't seen her in nearly a year, not since she left for Africa. Now she was back in New Jersey. She was a little drunk when I called her on my cell phone. I told her about my meeting with General Gilaad. At first she didn't appear to understand

what I was saying. She told me that she could no longer operate—she rambled on about a kid she nearly killed in Rwanda because she froze over the operating table. Then she hurled insults at the United Nations, the U.S. government, the World Health Organization, her ex-husband. When she had exhausted herself, I reminded her again about my meeting at the consulate.

“We should go,” she mumbled. “Right thing to do. All those people Mom saved. And their grandchildren ... you know.”

“We’ve gone. How many times have we gone? How many people have cried all over us? I won’t go anymore.”

“Hey, you know what would be fun? Sing them a song. Yeah. Bring your guitar and sing ‘Oh, Laurie!’ for them. I always loved that song. Every time I hear it on the oldies station, I tell people that my little brother wrote that.”

“Are you alone in the house now?” I asked.

“Yeah, I’m alone. Who the hell is supposed to be here?”

I didn’t answer. Then I said, “Penny, you shouldn’t be drinking with the medication you’re on.”

My cell phone exploded with expletives. “I’m the doctor around here! Don’t forget that!”

I waited a moment. Then I said, “I’m shaking with fear, Penny.”

She laughed. “Will you be here soon?”

“Very soon,” I said.



Penny lived in one of those sprawling, modern houses that lie half-hidden in artfully arranged greenery that ascends to the main

entrance in a swirl of flowers, bushes and soft lighting. A private, tree-lined road led the way to the house, which sat in kingly splendor over a gravel driveway. A solitary Lexus was parked in the three-car garage.

I rang the doorbell. After a few seconds, Penny opened the door, kissed me and then ushered me into the kitchen. She had been drinking Scotch and water and watching a nature special on the small TV set up on the kitchen counter.

"You want something?" she asked. She wasn't too steady on her feet.

"I'll pass. Why don't you have a seat?"

Penny looked at me as if I were the grocery list that she had forgotten to write something down on. "Okay," she said.

We sat facing each other across the kitchen table.

"So how have you been?" she asked.

I shrugged. "The usual. How about you?"

Penny shrugged. "My privileges at the hospital have been revoked. I have to demonstrate that I'm capable of conducting myself as a competent surgeon before I can resume practice there." Penny took a sip of Scotch. "I bought a beautiful new runner for the front hallway. Do you like it?"

"It's great. You have anything to eat in the house?"

Penny pointed at the refrigerator. "Help yourself."

"How about you?" I said, as I rummaged through the covered dishes and bowls. "Want anything?"

"Nah, I had a salad yesterday."

I put some cold chicken on the table, a bowl of salad, and some fruit. I removed Penny's glass and placed it in the sink.

"Start eating," I told her. She picked up a piece of chicken and

nibbled delicately on it.

I watched her as she ate.

Penny was a neurosurgeon who volunteered her skills all over the world. She had operated in Bosnia, Afghanistan, the Middle East and Africa. I had lost track of all the medals and awards she had received from grateful countries.

Penny finished her chicken. "That was good," she said.

"Yeah, food's like that sometimes."

"Will you spend the night?"

I hesitated. I had a business meeting early the next morning. If all went as planned, my fees would be enormous.

"Sure," I finally said, "but I'll have to leave by six."

"Great. Just take any guest room. I'll stay down here and tidy up a bit."

That meant Penny would resume her relationship with the Scotch.

I stood up and put my arm around her. "You need to sleep. I'll call you tomorrow."

On our way up the stairs, Penny said, "I got an e-mail from Kate the other day." Kate was my twenty-four-year-old niece who worked as a graphic artist in Los Angeles. She created digital mermaids, witches, pirates—a whole army of talking creatures—for animated films. I had not seen Kate since she graduated from college.

"How is she?" I asked.

Penny swayed a little on the second floor landing. "Oh, she's fine. She told me I was an asshole who wrecked my marriage and drove her father away with my obsessive need to prove my worth by running all over the world. She won't be home for Thanksgiving. She said she'll

stay on the coast with her boyfriend and his family.”

I didn’t know what to say. “Kids,” I finally replied. “You know.”

Penny leaned on my shoulder and we walked up to the third floor.

“Still,” Penny said, breathing heavily, “Kate’s got it pretty goddamned good. What was Mom doing at that age?”

“You can’t make that comparison. Mom was just trying to stay alive.”

“True,” Penny said. She stopped suddenly. “How many people did she kill? Does anyone know?”

I thought for a moment. “In the end, she killed the one person that really mattered.”

Penny shivered a little. “Don’t wake me up in the morning, okay, Pete?”



I was up at five thirty. By the following evening I had brokered a deal that would yield enormous income. Certain business associates, with the blessing of city tax incentives, would renovate a waterfront slum into shiny new malls with upscale shops, restaurants and condominiums. I would invest in the grand project through a series of dummy corporations; then, when stock had risen feverishly, I would sell out. Later, after the new business ventures went bankrupt, I would buy property at significantly reduced prices—and wait for another wave of tax breaks to entice other investors. Not all districts can be gentrified; some simply devolve into their former ruin. There is a great deal of money to be made from ruin, especially when the right

people have decided upon it.

When I returned home, the night doorman greeted me with his usual smile. He kept smiling, I presume, for the second or two after I had passed him into the lobby. I lived on the twenty-second floor. I also owned half the building.

The curtains were half-drawn against the window that faced the ocean. All along the wide space of my living room, the shadows formed in pale silver around the tables and lamps. I went to the window and looked out over the Atlantic Ocean. I loved this view although sometimes it made me sad.

After a while I went into the bedroom and the woman sleeping there rolled over on her side. She was another lawyer's ex-wife. She was young, rapacious and full of things—franchise business ideas, greeting card emotions, self-esteem projects. I had bought her a few expensive gifts, but not too expensive. In a sleepy voice she said, "Where have you been?"

I took my clothes off and slipped into bed beside her. "Out," I said. "Making money." I kissed her on the forehead and then slid my hand down under the sheets. She threw the sheets off and pressed herself full against me. I had paid for this view too.

I woke during the night. A little song was going through my head, and I wondered where I might have heard the melody. I toyed with a chorus and then a possible bridge, and then I was asleep again.

Chapter 7

The nice thing about being young—that is, if you haven’t been brutalized by life—is that you can’t yet see yourself occupying any particular place in the world. The prospect of wandering about, setting your feet in strange territory, greeting the odd traveler, is a wonderful geography lesson for the soul. When I was nineteen, I believed the world was a sort of bright, colorful clay, formless until I kneaded it into a shape that pleased me. I didn’t know that when you dig your fingers into the earth, the earth also digs its fingers into you.

Aiden Sewell, the concert promoter, was polite but firm over the phone: The New Jersey Summer Concert Festival scheduled acts at least six months prior to the event. Bands were chosen on the basis of club owners’ nominations from around the state and ballots from participating fans. The Master Planets had never even submitted an application form. The festival would begin in less than two weeks. Did we understand?

Yes, of course I understood. How many songs could we perform? We thought a ballad and a rocker would give the promoters the best possible sense of our musical range.

“I admire your persistence,” Aiden told me, “but you can’t play. Send in an application for next year.”

I reminded him about Roger Coutrell and the Savage Huns. I explained how we tore the place up in Ashcroft, Pennsylvania.

“Next year, kid. I have to go.”

"Wait," I said. "Roger told me to tell you about a special discount on some product."

There was a pause. "Discount?" he said. "As in white sale?"

"Yes. Big white sale. Like in a blizzard, man. But we have to play."

I could hear Aiden thinking this over. "Come in Monday for an audition. If you guys stink, I'll make sure you never get a chance like this again."

I was surprised by the location of Aiden's offices, both the run-down neighborhood and the general air of abandonment of the buildings. He was sitting in a narrow, dim, dusty room that looked like an old broom closet. A green metal desk faced the entrance and on the table were papers, pens and a single telephone. A red typewriter sat on a folding chair near the back of the room. Aiden was writing on a yellow legal pad and talking on the phone when we entered. He was somewhere in his late twenties, I guessed. As he talked on the phone, he tapped his pen on the legal pad and brushed back long, dark hair from a tired face. He was handsome, in a vaguely dissolute way, as if he had spent his whole life around people who never washed and their dirt had finally migrated over into his personal space. He nodded at us and made a gesture for us to sit down. We looked around for chairs but didn't see any.

"So you guys are The Master Planets," Aiden said as he finally hung up the phone. "And now I'm going to shit myself when I hear you play. And then I'm going to call up the Stones and tell them to retire because you make them sound like a junior high school band. Is that about right?"

I looked at the practiced weariness of his expression, the faint smirk curling his upper lip. Why were we meeting so many assholes?

Why couldn't people just shut up and listen to us without feeling a need to challenge us every time we wanted to play? Was this the big-time world of rock 'n' roll?

"We'd like to audition," Billy said. "Where do we set up?"

Aiden gave us a sour smile and then directed us to a rehearsal hall in a warehouse next door.

The lighting in the warehouse was spare. Ceiling fixtures cast weak yellow light over an enormous space, dark except for the tiny windows that lined themselves under the roof. A few people appeared to be hauling wires or cables from one corner of the building to the other. They shouted to each other, but their voices were swallowed by the emptiness. I smelled dust and the encrusted oil of long-ago machines that whirred and shook and rattled.

Aiden came into the rehearsal hall. He sat down on a faraway chair and peered at us through the darkness.

"There's no white sale," he said. "There's no blizzard. I called Roger Coutrell and now I want to know which one of you geniuses is Peter Jameson."

The band knew what I had told Aiden to get the audition. After an uncomfortable silence, I said, "That would be me."

Aiden nodded. Then he said, "You think you're a clever little bastard, don't you, Pete?"

"Well," I began, "Roger told us—"

"I don't appreciate your lies, kid. This isn't some movie where I'm astonished by your ingenuity and then decide to give you a break because I'm impressed by how much you want a chance."

"If you'll just listen to us—"

"I don't think so. Hey, Roger thinks you guys are great, but what

Roger knows about music you couldn't find under a microscope. The guy's a fucking coke-head and a loser and he owes me money."

I frowned. "Roger said you owed him money."

"The guy's got two teeth, more or less. Who do you think shows more fiscal responsibility?"

Two teeth or not, I believed Roger. I don't know why. Maybe it was because I didn't trust a well-spoken man with a closet for an office and a drug habit. I might have been a liar, but that didn't make Aiden Sewell an honest businessman.

"We're the best band in Jersey," I said. "Nothing else matters."

"Jesus, you really are a kid. Lots of other things matter."

Just then a woman walked across the warehouse toward Aiden. She must have used a service elevator on the opposite side of the building. She pulled some papers out of a folder and gave them to Aiden to sign. He stood up when she approached him. I could tell by his posture, his smile, that she was someone outside his immediate orbit of influence. After he signed the papers, she put them in her briefcase and walked away.

"Her," I whispered to Billy. "She might be somebody. Let's see if we can get her back."

We gave the "now" sign to Royce. He counted off four beats with his drumsticks. Aiden shook his head contemptuously, turned his back and walked away.

We plowed into "Time to Run," a song we often opened with because of its explosive, charging rhythm. Like most of our cover versions, we came up with our own arrangements, intended to showcase our talents, both as songwriters and musicians. "Time to Run" featured Billy and me on lead solos that answered and challenged

each other, and Royce digging a hole around a stuttering drum fill. By the end of the first chorus, when Royce had blocked out another signature rap on his tom-toms, and we were all shouting “Time to run ... time to hide!” the woman with the briefcase re-emerged.

Aiden saw her. He shot us a furious look. Then he plastered a smile on his face. He walked over to the woman and spoke a few words to her. He told her something that only he laughed at. She listened to us with great concentration.

I couldn’t see her very well because she stood near an exit outside the reach of the pale yellow light. She had put down her briefcase and seemed to lean forward, as if straining to hear something hidden in our music. When we finished “Time to Run,” we made some adjustments on our amps and guitars and then eased into another song, an old rhythm and blues classic, “Been In Love Too Long.” We had stripped the softer edges of the song, and added a harder, more rock-inflected beat. I sang lead and Billy and Tommy provided harmony. When we reached the last chorus and I wailed, “Don’t go away, baby ... please don’t go away!” the woman had walked forward enough so that I could finally see her.

She wore jeans, a white, buttoned-down shirt with the sleeves rolled up, a simple necklace, shoulder length brown hair, and a rather studious expression that was both severe and humorous. She was about Aiden’s age, in her late twenties or so. She seemed an attractive person, calm, observant, self-possessed.

We ended on a lingering bass note.

Aiden called out to us, “Okay, thanks very much, guys. That was actually better than I expected. Send in an application for next year’s festival.”

The woman walked toward us. Aiden did a fast shuffle to intercept her before she reached us. "Linda, you should have told me you wanted to stick around. I would have gotten you a chair."

She smiled and gave a small, dismissive wave of her hand. "No need," she said. "I was on my way out. I heard these guys playing. So who are you," she asked us, "and how old are you?"

We introduced ourselves then I said, "We're The Master Planets. We're all nineteen, except for Tommy." Tommy gave her a big smile and a goofy shrug. "He'll be nineteen in November."

"Linda, if I'd known you were talent scouting, I would have invited you to stay," Aiden said. "This band was recommended to me by a very old friend."

Linda ignored him. She stared at us. She appeared to be deep in thought.

"You have original material?" she asked.

"Tons," I said.

"Okay," she said. "This is what I want you to do." She took a card out of her briefcase and handed it to me. "I'm Linda Firestone, no relation to the tires, I'm sorry to say. I work in development for Ophelia Records. We're starting a subsidiary label very soon. Give my office a call next week and set up an appointment to see me. I'd like you to meet a few people; they may want you to play for them. Does that sound okay to you?"

We made sounds of appreciation and, probably, shock.

Linda laughed. "You guys have a great sound ... and you're all very cute, which doesn't hurt. Good seeing you again, Aiden," she said and then waved to us as she walked out. "Great meeting you, Master Planets. Give me a ring next week."

After she left, Aiden turned on us. “Do you have any idea who that was? Do you have any idea what sort of break you just got?”

“We didn’t get it from you,” I said.

Aiden nodded at me. “Right. Well, let me tell you something, Master Planets. If Linda Firestone’s secretary hadn’t been sick, and if my office wasn’t on Linda’s way home, you’d be playing to an empty room right now. You just got lucky, that’s all.”

We didn’t even bother to reply. Euphoria had made us blissfully deaf. We were going to make records. We were going to be on the radio. We were going to be in reality what we had always told ourselves we were—great, beautiful, fantastic, magical, sensational, giant, jumping rock stars.

“This is a business,” he informed us as we packed up our equipment. “A business that you don’t know anything about. You’re going to need a manager, someone who can look out for your best interests. Because Linda Firestone won’t look out for you. She looks out for herself. That’s where I can help you guys. All I ask is fifteen percent.”

Again we ignored him. We left Aiden Sewell in the wake of what we believed was our short stay in obscurity. All the way home, we talked about our future—how we would shape our musical direction, how we would design our first album cover. A few times we missed our exits because we were so busy talking about our new lives and the promise of ecstatic success and creativity.



If I had ever read a newspaper in those days, I would have noticed a rather sparse, wire-service story concerning a man named Jurgen

Krausse. Apprehended in a small town west of Dayton, Ohio, Jurgen Krausse was reputedly Rudolph Meissner, a man wanted by the government in connection with war crimes committed in Poland during World War II.

I had never heard of Rudolph Meissner. And he might have remained unknown to me if not for an elderly man who decided to attend a 4-H fair where his granddaughter rode a pony. When I was nineteen, I didn't pay attention to news stories. They didn't have anything to do with my career.

Chapter 8

The only time my father ever hit me—or I was hit at all by my parents—was when I once suggested that you couldn't criticize my mother for anything because of her miserable past. I think I made this comment after an incident involving the family car. I had just received my driver's license and didn't yet have enough money saved to buy a car of my own. My parents had told me that if I could pay half the cost, they would make up the rest, including insurance and maintenance. For now, I had to adjust my schedule to theirs, borrowing a car when they didn't need one. On this particular day, my mother had to deliver a special order from her flower shop, or perhaps needed to buy groceries. Whatever the case, I wanted the car desperately—it probably had something to do with a girl—and I couldn't have it. In the music room, surrounded by pianos, guitars and amplifiers, I complained about the unfairness of my mother's "privileged position." My father overheard me—I'm sure I intended him to—as he walked through on his way to the back entrance of the house where his car was parked in the driveway. He stopped at the door and turned around. He looked at me with a quizzical expression.

"Who the hell are you?" he asked.

I remember the question frightened me a little because it was one of those rare moments when I couldn't fathom his behavior. "What do you mean?" I waited for him to explain himself.

As an answer, he stepped forward and back-handed me across the

face so fast that I didn't even have time to put up a defensive hand. I felt myself falling through a kind of black mental space before I slammed against the wall and sank to the floor. A microphone clattered on top of me. I lay there, too stunned to cry.

"Don't ever talk about your mother like that again," he said. "You don't know what she's suffered. You don't know how much she loves you and Penny."

He walked out. I put a hand over my reddening cheek. My father was a gentle person. What had provoked this?

But it was true. I didn't know what my mother had suffered. A strange silence surrounded her. Even my shouting, boisterous friends became quiet, nearly solemn, when they were around her. The numbers tattooed on her arm reminded us that she was ultimately a stranger. She had come out of a place of death and her emergence from that place was a chilling miracle. I couldn't imagine her life—not the secret life—the life I sensed but did not really want to know.

Who was I, my father had asked me. I was a boy who believed that talent and hard work were all he needed to make a life pinned with stars. My parents, including my mother, had told me that. And I believed in myself. What else did I need to know?



The Master Planets spent the next few months racing between fear and glee. Linda Firestone introduced us to Ophelia Records executives in New York who promptly led us into a recording studio with engineers and producers and state-of-the-art technology. We learned to "hear" our music, not as a club act, but as a sound production

meant for radio stations and turntables. I was fascinated by the studio and how even the simplest musical ideas could be translated into gorgeous shapes and energies.

We were also preparing to open for Power Train in a limited concert run through New Jersey. This was all part of a publicity campaign that anticipated the release of our first album. Linda Firestone, now head of Tanzar, a subsidiary label for Ophelia Records, had signed us as the first band to record for her new company. Since Power Train's management also handled some of the same bands that recorded with Ophelia Records, we would be the featured opening act when Power Train played New Jersey on their national concert tour. None of this would have been possible if Linda Firestone had not recently been made director of Tanzar Records. She was banking her new career on us, and we needed to succeed. We were given a ten-thousand-dollar advance and a miniscule percentage of all future royalties on our records. In exchange, we would be groomed, choreographed, photographed, recorded and packaged according to Linda Firestone's vision of our talent. If we couldn't accept the terms of our contract, then of course we were free to decline it. We couldn't sign fast enough.

We decided that we needed to focus all our attention on practice, and living in the same house would give us the opportunity to write and rehearse whenever we wished. To this end, we rented a dilapidated old three-story Victorian near the train tracks on the north side of Sea Ridge. The idea was a good one, but within a few weeks the house became a haven for friends, and then friends of friends, and finally, total strangers who threw themselves in a heap on whatever spare carpet or floor they could find in order to sleep, drink, vomit, copulate,

smoke weed and doze at our expense. After two weeks of stepping over strange bodies, we tossed everyone out. Most people accepted their eviction with relative composure—they took their hash pipes and bongos and moved to somebody else's floor. A couple of boarders were not so pleasant. One bearded guy, who looked at least thirty and was perpetually wiping a runny nose, told us we were all “fucking pussy-ass losers.” As I shepherded him to the door, he suddenly tried a new strategy. “Pete, don't you know me, man? I gave you and Billy the idea for ‘Oh, Laurie!’”

“Doesn't ring a bell,” I said.

“Oh, so now you don't know me,” he sneered. “That's so fucking lame. How about this?” He began to sing. His voice, off-key and rattling with phlegm, sang a few words: “Oh, Laurie, girl ... when you shake, you blow my mind ... though you're fine, you still ain't my kind ... but I want your behind, so—”

“Those aren't the words,” I said. I shoved him out the door.

He stood outside, his voice muffled from behind the door. He shouted, “I've got more talent in my piss than all four of you cock-sucking, mother-fucking ...”

“Good lyrics,” I said. “Work on the backups.”

People couldn't understand how serious we were about the impending release of our first album or the chance later in the summer to play before a huge concert crowd. They couldn't understand our anxiety, either.

One unseasonably hot day early in May, I took my laundry home because the band didn't have a washer or dryer in our rented house and there was no pool or sun deck (as there was at my parents' house) at the local laundromat. As I folded my clothes in the basement, the

front doorbell rang. My mother was in the backyard, tending to her flower garden.

I ran up the stairs and opened the door.

The man standing there smiled at me. I guessed that he was somewhere in his fifties. His broad, deeply tanned face with a faint scar etched under his left eye held the same penetrating stare that I had seen so often on my mother's face. He was a big man. His shoulders and neck were powerful and moved with taut strength against a three-piece blue suit that seemed, on him, more a costume than clothing. He looked at me as if I were an exotic creature that he had read about but didn't quite believe existed until now.

"I was hoping to speak to your mother, please." After a slight pause he said, "Mrs. Jameson, that is."

He spoke with my mother's accent, and yet there was another language in his words that I didn't recognize.

Ordinarily, I would have invited him in. But his strange accent and dominating figure sent some instinctive warning through me.

"Can I ask your name?" I said.

He nodded, more to himself than to me.

"Yes, I am ..." He hesitated then smiled almost wistfully. "Tell your mother that Danny Boy is here."

"Danny Boy?"

"Yes, she will know who I am."

My mother was on her knees, picking weeds, when I approached her in the backyard.

"Mom, some guy named Danny Boy is at the door. He says you know him."

Her body went rigid. She stared at a clump of weeds clutched in

her hand.

"Mom?" I said.

She got up slowly and dusted some dirt from her hands. "Milk and eggs," she said quietly. "I need milk and eggs, Peter. Go to the grocery store, please."

"Who is this guy?" I said. "He looks like some kind of mob boss."

"Milk and eggs," she repeated. "I want you to go now."

"Do you know this guy? Do you want me to stick around?"

She reached over and patted my shoulder. "Don't worry. He is an old friend. From the DP camps. Now go to the store."

I knew something was wrong. My mother rarely touched Penny or me with what could be called maternal affection. Anyway, my mother had never mentioned "friends" from the displaced persons camps. She almost never mentioned anyone from the time before she met my father.

"What kind of eggs?" I said. "Medium or large?"

"Large. Don't waste time. I'm making a cake this afternoon."

Now I knew something was wrong. My mother didn't make cakes. She was a terrible baker. In fact, she was a terrible cook.

I got into my car, started the engine, and drove a few blocks away. I parked the car in a convenience store lot. Then I ran back to the house, careful to make my approach from the beach, through the tall beach grass. I crawled on my belly over the backyard lawn then made a dash for the music room's side door. I heard angry voices upstairs. They spoke in Polish. I crept up the stairs; I hesitated for a moment. I opened the door just a sliver. Danny Boy and my mother were in the living room. She had a revolver stuck in the front pocket of her gardening jeans and she was showing Danny Boy a framed photograph

of our entire family, along with other family photos, displayed along the top of a cherry-wood antique table. Danny Boy shook his head.

"No, you are wrong, Leah," he said in English. "It is because of them that you must cooperate."

"Not Leah," my mother said. Her voice was low and furious. "What is the matter with you? Never call me that."

He sighed. "Do you think this is easy for me? You are one of the few people, perhaps the only person, who can positively identify Meissner."

My mother crossed the room and sat down heavily on the couch. "You haven't changed," she said. "You are still the boy who thinks that right and wrong must come with blueprints. I don't give a damn about Meissner's civilized little trial. There's a special vengeance I set aside for him. Right now, I will live my life in peace."

"That may not be possible."

"I don't say this just for myself. My husband and children. They were born in America. They would not understand."

"You are wrong, Leah," Danny Boy repeated.

My mother was silent for a moment. Then she said, "I like you, Danny. I always have. But I will not let you or anyone else hurt my children."

Danny Boy's mouth tightened. He took a deep breath. "Don't threaten me, Leah. The Angel of Death no longer walks by your side. I can see that in your eyes." He adjusted the jacket on the three-piece suit that looked like a costume; then he walked slowly to the front door. "All I ask is that you think about what I've said. If you allow Rudolph Meissner to escape justice, then you will not be protecting your children—you will be accepting a world where people may commit

acts of evil—or good—without meaning, without consequence.”

My mother stood up. She took the revolver out of her pocket. She turned the gun from side to side in a way that suggested she understood its strengths and weaknesses as you would understand a peculiar and perhaps irascible old friend. Suddenly she raised her arm in a movement that was shocking in its speed, its peculiar intimacy. She stood absolutely still, the gun outstretched in her hand, poised to fire. She aimed at an abstract painting that hung over the cherry-wood table.

“Words, Danny. What is justice when it comes to filth like that? I marked him for death when I climbed out of that ditch.”

“That’s not what we want,” Danny Boy said.

“Oh, I know. You want to direct it all like a play.”

“I told you. We want justice.”

“No.” She still aimed her gun. “You want public relations.”

Danny Boy closed the front door behind him. My mother put the gun back in her pocket. Then she walked over to the table and picked up a photograph of Penny and me when we were five and two years old. She stared at the picture for a long time.

I crept down the stairs and ran back to my car. I drove quickly to the supermarket and picked up the items my mother wanted. Before I reached home, I glanced over at the grocery bag propped up on the seat beside me. I had bought medium-sized eggs.

I didn’t know what to think or how to act. Who was Danny Boy? Why was my mother carrying a gun when she spoke to him? Who was Rudolph Meissner? And finally, why did Danny Boy keep calling her “Leah”? My mother’s name was Rachel.

Chapter 9

Linda Firestone wanted us to redo the tracks for the new song we wrote, “You Want Me, Girl (And It Shows).” She didn’t like the tempo or the vocals nor did she like the way it parodied teen-age bravura and sexuality. She thought Billy and I should concentrate more on writing the simple hooks and choruses that comprise hits. After all, that’s why she had signed us—we had the knack of writing songs that were instantly likeable and easy to hear again and again. At least that’s what she and the other record company executives believed when we auditioned for them in New York. Even better, we looked right. We could be the next group splashed across the cover of a teen magazine. We could be heartthrobs, only with a harder, more rock ’n’ roll edge. We could be the missing link between David Cassidy and David Bowie.

Billy and I were stunned by her suggestions: she wanted us to sing the song as a lament; she wanted us to substitute melancholy “oohs” and “oh, babys” for the backing vocals instead of the persistent grunts that now punctuated each line in the lyrics. She wanted us to assume the musical persona of a forlorn teenage boy who loves a girl but knows that he can never have her.

“But Linda, the song is a hit. We wrote it basically as a great dance tune. It’s supposed to be funny and sexy.” Billy paused. He was trying to be polite but firm. “You see, we think people will like the song on two levels, as a very commercial, accessible tune, and as a funny bit

about teenage arrogance.”

Linda nodded her head. She always appeared to listen to us.

“It is a great dance tune,” she said. “And it might very well be a hit. But we need to push the song to a market that we know. Your song is not going to appeal to twelve-year-old girls. They don’t understand or care about irony, particularly if it’s about love and sex.”

Billy and I looked at each other.

I said, “Twelve-year-old girls?”

Linda leaned back in her chair. We were sitting in her office in New York. Our first album was supposed to be released in late September, a week or two after we opened for Power Train. It had not been decided yet which song would be issued as our first single.

“Guys, it might not be this year, it might not be next year. It might not even be you, although we think it could be, which is why we signed you. But the music business is headed for a wider, more age-inclusive target audience.”

We looked at her; we didn’t know what she was talking about.

“Sooner or later,” she continued, “there are going to be acts that will have enormous cross-over appeal to both ten-year-olds and forty-year-olds.”

Billy frowned. “Linda, no offense, but that’s nuts.”

“Not really,” she said. “It makes sense. But I don’t want to discuss that right now.” She leaned forward and pressed a button on her phone. “I’m going to set you up for more studio time tomorrow. Redo those tracks. We’ll see how it goes.”

Again, Billy and I looked at each other.

“Linda,” I said. “We’re not sure that the song should be rewritten or rerecorded. We believe the song is fine as is.”

For the first time, Linda gazed at us with utter indifference. She put the phone down. "It's up to you," she said. "But if we wrangle over the direction of your first album, it might not be released for a long time. That wouldn't help your career." Suddenly she smiled at us. "Talk it over. Then get back to me." She reached for the phone again. "Take care, guys. I'm sorry, but I really have to make some overdue calls."

We saw ourselves out.

Billy and I went to a favorite coffee shop in the Village. The café was squeezed between a leather store and a comic book emporium.

"What the hell, man?" Billy said. He stirred his coffee while staring out at the street.

"Twelve-year-old girls. What is that about?" I said. "And what is this business about ten-year-olds and forty-year-olds?"

Billy shook his head. "I don't know." He glanced over at me. "Did you get a strange vibe from Linda? I mean, after we told her we didn't like her suggestions?"

"Yeah. It went something like this: 'You little punks shut up and do as we say.'"

Billy nodded. "I didn't realize that, you know, we were going to be produced."

I wanted to offer some advice about where to go with this new obstacle. Usually I was the member of the group who analyzed options and then offered new solutions. But at that moment I couldn't think. I was still too distraught over the scene I had witnessed in my parents' living room.

"Linda's serious," I finally said. "And that stuff about delaying the release of our first album means it will never come out. They can afford to lose the ten thousand dollars they gave us. But we can't afford to

lose our chance to make an album.”

“So what are you saying? We make ‘You Want Me, Girl’ into some bubblegum song?”

Who was my mother? Who was she really? Was this the reason my father was having an affair with Mrs. Griffin? What should I do, if anything? For the first time in my life, I felt very alone and unsure of myself.

“We have no choice,” I said firmly. “We have to record the song the way she wants it. I’m guessing that will be our first single off the album too.”

Billy stared at me over his coffee cup. “So that’s it? We’re going along with this?”

I shook my head. “We’re good writers. It doesn’t matter whether our first single is some goooey shit. After we come out with a hit, we’ll have more say over what we produce.”

The waiter asked us if we wanted anything else. We paid the bill and walked over to Washington Square Park. A lot of people were roller-skating and throwing frisbees. As we walked through the park, we were careful where we stepped. Dog shit was everywhere.

“Look at all these people,” I said. “How many of them would love to be in our place right now?”

Billy laughed. “Most of them are probably too high to strum a C chord.”

“Yeah, but a lot of them aren’t. They just weren’t as lucky as we were.”

Billy stopped walking. “Lucky?” he said.

“Lucky,” I repeated.

“We’ve got something special,” Billy said. “That isn’t luck.”

A Frisbee hit me in the head. It hurt a little but not much. A bearded guy with a ponytail ran over and scooped the Frisbee off the ground. "Sorry, man," he said. He flung the Frisbee back to another ponytailed friend.

"Yeah, we're special," I said. "And the thing that makes us special is that we're nineteen years old with a recording contract. If they tell us to record 'Strangers in the Night' using chipmunk voices, we'll do it."

Billy smiled in spite of himself, then he looked down at his shoe. "Oh, fuck!" He had stepped in dog shit.

I picked a candy wrapper off a park bench and handed it to him. "Here you go, partner. We'll tell Linda that we've reconsidered."

I didn't quite believe what I told Billy. Even at nineteen I had an ominous feeling that once you let people change your vision of your talent—what you like best about it and why it keeps you interested—you might never find that right groove again.

We went back into the studio and redid the backing vocals for "You Want Me, Girl." We also changed the tempo of the song, as Linda suggested, and added a sweeping, lush organ sound in the chorus. When we finished, we were surprised. Linda was right. This was a lovely song; we had not understood its potential. Whether the song now appealed to twelve-year-old girls or forty-year-old accountants no longer mattered. This song was going to be a hit and everyone felt it. We forgot about all our former reservations.

A few days after we remastered the tracks of "You Want Me, Girl," I called Penny and told her that I was in the city and would like to see her.

"I'm pretty busy," she said. "What is it, anyway?"

I didn't like her attitude. I hadn't liked her attitude since I was

born. I quickly recounted the episode of Danny Boy in our living room.

"Well, what do you want me to do?" she said. I could tell she wanted to get off the phone.

"I don't know," I said. "Aren't you even a little curious about why this guy kept calling her Leah? And who this Rudolph Meissner is?"

"Rudolph Meissner is a man wanted for war crimes in Poland. He was the head of a mobile killing squad that executed Jews and other undesirables."

I was genuinely surprised. "How did you know that?"

"I read the newspaper." I heard Penny speak a few muffled words to Luke, her current boyfriend. Then she said, "All right. If you want to come over, do it now. I have rounds at the hospital later today."

I caught a subway uptown to Penny's apartment near Columbia University. Luke opened the door for me. Luke was a very blonde, muscular, good-natured guy. He and my sister had been seeing each other for about six months. Soon, I guessed, Luke would join the other men in Penny's stable of former admirers. Penny rarely stayed with a guy for very long. She tended to choose big, handsome men with moderate intelligence and few interests in life except for following her around. Penny once told me why she avoided intellectually talented men. They were "stuck" on themselves, both as typical men, selfish and fickle, but then, even worse, as personalities. Who needed the trouble? I felt a little sorry for Luke. I think he loved Penny. He looked at her with the unblinking gaze of a smitten dray horse. I knew he had a job; I just couldn't remember what it was. Every time he told me what he did for a living, the information vanished from my memory.

"Hey, Pete," he said warmly. "I heard about your record. That's so

great, man.”

“Thanks. It’s been an incredible year.”

Penny sat behind a desk. Books and notebooks were piled up on either side of her. “Luke, would you go to the store for me? I need those vegetables for the soup I’m making.”

“Sure, Babe,” he said. He extended his hand to me. “Good to see you, Pete. If I don’t see you when I get back, well ...” A moment later, he was gone.

I sat down in an easy chair and slung my leg over the side. “What strange power do you hold over the mentally vacant?”

“Shut up,” Penny said mildly. “Look. I told you. I don’t have much time.”

“I want to know what you think,” I said.

Penny closed the book in front of her and went over to the refrigerator in the little kitchenette off the living room. She pulled out a carton of orange juice and poured herself a glass. Then she came back to the living room and sat down on the sofa. She took a sip of her juice and stared at the floor for a few seconds.

“Mom is a grown person. So is Dad. So are we. We all have our own lives. There’s no need to do anything.”

“She was carrying a gun,” I said. “She said something about marking this guy Meissner for death. What does that mean? Who is she?”

Penny finished her juice. She put the glass down on a scratched coffee table in front of her. “What difference does it make? She’s Mom, whatever else she is.”

“Why don’t you care?” I said.

“I’m older than you. I’ve seen things that you don’t remember. I’m

sick of our family.”

The door suddenly opened. “Babe, you’re not going to believe this. I forgot to ask you. What kind of vegetables do you want?”

We both looked at Luke’s blonde, eager face filling up the doorway. “Luke, why don’t you go grab yourself a beer?” Penny said. She got up and took her coat out of the hallway closet. “I’ll go to the market myself. Actually, I need to get a lot of things there”

“Bye, Luke,” I said as I followed Penny out. Luke said something, but I didn’t catch it. The door had already closed.

On the street, we passed a road crew standing around a large, jagged hole in the pavement. One guy operated the jackhammer while the other guys gaped in leisurely good humor at the burgeoning crater. They stared at the hole, then drank some coffee, then talked and laughed and went back to watching the noisy destruction.

“Everything about Mom and Dad is wrong!” Penny shouted over the jackhammer’s pounding.

“What?” I said.

“They’re not who they appear to be!” We crossed the street and went up two blocks to a market. Penny gave me a shopping basket and we walked up an aisle loaded with produce.

“This is not Dad’s first affair, either,” Penny said. She dropped potatoes into the basket I was holding.

“What?”

“The guy has been fooling around with his assistants for years.” She held up a restraining hand. “I know this because Sea Ridge is a small town. I’ve heard nothing but gossip about Dad for years.”

“I never heard a thing,” I said somewhat defensively.

Penny dropped a bunch of carrots and some tomatoes into my

basket. "You were too young. Anyway, you didn't go to high school with the girls whose mothers knew Dad so intimately."

We walked over to the baking goods aisle where Penny picked out a small jar of basil and then reached down near the floor for a five-pound bag of sugar. The basket was getting quite heavy.

"Maybe we should have gotten a cart," I said, shifting the basket uncomfortably to my other hand. Somehow I sensed the truth about my father: he probably had been unfaithful to my mother with many women. We shopped for another ten minutes. I didn't know how to phrase what I wanted from my sister.

At the checkout line, Penny said, "Whatever is going on will end badly. Stay out of it. Focus on your music."

Penny gave me the two bags of groceries and we walked back toward her apartment. At the corner of the street where she lived, I put the grocery bags down in front of the black, empty windows of a closed laundromat. I adjusted the collar on my jacket. Penny stared at me.

"How come you got the wavy hair and I got the straight?" she said.

I picked the bags up again. "I feel sad whenever I think about Mom talking to that mobster-looking guy. I feel strange, as if I missed a bus or something and now I have to wait alone by the side of the road, maybe for a long time."

Penny took the bags from my arms and started up the steps to her apartment building. She turned around before getting out her key. "Don't waste your energy on things you can't understand. Listen to me, Pete. It's got nothing to do with you."

I wanted to talk to my parents—I suppose I needed some

assurance that my family history wasn't a complete fabrication—but the record company was ready to photograph our album cover as well as stylize our performance when we played before fifteen thousand people. We would play five songs for a total of twenty-three minutes and each second needed to be rehearsed. All my attention was given over to a flippant head shake here, a crotch grind there. I took Penny's advice. The war was over a long time ago. I needed to concentrate on our show.



Sometime during the summer, my mother received a package from Israel. Inside the package were photos and documents pertaining to Rachel Arenberg, my mother's maiden name. According to the documents, Rachel was born in a small town outside of Lodz, Poland, where the Nazis had murdered her father and mother. Rachel died a few years later, in 1944. The picture of Rachel showed a pretty, dark-haired girl, rather dreamy and innocent of expression, who bore absolutely no resemblance to my mother. None of us saw the package at that time. We learned of its contents much later, when records and reports no longer mattered much, at least to her surviving family.

Chapter 10

I remember the rest of that summer as a frantic tutorial on how to perform and please. The record company didn't like our hair, so we were cut and dyed according to stylists who knew how rock stars best appeal to teenage audiences. They streaked auburn highlights into Billy's dark hair; they layered Tommy's wild mane into a spiked shag. Royce's hair was teased into an indifferent Afro. They cut my tresses to fall in soft waves, but with enough body to keep their shape when I flung my head back and screamed "Baby!" to the fans. At first we looked at ourselves with embarrassed, self-conscious glances when the hair stylists were done. Then we barely remarked on the changes. We were too busy rehearsing our stuttering stage walks and spine-bending rock star stances.

Our album cover was shot in a large studio in lower Manhattan. They arranged us against a Max Parrish-like backdrop of sparkling stars and glowing green trees. We were posed to look like hitchhikers, although rather desultory ones—we didn't have our thumbs out—on a deserted country road that vanished to a point beyond an empty service station with red gas pumps out front and a haze of blue mountains floating on the horizon. I think the idea was that we were supposed to be magical travelers in a sinister but enchanted America. I'm not sure. The shoot took all day because the wind machine didn't work properly and our hair wouldn't lift in a magical or sinister way.

We became very professional. Choreographers—Linda called

them “stage directors”—taught us how to make our movements “bigger” for a concert crowd. We were taught to show “attitude” and “confidence” in the way we swung our guitars. We were drilled on how to step back, then forward with “swagger.” We learned to toss our hair “cute,” and to toss our hair “sexy.” We learned how to “react” to one another on stage and then how to come together in blazing force.

Linda also hired, or rather paid for the tickets of, several hundred young teenage girls to swamp the front rows of the arena and to dance and scream in spontaneous frenzy when The Master Planets gave their twenty-three-minute performance. She explained to us why these measures were not really disingenuous. The crowd was there to see Power Train. Opening acts were routinely booed, regardless of their performance. The record company had conducted focus groups on how twelve-to-fourteen-year-old girls would respond to our music and look. In all sample studies, the girls twitched in their seats and mouthed the words to our songs when they heard our album. When shown poster-sized shots of the group, many girls squealed; all of them made comments such as “cute,” “really, really cute,” and “oh, God, I’m so in love!” The record company merely wanted to ensure that our first big performance be given every possible advantage. This was a happy coincidence: we wanted every possible advantage too.

The summer ran down to that moment of imagined ecstasy. Along the way our view of ourselves changed. We felt that we had bought reserved seats on a swinging star while the rest of the world sat on bleachers. Success can breed a narrow vision, and we enjoyed the reflection that flatters the viewer while distorting everyone else.

There had always been girls, but now there were lots of girls. I no longer had time for Joanne, but somehow I had time for sex with

girls in Promotions, Advertising, and Sales. I told myself I wasn't really cheating on Joanne. I was simply going on a kind of extended "vacation" from being truthful with her. The other guys in the band were on similar vacations.

We were one week away from opening at the Garden Arena. On a Wednesday morning, my father dropped by the band's rented house. I was surprised to see him. He hadn't called to say he was coming.

"Dad?" I said, with the door open. My father looked troubled. I was instantly reminded of Danny Boy and of my mother holding the gun in our living room.

"Pete, do you have a few minutes?"

"Sure, Dad. Do you want to come in?"

He shook his head. "Let's go for a ride. This won't take long."

I had a terrible feeling. I wished that he had waited another week to talk to me. My father drove a Lincoln Continental. The car rode like a soft pillow settling against a couch. We settled along for a mile or two. My father still hadn't spoken.

"Dad?" I said. "You okay?"

"I'm not the best man in the world, Pete."

Oh, no.

"But I do love your mother and you two kids."

I was silent.

"We need to support your mother."

Huh?

"There's a lot you kids don't know ... and that's why this might be tough. In a few weeks ..."

I'll be opening for one of the biggest bands in America. Our first album will be released just days later ... I'm very busy.

"We're going to court with Mom," my father said. He paused then in a grim voice he said, "She needs to identify a man who may have entered the US illegally."

Danny Boy had gotten to my mother. Or my mother had another plan of her own. How much did my father know? What did I really want to know? I pictured my family in its various frames: my father's discreet, adulterous behavior; my sister's dogmatic detachment; my mother's drinking and secrets, her intimacies with a gun. My band was opening for Power Train in less than a week.

"Dad," I said slowly, "do you understand how hard it is to be really good, and then get recognized for being good?"

My father turned the air conditioning up a notch. "Pete, I'm so proud of you. Your mother and I are just, well, we're overwhelmed by your success." He glanced over at me, his eyes misting. "Pete, no parents could have better kids than you and Penny."

Why do you fuck other women? I thought. Why can't you help Mom get over her drinking? Why do I often feel that I want to be as far away from you and Mom as possible?

"Somebody from the war?" I said.

My father frowned. Then he said, "Oh, you mean ..."

"The court date," I said. "The guy who came into the US illegally."

"Yes, there's a possibility that your mother could help the government." He glanced into his rearview window.

"What's this got to do with me?" I said. "I don't know this guy. I can't identify him."

My father fiddled some more with the air-conditioning. "I was there at the end, Pete. I treated hundreds of concentration camp survivors. Your mother was lucky. She was unbelievably strong and so

she lived. But others ...” My father gripped the steering wheel. He was shaking. I couldn’t tell whether he was desperately sad or desperately angry. “I will never forget what those sons of bitches did,” he said. “If there’s just one chance in a million ... we have to do what we can. Even if it’s just to sit there with your mother.”

I felt the tug of admiration for my father. He had saved so many people. And yet he confused me. How could he be so supportive of my mother in this way while also disrespecting her with other women?

“Dad, I promise as long as my concert schedule and promotional activities don’t interfere, I’ll do what I can.”

There was a pause. “Do what you can,” he said in a gruff, distracted voice.

He was disappointed in me.

We didn’t speak on the ride home. I wanted to tell him that I was sorry, that he was wrong about me. I wanted him to understand that at this moment I couldn’t give him an unqualified promise that I would be at his side and my mother’s. My whole life, it seemed, had been gathering force and momentum for *The Master Planets’* debut. How could I cheat something so glorious of its rightful expression?

My father was disappointed in me.

Shake it off, I told myself as we pulled up to the house. I got out of the car and said goodbye to my father. I felt bad. I had disappointed him. But there was nothing to be done. I couldn’t afford any distractions this week.



On the morning of the concert, I got up, drew back the bedroom

curtains and looked out across the street at the Chinese restaurant and its neighbors, the gas station and the liquor store. Joanne was still asleep. We had spent a fitful night arguing, making love, and then arguing again. Joanne didn't like the fact that in the last few months I always had an excuse for why I couldn't see her. She wanted to know if I was seeing someone else, and if so, would I just have the decency to tell her the truth so she could move on with her life. I vehemently denied any such transgressions and acted stunned that she could even entertain such thoughts. She vehemently opposed my vehemence, and after a while, we grew tired of accusing each other, defending ourselves and pretending that we didn't understand what we both already knew: I was a liar, I would probably continue to lie, and she should stop kidding herself that anything would change in the near future.

I remember feeling vaguely aggrieved by Joanne's accusations. In some mysterious way, I had almost convinced myself that it was just this sort of mistrust and inconsiderate behavior (how dare she upset me on the most important day of my life!) that had led to several meaningless sexual encounters with other girls. And after reviewing these issues and finding them insoluble for the immediate future, I forgot them. Today was my day.

"You guys will be great tonight."

I turned around and saw that Joanne was already out of bed. She was smoothing the sheets and fluffing the pillows. She was naked and very tanned and her blonde hair seemed to float across her shoulders as she made the bed.

"Don't bother with that," I said. I came up behind her and ran my hand up and down her back. "I'll make the bed later on."

Joanne grimaced. Then she smiled a very tight little smile and

said, “Who are you kidding, Peter? You never make your bed.”

I had no response to that. She was right.



Royce was nearly sick on the way to the arena. Every five exits or so, he would insist that he was going to puke and that we had to pull over. At each stop he crouched over, sometimes getting on his hands and knees, and made retching noises. He never actually threw up. He just made sounds as if he was going to, and then got to his feet, wiped his mouth and looked at all of us with a tragic, green expression. Tommy spent the journey in the back of the van with both fists clenched, staring down at an old candy wrapper by his feet. Billy drove the van, but I’m not sure he saw the road ahead of him. I noticed that he was absolutely white; his hands trembled around the steering wheel. For myself, I felt nauseated, petrified, dizzy and weak.

Terrible things flashed through my head. I saw myself in front of fifteen thousand people, a deep, vast cavern of grotesque, sneering demons. I opened my mouth to sing, but no words came out, just a low, twisted groan. My feet felt cemented to the stage. My hands had grown to ridiculous proportions—they were Mickey Mouse hands, gigantic, rubbery, inflatable and useless for playing a guitar. And around me, my band was no longer my band; they were winter stalks six feet high, with rags for clothing, shivering in a desolate field.

I was about to ask Billy to pull over. I thought I needed to join Royce in his ritualistic vomiting.

Then I remembered an old trick, a gag we used whenever our performance fell flat or we were just sick of playing for an audience

that wouldn't respond to our music: we amused ourselves. We were all excellent mimics and we knew dozens of songs that we could expertly cover, generally as a caricature of the songs' vocal or musical styles. The audience loved it—there's nothing like alcohol and pot to add potency to cheap clowning.

I glanced back at Royce and Tommy; each sat with a look of stoic, wooden fear. Then I smiled at Billy, who appeared to be seeing monsters on the highway's dividing line.

I crooned, "He's a man who's not afraid of trouble ..." I found Johnny Hudson's pseudo-cool, man-of-the-world drawl in my larynx.

Billy began to smile. He sang, "A gun for hire, his life spells danger ..."

Finally, with Royce and Tommy joining from the back of the van, we all sang:

"Take him him as you see him, he's too fast for you to see him twice!"

We sang every teeny-bopper song we knew all the way to the show. We were no less scared than we were before. But at least we were able to sing.



Originally a racetrack, the Garden Arena had been renovated in the late sixties to resemble the Hollywood Bowl. Upper tiers, with thousands of additional seats, had been constructed to form a rising, half-moon bay around a deep stage. If you sat in the back rows of the arena, you might see the performers as tiny dots of light twinkling

upon a distant island. Nevertheless, the acoustics were excellent, and even if you couldn't actually see the performance, you could hear it well enough to jump around in your seat and pretend that you could bang your head against the stage, if the music so moved you. New technology also created the impression of nearness; gigantic screens mounted above the stage inflated performers into King Kong-like apparitions. For the people in the back rows, the experience might have seemed a little abstract, but still fun. They could watch a live, televised performance while seated in a sort of monstrous rec room. Their friends could join them too, all fifteen thousand, most of them carrying ample supplies of drugs and alcohol.

When we arrived in the early afternoon, a number of trucks were already parked near the back of the arena and scores of roadies unloaded the massive equipment used to amplify sound for a concert crowd. We were ignored by the roadies; we were the opening act, a euphemism for someone to arouse the crowd's impatience before the real stars took the stage.

We found Linda Firestone down by the front rows, talking with a couple of older guys wearing jeans and paisley shirts. She introduced us to them and explained that they were reviewers from local newspapers. We all shook hands. One of the reviewers, a man with an intelligent face and soft, stoned, reddish-brown eyes, smiled and said, "Are you guys ready for the no-holds-barred, sometimes morally ambiguous world of professional rock 'n' roll?"

There was a moment's pause. Then I answered, "No. We expect to crumble like a cheap dime bag of pot at the first sign of disapproval."

He laughed. Then he made a sound that might have been phlegm rumbling through his chest or an abrupt hiccup. The other reviewer,

not quite as intelligent looking but certainly less stoned, said, "How would you describe your music?"

We looked at Linda Firestone. She smiled at us and shrugged.

"Poignant," Billy said, "but vicious."

"Nostalgic," I added, "but uncompromising."

"Stupid," Tommy said, "but whimsical."

"Loud," Royce said, "but with a nice smell."

The two reviewers wrote something down in their notebooks.

"Well, good luck to you," said the less intelligent looking reviewer. He shook our hands, walked up onto the stage and disappeared behind a wall of towering amps. The stoned reviewer took a joint out of his paisley shirt pocket, lit it and then sucked down a big, long draw. As the smoke dribbled between his lips, he said in a choked, squeaky voice, "You guys afraid you might shit yourselves in front of fifteen thousand people?"

"Not really," Billy said, "we've already practiced not shitting ourselves in front of smaller crowds. We're getting pretty good at it."

He took another toke then nodded his head—not necessarily at us, but he nodded his head. "Good," he said. "I like you guys. I'll give you a good write-up. I don't care what you sound like."

He drifted away.

Linda motioned for us to come closer to her. "Those reporters you were having fun with," she said, "write for weekly papers that no one reads except for the coupons. You can't be flippant for the bigger publications." She paused to make sure that she had our attention. "When you're successful, you can afford to have a little fun." She looked at each one of us. "I'll let you know when you're that successful."

Properly instructed, we took the stage to prepare for our sound

check. Engineers from the record studio told us to play certain chords. Sometimes we were told to play together, then separately, then in combination with just the bass or drums. They huddled around a gigantic mixing board while telling us what to play. After a half hour of mostly standing mute and watching the engineers write notes on their clipboards, we were told to leave our instruments on the stage and not to touch them again until the actual performance.

"I know how nervous you are," Linda said afterwards as she ushered us down a flight of stairs and through a labyrinth of corridors. "But once you get out there, you'll be fine." She stopped on a gray cement landing. "I believe in your talent. That's why you're here." She appeared to be collecting her thoughts, as if she were going to say something more, then she pushed a button on the wall behind her. We heard a buzzing sound. A red light blinked over a door to our right. Linda pushed the door open and we followed her in.

Our hair was blow-dried and doused with various products. Makeup people applied subtle mixtures of pancake base, eyeliner, and blush so that we would appear healthy and pretty on the lunar-sized screens floating over the stage.

Time collapsed into a delicate dark pencil brushed against our eyebrows, the emergent rumble of crowds gathering above our heads.

We slid into our costumes. Pirate, outlaw, futuristic rebels. Red, purple, gold. Chains hanging from our belts, tight black trousers.

We were moved upstairs, closer to the stage.

Finally, we heard the cannon's roar:

"Ladies and gentlemen please welcome ...Tanzar recording artists ...THE MASTER PLANETS!"

The world shot forward. We stepped into the spotlight.

Chapter 11

You cannot prepare for the vibration of fifteen thousand voices hurled against the dark. I was not aware of individuals or even a crowd. I struck the first notes to “The Battle of Britain” and lost all consciousness of myself.

My guitar ran over fire and shook off heat. I heard the sound of ghostly swarms rushing down the steep aisles of the arena. The air shivered around me. When Billy and I shouted our harmonies, we heard a rioting noise. My feet picked up this rhythm and I danced my dance to the wordless chant that rose from the darkness. I remember each second on stage as a powerful slide through heat and desire. I had never felt so strong, and I saw the same strength in Billy, Tommy and Royce as we made our ferocious stand to the world. We could have flown off stage, taken a hop beyond the upper tiers, sailed in majesty past the New York skyline and then floated back to the arena, all to astound our earthly watchers. By the time we performed “You Want Me, Girl,” the last song in our set, the crowd seemed to swell, or scream, or sigh along with each lingering echo of our voices.

For every person, there is a moment when the heroic idea of himself breaches the surface, gasps for air and hopes to find happiness in the new world. On a warm September night back in 1973, fifteen thousand people made a thundering noise for us. We played for exactly twenty-three minutes. We played five songs. We yelled, “Thank you!” and we yelled, “Good night!” The spotlights went out.

The sound from the audience welled louder than ever, impossibly loud, a big blossoming black rose that spilled out shrieking petals.

When we moved backstage, a crowd surrounded us. They were mostly business types. Many of them I recognized from the record company. They all wore the current uniform of the hip: jeans, flowered shirts, Native American jewelry. They shouted and congratulated us. They formed a flying wedge, and we all migrated in a shoving, laughing mob to a lower level of the arena.

"That was the best twenty-three-minute show I've ever seen!" Linda yelled in my ear. I stared at her. Where had she come from? The performance was still hot and racing through my body. I couldn't stand still. I couldn't listen to people. I wanted to pound the walls or smash a window. I saw the same chemicals flying and sparking in my bandmates' eyes.

Beneath our feet, above our heads, through the walls we heard the heavy thump, thump, thump of the crowd. Behind that sound another was building, the cheering and screaming that resembled the whine of jet engines preparing for takeoff.

"Do you hear that?" Linda shouted. "They want you back for an encore."

Billy, Tommy and Royce immediately turned and began to shove people out of the way with their elbows. I struggled to join them. Then Linda's fingers dug into my arm. "No!" she yelled in my ear. Her voice was hard.

"What?" I said.

"You can't do an encore!" she yelled again.

I looked at my bandmates. They all wanted to grab a piece of the stage and tear it to pieces. So did I.

"You're nuts," I laughed, and with a violent wrench of my arm, shook myself loose from her.

I got perhaps four or five steps.

An enormous arm blocked my way. It was leveled against my throat.

"Settle down," said a massive security guard. He chewed gum. The smell of wintergreen wafted into my nostrils. His eyes were pale gray slits and he smiled a little. The hair on his arm rubbed against my throat.

"Get the fuck off me!" I shouted at him. I struggled against the arm. It tightened. The guard smiled again. I smelled more wintergreen.

Other muscles with arms held Billy, Tommy and Royce against the wall.

I glared at Linda, who stared back with an impassive gaze.

"What the fuck is this?" I yelled. I strained against the security guard's arm, and then, as he tightened his hold around my throat, I felt my eyes begin to bulge out of their sockets.

"That's enough," Linda said. The security guard let go. I rubbed my throat, then, with a maneuver I considered a brilliant feint, I swung my fist as hard as I could into the guard's stomach. I wanted to kill him. Apparently I didn't come close because he laughed then put his hand on my forehead and gave me a little push. I fell backwards into Linda's entourage, who gave me an amiable push forward. By then the stomping noises from the crowd had dimmed; the other security guards had moved away from Billy, Tommy and Royce. A moment later we heard a tremendous roar. The real show had started. Power Train had taken the stage.

I pointed my finger at Linda. "You just cost us an encore!" I spat at

her. My throat was sore. I looked around at the hip entourage and the security guards. None of them seemed concerned that a band with a record deal and thousands of screaming fans had just been physically assaulted. I hadn't been in an actual fight since I was ten years old, but now I was afraid I might attack Linda.

"Take it easy," Linda said. "Let me explain."

"Take it easy?" Billy said. "Take it easy?"

"You're the opening act," Linda said. "You're not supposed to do an encore."

Royce shouted, "The bumblebee ain't supposed to fly, but it does, mother fucker!"

For a very brief moment we all stared at him. Then, in a conciliatory manner, Linda said, "You guys are great—you were great. And with the proper management you will become a very big band. But encores from opening acts cut into the running time of the show. That means costs, in electricity, security, maintenance, all picked up by the sponsors, and they're paying for their client, Power Train. Not a talented club act out of Jersey. Do you understand?"

"Okay," I said. "I get it." I nodded my head. "Yeah, and you know something? We don't give a shit." I heard a chorus of "Fuckin' A!" from Billy, Tommy and Royce.

"It's too late," she told us. "Power Train is on now. But here's the good news. They did see your performance. And they were very impressed."

We stared at her.

Linda smiled and put her arm around my shoulders. "Listen," she began.

With two fingers I delicately removed her arm. "Don't want you

to accidentally crush my windpipe,” I said. We both looked in the direction of the wintergreen giant, who now stood with his arms crossed at an exit door.

“I’m sorry for that, but I really thought you guys might do something stupid,” Linda said. She added brightly, “I’ve got great news. Power Train wants you to join them for their final encore. ‘Combustion.’ You guys know that song, right?”

We knew it. But we didn’t want to stand in the background and lip synch some other group’s hit. After our performance I still felt—we all felt—a kind of fabulous, raw, aching power surge through us. We wanted to play the songs that we wrote.

“Will we get to go-go dance in a cage too?” I asked Linda.

Her eyes leveled at me. They were very unfriendly. “Be thankful for this opportunity,” she said in a quiet voice. “Kindness in this business is rare.”

“We’re making money for you,” I said. “That isn’t kindness. That’s success.”

“In time you may make money,” Linda corrected me. “Until then, you are an interesting prospect.”

And then I got it. We were not talented musicians, at least not to the record company. We were a low-risk investment with nice hair. In the future, we would have to negotiate our career based on two opposing levels of reality: what we wanted for ourselves and what other interests—more powerful, less human—wanted us to be. A simple lesson, really. People had been learning it since they first formed groups in caves.

We were dismissed to wander the hallways until it was time to join Power Train. The thrill of our performance and the resulting deflation

when bouncers tossed us around like wet tissues made us silent and sullen. Mostly, we waited in the dressing rooms. The girls who had blow-dried our hair were very excited. They had watched us play on closed circuit television and knew that we would be accompanying Power Train at the end of the show. Eventually, we all found separate dressing rooms, each with a different girl. As I said, they were very excited.

Finally we were called upstairs to wait in the wings. We made our entrance. Denny Sharpe, Power Train's lead guitarist and singer, pointed to us and shouted: "The Master Planets! You guys are outasight!" A tremendous roar. We waved and smiled to the crowd and then took our places upstage. We sang "Combustion" with one of the most famous rock bands in the world. An audience the size of a small city screamed and clapped.

When people discover that I wrote a few rock standards a long time ago—and that usually happens because Penny has informed them of the case—they ask me if I miss my old life or wish that my career had really taken off. I tell them that being successful in the arts, even for a little while, is very rare, and that I feel grateful to have had some wonderful experiences to look back on.

This is all true.

And sometimes, now, stuck in traffic, with the radio playing "Oh, Laurie!" or "The Battle of Britain," on a station digging up old memories, I'll follow the melody and remark to myself: "That's a pretty good song." And sometimes, for just a moment, I'll forget that I wrote it.

Chapter 12

We spent the next week in a flurry of promotional activities. The album had been released and we made appearances at record stores and shopping malls. We signed album covers, talked to fans, gave interviews to local newspapers. Our first single, “You Want Me, Girl,” broke into the Billboard Charts at number thirty-seven. Album sales were slow, but we weren’t surprised—the single hadn’t been out long enough to build interest in the band.

Reviews for the album were good, if somewhat qualified. *Rolling Stone* wrote: “an intermittently inspired debut album with strong vocals and blazing energy ... The songwriting efforts of nineteen-year-old Peter Jameson and Billy Warwick suggest a sophistication that, in time, may develop into more groundbreaking material than what this group currently serves up, workmanlike pop tunes wrapped in a kind of faux heavy metal dumpling.”

Fave! wrote: “They sing and play their own music! And they’re really, really cute ... ‘Oh, Laurie!’ will become a ‘gotta dance!’ at your next party!”

Linda had passed on to us the playlists for all the rock stations in New Jersey. The first time I heard myself on the radio, Joanne and I were coming home from a party at one of her friend’s houses near Sea Ridge. We were both quite stoned. I was driving down a single-lane road (it was about three in the morning) and my headlights arched through the trees and made the leaves ripple in the moving glare. There

was a sweet smell to the night, fresh earth and the far away scent of the sea, drifting on a warm wind. Joanne turned the volume up on the radio. After a commercial for “unclaimed freight,” the DJ rapidly fired off an introduction: “This one’s for Lisa Jane Friedman and all the girls at Thomas Sullivan Jr. High. The new single by Jersey’s own Master Planets, ‘You Want Me, Girl.’”

I felt shivery. Hearing my voice echo off the dashboard was like having a conversation with a famous person you never expected to meet. I was the famous person, and my record was playing on the car radio!

Joanne gave a little shriek; she turned the volume still higher and sang along with the record.

For reasons that I no longer remember (I was stoned, after all), Joanne suddenly pulled her tee shirt off over her head. She swayed in the darkness and half sang, half murmured the words to the song. During an instrumental break in the music, she said, “Oh, Pete, I’m going to remember this night forever,” and then took one of my hands off the steering wheel and put it over her breast.

A girl may whisper all sorts of things when she is sitting close to you in the dark. But it’s rare that while she’s crooning to you, her voice melting into yours, she’s actually singing to your record on the radio. Looking back, I see in her gesture a moment glowing with pride, romantic expectations, silliness and beauty. I see every nice girl in my youth and just about every nice quality in them that I took for granted.

On a Monday morning, Linda called the band’s house. Arrangements had been made for us to join Cold Star, a group with a number five hit, on their U.S. tour. We would play twenty-six cities,

beginning in early October. Although we weren't fans of Cold Star's music (we thought they played a kind of insipid, countrified, barn-hall rock), we were delighted to perform on a national level. The tour would help promote our album by introducing us to a greater cross section of the country.

We responded immediately to Linda's good news by inviting all of New Jersey to celebrate our emerging greatness with a huge party on the beach. I remember playing acoustic guitar with Billy; I remember a bonfire that cast leaping shadows over dogs with Frisbees in their teeth; I remember the smell of kelp and beer; I remember someone named Dotty or Kathy or possibly Cindy, and perhaps five or six of her friends, running a relay race naked down the beach. I remember the police.

During this time, I had not forgotten my family in the midst of my success. In a large, florid hand I wrote my signature on posters of the band. To my parents, I wrote: "To Mom and Dad ... Rock 'n' roll will never die! Love, Peter" and to my sister I wrote the equally lyrical, "To Penny—keep on rockin'!" To their credit, my family proudly displayed the posters. I can't imagine the conversations inspired by the posters' conspicuous placement on office walls. For instance, what did my father's patients think when they saw my insouciant, rock star pose hanging near his medical diplomas? What did my father tell them? "I'm afraid it's degenerative, but hey, my son's single is climbing the charts with a vengeance."

Aside from the occasional orgy of self-congratulation (which never interfered with strict rehearsal schedules), nothing unusual happened during the rest of September.

Joanne returned to college—she was a sophomore at Rutgers—

and Billy and I began writing a new batch of songs for our next album. Our single, "You Want Me, Girl," had reached number seventeen after three weeks on the charts. If we made the top ten, then everything would change. We could be headliners on our own tour. We might even have final say over how we wanted to produce our music.

When my father called, I expected him to want an autographed album for some patient's kid, at least something to do with the band. So I was surprised when he told me that my mother had disappeared.

"What do you mean?" I asked him, somewhat peeved at the hour he had called, nine o'clock in the morning.

"I mean she didn't come home last night. She didn't leave a note. Do you have any idea where she might be, Pete?"

The question baffled me. How would I know where she was? I had opened for Power Train, my record was on the charts, I was going on a national tour. Was I also supposed to keep track of my mother? Then I remembered the upcoming trial against Rudolph Meissner. I also remembered Danny Boy in our living room and my mother's casual toying with a gun. I had a very bad feeling.

Chapter 13

My father filed a missing persons report with the police. A detective came to our house and asked us questions. He was very young. He wore a crew cut and he wrote in a little notebook in a slow, laborious hand.

“Was she upset about anything?” he asked. He had stopped writing and gazed at us in a friendly way.

Penny and I glanced at each other.

“Last May this guy came to our house,” I said. “She seemed pretty upset with him.”

My father looked at me. “What guy? Why didn’t you tell me this?”

I shifted uncomfortably in my seat. “Well, she sort of threatened him with a gun, Dad. I thought maybe it was best to just leave it alone.”

“She has a gun?” the detective asked. “Does she have a permit for its use?”

“Your mother threatened a man with a gun and you didn’t bother to tell me,” my father said. “What is the matter with you, Pete?”

“He told me,” Penny said, staring at my father. “I told him to forget it. I told him to concentrate on his music. I told him that your problems and Mom’s had nothing to do with us.”

The detective held his pencil poised above the notebook. He seemed undecided whether to continue writing or simply throw the

pencil away. "Problems?" he said.

Penny still stared at my father.

"My wife has a drinking problem," my father finally replied. "Every once in a while she'll lose track of time."

Penny made a snickering sound.

"Why does your wife have a gun?" the detective asked.

"My mother was in a concentration camp," Penny said. "She doesn't feel safe. She's never felt safe."

The detective frowned. "What do you mean by 'concentration camp'?"

"Our mother is Jewish," Penny explained. "She was born in Poland and then during the war the Nazis killed her family and she was kept in a concentration camp."

The detective nodded; he wrote a few more notes down. Then he looked up at my father. "Sir, what is your occupation?"

"I'm a doctor. I'm a specialist in neurology."

The detective turned to Penny. "And your occupation, miss?"

"I'm a medical student," Penny answered.

"And you?" He looked at me.

I was about to say, "I'm a rock star," but I knew how ridiculous that would sound. "I'm a musician," I said.

"What was this argument about last May?" the detective asked me. "Did you know the man your mother was arguing with?"

I recounted the entire incident—I even mentioned the large eggs my mother wanted for the cake she was baking. As I spoke, I felt a little foolish. Why didn't I tell my mother that I had heard her argument with Danny Boy? Why didn't I confront her? Why didn't I simply say, "Mom, what the hell is going on here?"

And then I realized how strange the three of us—my father, Penny, myself—must have appeared to the detective. We were all intelligent people who acted as if the missing person, a central figure in our family, was a rather hopeless eccentric whose antics were not worth any serious regard.

“One last question,” said the detective, closing his notebook. “Do you think Mrs. Jameson might have gone to Ohio to see a man named Jurgen Krausse?”

We were silent. Then my father said, “I think you should call the police in the town where this Krausse fellow lives.”

The next day FBI agents interviewed us. They hadn’t found our mother, but they did find Jurgen Krausse, the soft-spoken agricultural salesman.



We were told very little. Jurgen Krausse was dead. Just how he died or whether Krausse was an alias for Meissner, we also weren’t told. But our mother was a suspect. She had been missing now for three days.

I felt frustrated and guilty. Every time an investigator from the FBI or the Attorney General’s office asked me a question, I wanted to blurt out, “You don’t understand. My mother is a nice person. She owns a flower shop. She’s an alcoholic, not a killer.”

We were told to report any communication with her to the local FBI. If we failed to report contact with her, or we thwarted her capture in any way, we would be held criminally liable and prosecuted accordingly.

On the fifth day of her disappearance, Penny and I took a long walk on the beach. We began at the dunes in front of our house and walked north to the barrier islands offshore that created sudden currents and riptides. The day was bright, full of cheerful autumn color, and the waves gleamed beneath a hard, blue sky. Penny and I barely spoke as we walked. I had the feeling that this was my true life, the life that claimed a deeper ownership upon me than upon any other. I would walk down the beach with my sister and we would barely speak. How many times had we taken this walk before?

My head was down and I thought about all the funny and exhausting exercises our mother had made us do when Penny and I were little kids.

Penny suddenly said, "Oh."

We stopped. I looked up. An arm stuck out between two large rocks that were part of an old breakwater.

"I ... " My voice died. The arm moved in the tide. As the water rushed away, the arm stretched out on the sand, the dead, white palm facing up to the blue sky.

"Wait," Penny said. "Just wait."

I stepped forward.

"Pete," Penny said.

I hesitated. Then I walked over to the rocks and looked down, where she lay trapped between two kelp-encrusted boulders.

"Pete," Penny called.

Penny was beside me. The sound of her breath grew sharper, shorter.

"Mommy!" she screamed. "Oh, Mommy!"

That went on for a long time.

Chapter 14

I discovered grief as a witless blow. I couldn't manage or contain it, all I could do was cringe with the pain and then fall down in that dark little room inside myself. Mostly I heard silence.

The rabbi spoke the prayers for the dead. He spread a line of dirt over the casket. I repeated the words along with the other mourners. After the service, people were very kind to my family. They expressed their condolences in gentle voices. We received sympathy cards.

I cried opening the refrigerator door. I cried brushing my teeth. I asked myself to stop crying and that didn't work. I heard nothing. I listened for the familiar sounds of my life, that vibrant dialogue with the world, and I heard nothing.

The coroner's office called my mother's death a suicide. They removed a bullet from her brain. Ballistics tests revealed that the bullet came from a vintage World War II Luger that my mother had registered with the police. The gun had vanished from our house. She had probably shot herself on the beach, near our home, and then the tides and currents took her body north and eventually deposited her between the two rocks. She had been in the water for about two days, the coroner's office estimated.

The day after Penny and I discovered my mother's body, my father received a letter via registered mail. The letter was turned over to the FBI, who analyzed its contents and concluded that the author was indeed my mother.

The first part of the message was terse and direct.

She confessed to killing Jurgen Krausse, a.k.a. Colonel Meissner. She attached dental records to prove Meissner's true identity in case the authorities doubted her claims. The dental records were copies of SS documents stored in Berlin. Just how my mother got those documents was not immediately clear although later events would yield a simple explanation. In a surprisingly unemotional way, my mother revealed that during the war Meissner had killed her family, and had very nearly killed her. She had sworn to kill him if she survived the war and he was still alive. She knew the U.S. justice system could do very little with Nazis who had used false papers and identities to gain entry into the country. At most, Meissner would be deported, provided that some country was willing to take him in. She would not have that. Almost as a parenthetical thought, she added that, of course, she would kill herself after dispatching Meissner.

And then came the final paragraph.

"My darling children, Penny and Peter," she wrote, "always I wanted to keep you safe. Watching you children grow up was the greatest joy of my life. I have not been the good mother that I wanted to be. I did not want you to get too close. I was afraid that some part of me might influence you in a way that I did not want it to. I know you will be angry with me for what I have done. I am sorry. Obviously, I am not a good person or I would have died a long time ago. But you are good children, very sweet and good children and for that I am so grateful to be your mother. I wish I could explain better what happened. But I can't. And I'm so tired. I know this is unfair and you will have many questions. I am sorry I cannot answer them for you. Be good to your father. He's a wonderful man, a brave man, and I owe him more than

I could ever repay. Be well, children. I will love you always. You are my sweet little babies. Mama.”

Five days. Five days from the time she disappeared until the time we buried her. The years went back to work. Penny and I inherited a very old trust, a story of incomprehensible horror and its more civilized twin, mystery.



After my mother’s death, my family found communication to be a complex and painful attempt to console ourselves. We didn’t know where to start because we never really knew the person who was gone. Penny and I couldn’t ask our father to comfort us because we weren’t sure of his relationship to our mother. We didn’t even know if he ever truly loved her. He had been unfaithful to her for many years. Was her death painful to him? Was he secretly relieved? And then there was the other problem. We had never chosen to find out much about her life while she lived. Grief over her death collided with the years we had spent indifferent to her basic humanity.

The newspaper, magazine and television people started calling. They wanted interviews. Our mother was a symbol of Nazi persecution and triumph of the spirit. She was vengeance. She was madness. She was the ultimate victim. She was ruthless justice. She was ... a pretty good story.

My father deflected most of these inquiries by insisting that his wife’s death was a private matter for our immediate family and that we were not ready to speak of her life just because the public was curious.

Of course, not everyone wanted to exploit her death. A number of organizations devoted to Holocaust survivors contacted us. The story of Rudolph Meissner and the woman who killed him had been picked up by the wire services and run in newspapers around the world. My mother's picture accompanied the story. Soon people from places as disparate as Israel and Mexico claimed to have known my mother. They swore that she rescued them from a cattle car transport en route to Majdanek, a death camp in Poland.

About this time, I slowly came to understand something new about my future. I would no longer be the person I was striving to be prior to my mother's death. Forever afterwards, I would be linked to my mother's life, with all its violence, misery and ambivalence.

And yet for quite a while I wanted to explain to people, to make them see the absurdity of the situation. She owns a flower shop, I wanted to tell them. She's not a killer. She's a very nice person. She's my mother and for some awful reason that I'll never understand, she killed herself. And now ... and now ...



A week after the funeral, Linda Firestone called me into her office in New York and expressed her condolences. Then, after an awkward silence, she asked me if I could do the concert tour with Cold Star. We were scheduled to perform our first gig in Boston in about two weeks.

"I know this is a terrible time for you," Linda said, "but unfortunately we have to commit ourselves one way or another, right now. Can you do it, Pete?"

I saw impatience squirming behind a faintly sorrowful expression. She wasn't used to consoling people. It made her cranky.

"I'm ready," I said, perhaps a bit too bravely.

Linda nodded. Then she smiled at me. "Good boy," she said.

I wanted to smash her face in.

"The guys were very worried that you might not be able to do the tour," Linda said in a confidential tone. "They didn't know how to bring it up to you."

Oh, the guys didn't know how to bring it up to me. How sensitive of the lads.

"You see," Linda said, "a group is like a family, and when something happens to one member, it affects everyone."

I stared at her; she shifted her gaze, obviously uncomfortable, down to some papers on her desk. In a perfectly reasonable, measured voice I said, "Yeah, since my talent is pretty much the whole group, of course it would affect everyone."

Linda frowned. She adopted a serious, even pained, look of concern. "Pete, I understand how difficult this must be for you. I want you to know that if I can do anything—"

"The Battle of Britain' should be the closer, not the opening song. And tell the person on the mixing board to balance the levels better on the harmonies. They should be more up front in the mix. At the Garden Arena I couldn't tell whether there were voices blending with mine or if a bunch of people were scraping their shoes backstage."

Linda wrote down a few notes as I spoke. "I'll make certain about the changes."

"Good," I said. I stood up.

When I reached the door, Linda said, not unkindly, "This must

have been a terrible shock for you.”

“Yes,” I said, after a moment. “Yes, I suppose it has.”

“Were you very close to your mother?”

My throat closed; I felt as if I was choking. “No,” I said. I closed the door behind me.



Billy, Tommy and Royce tried to be considerate, but they didn’t know how to behave around a friend whose mother had killed someone and then killed herself. What do you say? When were you allowed to make rude jokes about people again? How long were you supposed to treat your old buddy as a fragile, wounded creature?

I relieved them of these burdensome questions by telling them to stop being so polite. As if to reinforce the point, I said that I wanted three things out of this tour: to gain a national fan base, to get high a lot, and to fuck as many girls as possible while getting high and gaining a national fan base. These proclamations cheered the boys. By the time we reached Connecticut, they had stopped glancing at me with worried, unhappy faces and were hanging out the window, giving the finger to every Ford Fairlane they spotted near our bus. I no longer remember the purpose of the game. I’m not sure it had one, other than to pass the time.

If this all sounds grotesque, remember the circumstances. They were nineteen years old. So was I. We were headed across America to boost album sales. You don’t sell rock’n’roll—much less yourself—by mourning.

But I had lost my mother just weeks before. Her murder-suicide

was in all the papers. Her name was not Rachel Arenberg; it was Leah Dansky. Some guy called Danny Boy knew her true identity and her past. He had threatened to expose her. Perhaps he had known how she would react. Perhaps he had meant for her to kill Meissner all along.

I did not think about these issues in a concrete way. Rather, they were microbes crawling through my blood stream. I didn't feel sick. I didn't even know that I was infected. Into my life came a nameless void.

Chapter 15

Gil Mattison was the lead singer and founder of Cold Star. He had a good voice, husky but sweet, the sort of voice for crying its way into a girl's pants as the roadhouse lights went dim on another night in misery town. He was thirty-two (although he claimed to be twenty-seven), and he pretended to be a simple hick from Arkansas, except when he got drunk. Then he let slip a blunt sort of intelligence, hard, practical and seasoned with a wistful humor. He was a nice guy, when you forgot that he wasn't really a nice guy at all.

I met him after our first show in Boston. He was backstage, toweling himself off after a very athletic performance. He grinned at his lead guitarist and poked him in the ribs. He tossed his sweaty towel at a girl who was smoking a cigarette as if she were studying how to smoke. The towel knocked her cigarette from her fingers, and she glared at Gil with wild disgust. She looked about thirteen.

"You goddamn asshole!" she cried, working herself up into a real fit. "Don't you look at nothin' that you're doin'?"

Gil smiled at her. Then he went back to poking the lead guitarist in the ribs.

"Quit it, Gil," the lead guitarist said in a tired voice.

"The joy of life has done gone outta you, boy," Gil sadly informed the guitarist. Then he winked at me. "Why are y'all gloomin' so? Didn't we rip 'em up tonight?"

The guitarist, an extremely thin, extremely tall man with a pale,

sad face and ratty, long brown hair that hung over his bare shoulders (Cold Star didn't wear shirts—it was part of their Southern Rebel rocker image), shook his head in a mournful way and then disappeared down the dark exit tunnel of the arena. Gil smiled after him.

Suddenly he turned on the student smoker, who was now practicing a little dance step. "Juliette," Gil demanded. "Get me a shirt. Goddamn, I'm freezing my ballecules out here."

"Get it your own goddamn self, you big corny piece of shit. I ain't your slave."

"You been studyin' your math, girl?" Gil said. "I promised your sister that you wouldn't get behind in your school work."

Juliette stopped dancing. She unwrapped the cellophane from a new pack of cigarettes and threw the wrapper on the ground. She took out a cigarette and placed it between her lips. "Two and two make you a big hunk of shit," she mumbled as she lit it.

Gil sighed in my direction. "Look at me," he said, and spread his arm out to include the disdainful Juliette. "On tour with the number five hit in the whole United States of America and I'm spending my time babysitting the result of another busted Trojan." Juliette pointedly ignored him.

A moment later, a streak of blonde hair and two blue dashes for eyes came rushing between the roadies as they pushed and sweated the mountainous amplifiers onto dollies.

"Sorry, sorry," said the painted woman, out of breath. "I couldn't find a single pack of unfiltered Lucky Jims in this whole neighborhood." She came up close to Gil and kissed his cheek. "You havin' a good time with Juliette?"

Gil gave her a skeptical look. "Juliette is practicing to be a nasty

twat hole with the personality of lukewarm shit caked onto an old cow's ass. Aside from that, we're getting along just fine."

"Hi, how are you?" the smear of mascara and lipstick said to me in a friendly way. "I'm Roberta. I'm this man's"—she jabbed a finger at Gil—"fiancée. God help us all."

I introduced myself.

"I heard y'all open tonight," Roberta said, "and you were just as good as—" she searched for an appropriate word.

"As good as lukewarm shit falling down an old cow's ass," Juliette said.

"Juliette!" Roberta said indignantly. "You apologize right now."

Juliette smiled in an embarrassed way. "I was just kiddin," she shrugged. "Actually, I thought you guys were great." She looked at me. "Especially you."

"Uh-oh," Gil smiled lazily at me, "that's either a declaration of love or a stretch in prison, depending on how you look at things."

"Shut up," Juliette whined.

I smiled at everyone.

The Master Planets had been great that night. In the mysterious way that experience teaches you the subtle lessons of charging a performance, of making electrical sparks with the audience, we cooked that night. I felt the crowd and their reactions as an organic part of my playing and singing. You know when you are illuminated before an audience; you feel the light pulsing off your body.

Afterwards, the guys had wanted to go to a party. There were girls backstage, friends of friends of the promoter, who wanted to show the band off to Boston's late-night club scene. No doubt there would be riotous drinking, smoking and fucking, but I had declined the

invitation. I'd wanted to watch Cold Star's performance. I was also tired of the guys. They depressed me now with their swaggering new rock star poses. I think they were just as anxious to be away from me. There's a special chemistry shared between friends when you are young. At that age, you can't make adjustments for different levels of experience. You and your friends are the experience; anything less is the sad realization that all relationships, however strong, are subject to the ephemera of life. Gil nuzzled Roberta's neck and murmured something into her ear that made her giggle and squirm against his embrace.

"No, Gil," she protested, laughing. She pushed him away. "I ain't gonna do that. You save that for your toothless cousins."

Juliette raised her eyebrows at me in an arch way. "Gil's a pervert," she said simply. "He likes to make my sister do all sorts of disgusting and gross things because he's mental."

Gil smoothed Roberta's hair back from her face with a gentle hand. "Why don't you girls go on back to the hotel," he said, smiling. "I want to have a little talk with Peter here."

"Don't sign anything," Juliette said. "And don't sleep with any of Gil's whores." She reached out to me, her fingers curled into claws. "You'll get disgusting little crabbies hanging onto your cock hairs."

Roberta giggled and slapped Juliette's shoulder. "Bye!" they both waved cheerfully, and then walked down the exit tunnel.

"Let's get a drink," Gil said. "I know this place in Roxbury that I like."

We took a cab. Along the way Gil hummed Cold Star's hit, "Beggin'" with a speeded up melody that made the song sound like a Looney Tunes theme. He saw me smiling at his interpretation.

"It's actually a crappy song," Gil explained. He shrugged. "It don't matter. It's our first top-ten hit. I'd sing about hog shit on a Sunday morning if it sold records."

I thought about this. "Makes sense."

He looked at me, his eyes screwed up in concentration. "Does it?"

"Sure," I said, "what's the point of writing or singing if no one ever hears you?"

Gil turned away from me and grinned at his reflection in the cab's window.

The club in Roxbury was less a club than a private entrance to a large room on the fourth floor of an old office building. Against the wall was a bar and in the open space in the middle of the room a few couples danced to a good sound system whose speakers were hidden. The lighting was dim. A soft red glow swirled around the laughing people. Someone gave me a drink. Then Gil and I sat down at a long, low sofa and a moment later two girls slid beside us, lovely bookends in the dark.

"I saw you guys tonight," Gil said. He took a long swallow of his drink. "And you were very good. Real good. What surprised me was the quality of your songwriting. You guys have got a groove that's way down there. It's not the usual shit." Gil raised his hand and another drink appeared in front of him. The girl next to me—her hair was soft and dark and she smelled like flowers—gave me a lit joint.

"The point is," Gil said, deep into his second drink, "that you guys are writing great stuff at nineteen years of age. God almighty. What might you do by the time you're twenty-three?"

Already stoned, I felt the loose, humming buzz flow through my

limbs. The room grew wide, then misty, then slow. The dark-haired girl nibbled on my ear and her tongue felt like the hot touch of an overheated squid. I laughed. She laughed too, and then I watched her mouth as she laughed and then I kissed her. Her lips engulfed me. My hand reached out to touch her breast. I smelled her perfume and I wanted to get on top of her.

“You don’t make money—not real money—unless you own the songs you’re singing. And that’s where things can get tricky.” Gil was on his third drink. “Are you listening to me, boy?”

“What?” I said.

“By controlling distribution, you ...” Gil’s voice drifted away.

He reappeared next to me. He leaned down and whispered to the dark-haired girl. She nodded up at him and laughed.

My hand, I noticed, was inside the girl’s unbuttoned shirt. The hand traced a letter of mysterious origin over the lovely breast.

The dark-haired girl and I spent the night in a strange room—perhaps it was a hotel room, perhaps it was her apartment. The sheets were soft and smelled of sex and perfume. Many times during the night I slid down the flat plane of her belly, kissing the warm skin and smelling the fragrance of heat as it rose from her body. She wrapped herself around me and I met the smooth dark smile as we slid tighter and tighter together.

In the morning she was a pretty girl with tousled brown hair and a nice ass. She told me she was a publicist for an entertainment conglomerate. I saw that I was in an apartment. In her tiny kitchenette, a single jar of instant coffee perched on a shelf over the sink. She asked me if I would like breakfast. She had coffee and just enough milk for one person to have a bowl of Special K.

She was a nice girl and I didn't want to hurt her feelings, but I desperately needed to get out of there. The instant coffee made me terribly sad—I wasn't sure why—and the thought that I had been inside this person and was now being offered Special K with her last bit of milk made me feel even worse.

I offered to take her out for breakfast, but she was already late for work. We kissed on the street before she descended into the subway. I promised to call her from Hartford, our next stop on the tour. She patted me on the cheek. "You're a nice guy," she said and then was gone.

I took a cab back to the hotel where the tour bus was scheduled to depart around noon. I did not feel like a rock star. I did not feel sexy.

The Master Planets gave an even better show in Hartford. This time I could sense the audience's reaction perhaps just a microsecond before they felt it, and powered up my performance to control their response.

Again after the show Gil and I found a private club, where we sat in the dark with different girls and discussed the value of streamlining distribution costs. I smoked weed grown in a faraway, tropical jungle—or so the girls told me—and I went home with a secretary to the vice-president of marketing and research for a very large record company. This girl wasn't quite so domestic. She wanted her friend, who was studying to be a dental hygienist, to join us in bed. In the morning, neither girl offered me even a slice of toast. I invited both of them out for breakfast, but again, they said they were late for work. I didn't promise to call them from Albany. I didn't kiss either of them goodbye.



We drew longer ovations and more excited crowds with each stop. By now, the band was learning to improvise, however minutely, to wind up the audience. Our set was no longer forty-five minutes of rock 'n' roll. It was the creation of stomping feet and piercing cries, the blood beat of our raging fans.

In Pittsburgh, the crowds demanded encore after encore. Every time we said "good night!" they shouted for us to come back. Finally, Cold Star was forced to take the stage to a furious chorus of curses and boos. We were becoming the featured act although Cold Star was still technically at the top of the bill. In Atlanta, the fans began singing "The Battle of Britain" before we hit the stage. The promoters and record company executives—and not least Cold Star's management—were very concerned. Our contract stipulated that we would open for Cold Star on a twenty-six-city national tour. Obviously our growing fan base was not helping Cold Star build album sales based on their hit "Beggin." Then again, we had a number-twelve hit on the charts, recently having jumped from seventeen, and we couldn't afford to abandon the tour just because we were blowing Cold Star off the stage.

Several heated discussions later (Cold Star's agent accused The Master Planets of hijacking a serious rock 'n' roll audience and replacing it with a teenybopper cadre), Linda Firestone negotiated a new deal for us. We would leave the tour after Jacksonville, Florida, and then, during December, headline our own tour. Lost Souls would replace us as the opening act for Cold Star. (Lost Souls last had a hit

in 1970, a wretched little tune about a dog named Bobby and the little girl who loved him. Both the little girl and her dog died on Christmas day and every Christmas afterwards, the little girl's parents visited the pound and took home a dog about to be euthanized. After several years, the parents died and the townspeople, struck by the pathos of a kennel created out of love and misery, undertook to build a new orphanage, right next to an open field where puppies and small, unwanted children could run free together. The song, titled "Tina 'n' Bobby," sold millions of records and remained number one on the charts for six long weeks during the fall of that year.)

Strangely, Gil and I remained on the best of terms. I expected him to show a certain degree of rancor, or at least reserve, as *The Master Planets* eclipsed *Cold Star* in exciting the fans on the tour. If anything, however, Gil became more voluble after the shows, praised *The Master Planets* even more for our professionalism and talent. He let me know that I was, in particular, the "great gumball in that shooting gallery." I asked him, laughing, what on earth he meant by that tortured phrase, and he smiled at me a very wicked, knowing smile and replied, "You're it, son. You guys are great, but you're the one with the big, raging fire inside him. You got the heat, boy."

I thanked him for the compliment. I was very susceptible to flattery at nineteen, as most young people are, and then, a bit hesitantly I asked him if he was upset about *The Master Planets* getting so much audience response. He laughed at my question as if he couldn't believe my innocence, my naïve belief in the appearance of things.

"Upset?" he said, already on his fourth drink of the night. "I couldn't be happier. Who do you think pushed for you guys to headline your own tour?"

We were sitting in a rather plush, bamboo-style “hut” on the Florida beach. Far away, over the warm, tropical night, a light gleamed from a distant ship. A wind blew through the hut, redolent of sea and the banana scent of lingering suntan lotion. New girls, blonde and deeply tanned, served us drinks. The girl sitting closest to me wore a little halter top, a scanty, sunburst-colored thing with thin straps over the shoulders. She lit a joint and then, after a few puffs, put the joint between my lips. When I exhaled, she shrugged off the straps of her halter top and kissed me. Her mouth tasted like bubblegum and pot.

“Wait,” I said, trying to think clearly. The girl’s breasts nudged my chest as she kissed my neck. “Wait,” I said again, a little baffled. I flicked aside a strand of the girl’s blonde hair, hanging over my face like a curtain. “You’re telling me,” I inquired, spitting out the bleached hair still hitting my face, “that you pushed for us to headline? You did that for us?”

Gil sighed. He pointed to his empty drink and the girl next to him promptly went behind the bar to fix him another concoction of rum.

“Hey, I wanted you guys to be good. But when you were great, it was obvious to me—hell, it was obvious to Linda, too—that you had to be headliners, not the opening act for a bar band riding a so-so hit.”

The girl behind the bar had returned and Gil guzzled his seventh or perhaps eighth drink of the evening. I stared at him. Another question was forming.

“You know Linda?” I asked him.

Gil patted the rear end of the girl bringing him the drinks. “Lovely service,” he winked at her. She smiled and then shrugged off her halter

top. Gil admired her breasts. "Why, I believe there is a hint of rose in your nipples, sweetheart." The girl laughed and then returned behind the bar.

Gil finally turned to me. "Yes, I know Linda. Everybody in the business knows her. She's moving up fast too. Just last week QV Records made her head of their West Coast office."

QV Records, along with perhaps one or two other labels, represented the biggest record company in America.

"She's not going to be with Tanzar anymore?" I asked, suddenly worried.

Gil shook his head. "She's done gone."

"But, how does that—?"

"Affect your band?" Gil said. He pushed back the mass of his shoulder length, curly brown hair and pinned it behind his ears. "Well," he said in a slow, meditative manner, "I reckon it won't make that much difference. Unless, of course, Tanzar's new head of talent and development isn't as committed to pushing your career."

An idea began to form in my baked brain. "You've changed labels, haven't you?" I said. An even newer idea pushed its way into my consciousness. "You're going with Linda over to QV. And you arranged with Linda, before the tour even began, to have us as your opening act."

Gil gave me a little smile. It was not an unfriendly smile—was there a touch of sympathy in the expression? Or was I still stoned?

"Why?" I said. Suddenly, I had a horrible thought. "Who's replacing Linda at Tanzar?"

Gil shrugged. "Some guy named Aiden Sewell. Used to be a promoter or something." Gil pointed at his drink and the topless girl

behind the bar dutifully poured him another.

I shook my head. Aiden Sewell. “We’re not headlining our own tour in December, are we?” I sensed, rather than knew, anything definite.

“Hard to say,” Gil remarked.

“I don’t understand any of this,” I said wearily. The girl who had been kissing my neck was gone. Her suntan lotion, the banana smell, lingered in the hut, along with the scent of the sea. The topless bartender sat down next to Gil. Her legs were crossed and she rested her chin on her hand. She looked at me in a polite, curious way. She might have been a participant in a seminar that went on just a bit too long and now she was struggling to pay attention, with her breasts exposed.

“Peter, you are a great talent. Your band is great,” Gil said.

“Then why—?”

“We want those songs,” Gil said. “We know how to make them into hits and our band is already established. It’s all part of a package for moving to QV. Linda gets to be West Coast chief, and we get the music that will make us real stars.”

I laughed. The idea of Cold Star, with their corny, rebel rocker, country-fried-shit sound making a hit out of our music was ludicrous.

“Oh, I know,” Gil said, amused himself. “We’re not half the band that you guys are. And you can write while we just finger paint. Yeah, that’s all true. But you know something, Pete boy?”

I stared at him. It was too soon to genuinely hate him, but I knew that through practice it would become easier.

“What?” I said coldly.

"It don't matter." Gil laughed a little. Yes, it was becoming easier to hate him. "It just don't matter." The topless girl's chin slid off her hand. She jerked herself awake with a flutter of startled eyes. Then she yawned.

"I'm tired, Gil," she said. She yawned again. "Are we gonna fuck tonight or are you just gonna sit here and bullshit?"

Gil patted her cheek. "Real soon, sweetheart, real soon."

The topless bartender rolled her eyes at me.

I got up from the lounge chair and made my way to the door. Outside, the light of dawn made a smooth gray ripple over the sea. I breathed in the deep scent of salt.

"Why would I sell you our songs?" I said.

There was a rustle in the hut, as if Gil were finally ready to put away the drinks, the girls, the deep fried accent, and go home to his broker's office.

"Because you'd rather have people hear your music, even if someone else is doing it, than go back to playing in cheap bars around the Jersey shore. Also it's a way to stay in the business. Eventually, you might cut another album. You're young, you've got time."

I turned around. Gil stood, not too steadily, with his arm around the bartender. Her halter top was back on. Gil's face looked puffy and gray. He was pushing middle age fast.

"I never really understood what was going on here, did I?" I asked.

Gil considered the question. "Not much," he finally said. Then he winked at me. "But you're a real fast learner, son, and someday I know you're gonna make a big name for yourself, one way or another."

I was too depressed to comment, derisively or otherwise, on this

prophetic reading of my future.

“Boy, I know this feels bad,” Gil said evenly, “but it ain’t that bad. No matter what happens, you’re gonna be just fine.” Gil frowned, then he shook his head like a dog shaking the water off his coat. The bartender tightened her grip on his shoulder. Gil was quite drunk now and wobbled when he walked. He looked up at me with his bleary eyes.

“Jesus Christ,” he said softly. “You came on this tour just a few weeks after your Mama killed a man and then killed herself. And you’ve been great on stage, really great. You might be inexperienced, but you’re tough. You’re going places, man.”

Gil awkwardly patted my shoulder and then weaved back and forth down the beach with his bartender girlfriend.

The Master Planets left Florida the next day and flew home to New Jersey. We never performed publicly as a group again.

Chapter 16

Is there an exact moment when adulthood begins for some people? I don't know. But I do know the exact moment when I looked at the guys in the band after we returned from Florida and recognized them for what they were: rather nice boys who were extremely gifted and could never devise a clever plan to exploit someone else's talent.

We were drinking wine and smoking hash in our rented home on the north side of Sea Ridge. A late November rain had begun to fall outside and there were strange drafts of cold air blowing in the corners of the old house. Perhaps thirty people crowded into the living room—friends, and then, of course, the friends of friends—all of them hoping to acquire a little celebrity shine by rubbing against us. Billy and Royce had just finished telling the story of the roadie who threw a microphone stand into the audience in Buffalo. A small riot had broken out and the police were called in to subdue the angry fans. Why did the roadie throw the microphone into the audience? Why was a rioting group of stoned kids so funny? What did any of this have to do with anything? I had no idea. The living room devotees found the story wonderful, fantastical. They laughed—some even shrieked—at the end of the story, when Billy and Royce revealed that the roadie was tripping and thought he saw sea monsters gliding through the pot smoke hanging over the seats in the upper tiers.

Our song was now number fifteen on the charts (a week after we left the tour, the song began to plummet), but the record still played

on radio stations all over the country. We had opened, however briefly, for Power Train and later for a lesser-known group, but a group, nevertheless, that was still seen occasionally on Dick Clark specials. We might not be rock 'n' roll gods—at least not yet—but we had dined with the immortals and so we knew a thing or two about the brilliant life of those who were great.

“We need to get smoke, man, when we come on stage, you know, like we’re stepping out of a time machine or something,” Royce said quite seriously. He paused to think—everyone watched him—and then he added, “Our tour should be, like, a rebirth, you know?”

“I was thinking of planets, great big revolving planets hung from the ceiling that send out sparks and shit when we enter the stage,” Tommy said, “and then, when we exit, the planets should explode.” Tommy considered the image. “Yeah,” he said, “now that would be announcing our presence with some fucking authority.”

I remember smiling. It was the first time I had actually felt like smiling since my mother’s death. I looked at Billy, Tommy and Royce. They were so busy and happy explaining and describing our upcoming tour that I didn’t have the heart to ask them one simple question: when were we supposed to begin this tour? Aiden Sewell’s secretary had called us more than a week after we left the road with Cold Star. According to her, the promoters needed more time to organize concert dates and venues. Perhaps we might start the tour at the end of January. About Cold Star buying our songs, the guys couldn’t even imagine anything so absurd. Even Linda Firestone’s departure for QV held little significance for them. The fans in Atlanta knew the words to “The Battle of Britain.” What more evidence, what more certainty did you need to guarantee wild success?

I wondered what I would do after my career in music was over. The shock of finding my mother's body was still fresh in my memory. So was the impact of the circumstances surrounding her death. My father had become a recluse. I had expected him to find solace with Mrs. Griffin or someone else, but instead he came home alone from work and began a nightly ritual of drinking in front of the fireplace. I knew this from Penny, who had spent the last few weeks with him while I was away on tour. Penny, of course, drove herself to do even more work. She had recently won a grant to do research at a prestigious medical institute.

I wondered what Billy, Tommy and Royce would do when things were over. They had been wonderful friends.

I smiled as Billy told a story about groupies—twins, no less—who banged on his motel door at three in the morning in Charleston, South Carolina. The twins wanted him to play and sing “Oh, Laurie!” while they took turns sucking him off. Later, a girl who had passed the hash pipe to me in the living room and smiled as our hands touched over the smoking instrument asked me if I wanted to spend the night with her. I coughed and cleared my throat. I told her I was sick and didn't want her catching anything. Around five in the morning, I threw on a jacket over a heavy woolen sweater and walked down to the beach. I looked at the gray winter sea.

Chapter 17

Our family received more letters from around the world. Some thirty people insisted that my mother, using a submachine gun hidden under the wooden planks of a railroad car transport, had blown open the doors, killed the guards, and somehow miraculously led this tribe of the doomed to the forests and eventually to freedom. The letters differed somewhat in narrative order and coherence, but they all described my mother as a fearless, almost supernatural presence, with a strangely calm yet bottomless fury in her pale gray eyes. They saw her picture in the newspaper and, despite the passage of years, recognized her as their savior. They would never forget that face. They had known her for ten minutes, more or less, from the time she pulled the gun out from beneath a slat in the floor until the German guards lay like bloody matchsticks in the Polish snow.

More than ever, I wanted to speak to Danny Boy. But when I broached the subject with Penny, she recoiled as if I had uttered the vilest obscenity. We were walking down Bleeker Street in the Village; we had reservations for dinner at a French restaurant where we were supposed to meet Penny's new boyfriend. He was a second-year resident in cardiology and, as far as I knew, Penny's first boyfriend with a serious career ahead of him.

She stopped suddenly in front of a fruit stand and looked at me. She was trembling. "I can't sleep at night. I can't eat more than a few bites of anything. And people"—she shut her eyes; when she

opened them, they glistened with tears—"people say things to me," she whispered.

"What things?" I looked into her shifting, anxious eyes.

"Things!" she shouted at me. "Are you stupid? What's the matter with you?"

People glanced at us as they passed by. I was a little afraid now. "What are you saying?"

She looked at me with a sly, almost pitying expression. "You're so stupid, Pete. Oh, you're so stupid. Your stupidity is monumental, it's boundless. How have you lived so long?"

"Penny, I don't understand," I said. I reached out to touch her arm. "What's going on?"

She slapped my hand away. "You!" she sneered. She pointed her finger in my face. "You!"

I stared at my sister. I saw the hatred in her eyes.

"I didn't do anything," I said quietly. She pointed at me and sneered. "I didn't do anything," she mimicked me in a high, nasal voice. Suddenly, to my amazement, I was crying. People stared openly now as they passed us on the street. I put my hand over my eyes.

After a while I got control of myself. Penny had disappeared.

A week later, Penny was hospitalized for severe depression. For the rest of her life she would collapse at odd intervals with similar depressions, squeezed between the longer periods of her life, packed with awards, honors and tributes.

Shortly after my sister's first breakdown, Danny Boy contacted me.



A brilliant winter's day. The sunshine broke against the snow, and in the window panes of the houses and the storefronts lining the streets the glare hurt your eyes, as if tiny razor blades, full of sharp, piercing rays, had leaped off the snow. I was walking to the station in Sea Ridge to catch the nine o'clock commuter train to New York. We couldn't get a straight answer from Aiden Sewell about when our tour was supposed to begin. At first he told us that concert venues were solidly booked with other bands throughout March. Then he told us that it was difficult to predict whether a tour would be economically feasible, given the sagging sales of our first album and single. Billy, Tommy and Royce argued with him on the phone. Album sales were down, they told him angrily, because we weren't touring. Didn't he understand even that much about promotions? The guys in the band finally prevailed upon me to speak to him in New York. They assured me that I was better at making people, even assholes like Aiden Sewell, understand. I doubted that Aiden would change his mind about the tour. But I dutifully agreed to go into the city and speak with him.

The benches in front of the railway station were nearly empty; most of the commuters had taken an earlier train. A few young mothers and their children huddled near an old poster stand with an advertisement for toothpaste hanging limply off the mounting. The children laughed and their breath blew out in big frosty exclamations of shouts and giggles. The young mothers tied the children's hoods even tighter until their little faces nearly disappeared inside their yellow or blue or red parkas. A man sat alone on a bench, some distance from the children and from the old poster swinging in the wind. He read a newspaper. He did not wear a hat. His face was deeply tanned. Slowly he folded the newspaper, put it away in a briefcase by his side, and

then looked across the tracks as if he saw something perplexing, but quite interesting, in the sparse, low trees on the opposite bank.

I approached cautiously. I wasn't sure it was him. He was still staring across the tracks when, in a quiet, pleasant voice, he said, "Sit down, Peter."

I looked around. Nothing had changed. The mothers still fussed over the children's clothing, the poster for toothpaste still swooned in the chill air.

"It's all right," he said, not quite looking at me. "Sit down. I want to talk to you."

Very slowly I sat on the bench but with plenty of distance between us.

"Danny Boy?" I inquired softly, nervously.

He turned his head to look at me. "My name is Daniel Gilaad, Peter. I work for the Israeli government. Only your mother ever called me Danny Boy. She thought I was somewhat naïve and immature."

I noticed for the first time that his face was a patchwork of scars, faint but visible enough to create a sense that he was in the final stages of healing after a horrible accident. I noticed too that there was a deliberateness in the way he breathed, the way he spoke. Nothing surprised him and nothing would ever really agitate him. He was a man capable of enormous violence, although at that point I couldn't say why I should feel those things about him.

"Why are you here?" I asked.

For a moment, a clouded, deeply serious look crossed his face. Then the look was gone and he was once again a polite man sitting on a bench in the winter while he waited for his train.

"I wanted to express my deepest sympathy to you and your family."

He spoke the words as if, after repeating them so many times, they had lost all meaning for him.

I didn't believe in his sympathy. I didn't believe in anything about him.

"I saw you that day," I told him, "I saw you talking to my mother. I heard the whole thing. I told the police and the FBI and the attorney general's office all about your goddamn conversation."

He turned away from me and resumed his serious examination of the earthen bank across the railroad tracks.

"I know," he said. "I read the reports."

At that moment, in the distance, the train blew its whistle. The young mothers got up from the benches and gathered the children into squealing squadrons of mittens, hats and boots. Daniel Gilaad didn't move. With a rush of wind and the clattering roar of steel wheels, the train pulled into the station. The doors whooshed open and several conductors stepped outside and organized the small crowds of people onto the train.

"Let's get on," the general said. He stood up quickly, surprisingly so for such a large man.

I hesitated.

"I saw you staring at the scars," he said. He placed a finger on his cheek. Then he smiled in my direction. "Your mother saved me from worse."

The doors closed just a moment after we got on board.

Chapter 18

He apologized for not attending her funeral. The outbreak of the Yom Kippur War, he explained, had required all of his attention, and traveling abroad at that time was simply out of the question. He did not elaborate upon his role in the war and I did not ask him to provide any further information. We did not speak and the train rushed past several shore communities. The general's scars flashed bright in the hurtling sunshine, then flickered out in the intermittent shadows. Somehow, sitting next to him, the car forging through snowy fields then dense woods, I found myself unable to say anything.

"This is very strange," he finally said, addressing the window as he looked out upon a jungle of abandoned warehouses.

I waited, alert for an explanation. He continued to examine the gritty industrial parks as they flew by. "You see," he said, still gazing out the window, "I never expected to be speaking to Leah Dansky's son." He turned to me. The puzzled, almost pained look in his eyes had returned. It was the same expression he had worn for an instant when I asked him, back at the station, why he was there.

"I know my mother is dead," I answered. "I know you had a lot to do with her death."

He smiled at me. Years later, I would understand that smile. It was the smile that admired and pitied youth. It was the smile that acknowledged youth's generous acceptance of romance as a way of looking at the world. It was the smile that knew better.

"The problem," he said, "is that you won't understand anything now. But years later, you might. And that, I'm afraid, may be worse for you."

"I want to know. You knew her, or so you tell me."

He thought a while. "All right." He didn't speak for several moments. Then he said, "You look so much like her." I was surprised. In his voice I heard the sound of anguish.



We sat in a darkened restaurant near the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Several times the general's eyes swept the room, from the maître d's post near the front entrance to the swinging doors connecting the kitchen to the dining area. His glance was rapid and subtle, a professional's survey of space and its inhabitants.

"What are you looking for?" I asked, puzzled.

"Nothing in particular." His tone was vague. In the dim light, his scars gave his face a rugged, unformed look, as if he were a sculpture that his creator had brutally abandoned.

I didn't quite know how to start. I didn't know exactly what I wanted to find out from him.

"How's your band?" he suddenly asked.

"My band?"

"Yes, you were on tour, weren't you?"

His knowledge, and even more, his curiosity about my musical career, surprised me.

"We've run into problems," I said.

"Yes?" he inquired. Just then the waiter approached. He set down

a basket of warm rolls and took our orders. Afterwards I looked across the table at the general. He seemed less menacing now, almost benign.

"The music industry is pretty complicated," I explained to him. "You see, we can't really promote our album unless we keep touring. And we can't keep touring unless our record company wants to promote us." I smiled a little at him. "I'm sure this doesn't make much sense to you."

"People take advantage of your talent because you allow them to."

"It's not that simple." I was a bit defensive. "You need huge financial backing to go on tour. You can't just walk into a ten-thousand-seat arena and ask the directing manager if he's looking for a band."

This simple lesson in marketing and economics appeared to amuse the general. I shook my head, half angry at myself, half angry at him. "When people go into a department store and they buy an album, they have no idea how many deals have to be made so they can hear one lousy song on their turntable."

Just then our lunch was served. The waiter set a steak sandwich before me. The general had ordered a Caesar salad. I stared at my sandwich. A pile of fries lay heaped around the corners of the plate. Several of the fries were burnt at their ends. The general ate slowly, chewing on his wedge of lettuce with a kind of mechanical deliberation.

After a while he smiled at me and then he folded his napkin and placed it beside his water glass.

"Before I tell you how I met your mother, I want you to know how pleased I am to talk with you, Peter."

I waited. At that moment, a tall young man suddenly appeared next to the general. He leaned over the general's shoulder and whispered something. The general listened quietly, then he held up two fingers. The young man smiled. A moment later he was gone.

"Who was that?" I asked.

The general shrugged. "A friend."

I was about to say, "You have a friend?" but caught myself before I spoke.

The general gestured at my plate. "You're not eating."

"Why are you interested in me?" I asked. "Why aren't you speaking to my father? Or my sister?"

"Your sister is in the hospital, recovering from a nervous breakdown. She's currently being observed on what is called a 'suicide watch.' Your father is very tired. He's lost a great deal in life. He's wondering just how much he may have contributed to his wife's death. And now his girlfriend is pressuring him to marry her."

I looked at the general. It occurred to me that I knew next to nothing about him. Were we being watched? Investigated? And for what purpose?

"I want to see some ID," I said, mustering what I thought was just the right blend of authority and forcefulness. "I want to see your driver's license."

"All right," he said calmly. He reached into the breast pocket of his suit jacket and drew out a wallet. Then he selected a card from the wallet and carefully pushed the card across the table.

I inspected the identification card. It looked like a driver's license and his picture was on it, but the writing was all in Hebrew.

"This doesn't mean anything," I said. "What if I called the cops?"

Smoothly he raised one finger off the level of the table. Two tall young men materialized behind him. "This young man would like to have me arrested," he informed them. "Would you please call the New York City Police?"

"What shall I say you're being arrested for?" one of the young men replied in accented English. He and his companion smiled at me courteously.

"Oh, I don't know," the general said. "Perhaps ..." He looked at me. "Unlawful dining?"

I frowned and threw a sulky glance down at my steak sandwich. "All right, I get the point."

The general motioned the two assistants away. They nodded once at me and then disappeared into the dark recesses of the restaurant.

I stared gloomily at my cooling fries.

"I don't blame you for being suspicious," he said.

"I want to know exactly who you are and what you want from me," I said coldly.

"As I said, I work for the Israeli government."

"Yes, I know. But what do you do exactly?"

"Well, let's see," he proffered, "I listen, I observe. Sometimes I'll make a suggestion."

"That's a job?"

He smiled faintly. "For some it's a very skilled job and often quite dangerous."

I took a sip of Coke. It had gone flat. "What do you want from me?" I said.

"Your help, your participation."

"With what?" I asked, baffled.

"We're going to set up a memorial fund to honor your mother. The proceeds, over time, will be used to develop various studies, possibly political commissions, public relations ventures, think tanks. Eventually books will be published about your mother's life, documentaries produced about her wartime exploits."

I looked around the restaurant. A young couple held hands across their table.

I turned back to the general. "What?" I said. "What are you talking about?"

"Your mother was a great symbol of resistance and heroism. The world should remember her."

At first I simply stared, uncomprehending. My mother? Documentaries? She came back to me then as I remembered her eyes. She leaned against the deck of our beach house, her hand cradling a glass of scotch as she stood ghostly watch over the Atlantic Ocean. I felt a sudden, strange shortness of breath.

"My mother was very unhappy," I said, struggling to explain something perfectly obvious about her existence. "She committed suicide. She apologized to her family for not being a good person, whatever that meant."

The general's eyes shifted. He looked past me, and then his gaze came back to rest coldly upon me. "Your mother suffered, as did many other people, so that you could sit in this nice restaurant and worry about the business of popular music."

I felt dizzy. I lifted myself from my chair and grabbed the corner of the table for support. "I can't stay here," I told him. I reached for my wallet and drew out some money.

"Peter," he began, "Please sit down. I want to explain—"

"No. I have to go."

A second later, the general's two assistants accompanied me out of the restaurant. Along with them and the general, who hovered solicitously near, I found myself standing unsteadily in the bright, cold sunlight underneath the looming façades of several office buildings.

"I'm fine now," I said. I backed away from the little circle of foreign agents.

"Are you sure?" the general said.

"I'm fine," I repeated. "I just want to go home."

I left them on the street. I walked for perhaps ten or twenty blocks. Then I took a train to the Village and sat in the coffee shop where Billy and I used to write lyrics. The tabletops were made of chalkboard. You could write, draw and scribble while you drank your coffee. I put my head down on a chalkboard tabletop. I didn't write or draw. After a half hour, I walked out. From a pay phone I called Aiden Sewell to confirm our three o'clock appointment.

His secretary answered his phone and apologized profusely. "Oh, I'm so glad I caught you. Aiden had to cancel your meeting. Can he reschedule?" I waited while she checked her appointment book. "How's three o'clock, April 3?"

"That's nearly two months from now," I said. "Please tell Aiden that we'll sue him for breach of contract. He's supposed to promote the band. Please tell him that before the white stuff goes up his nose." I hung up.

On the train back to Sea Ridge, I sat slumped in my seat. Two girls and two boys, a few years younger than I, got on board at one of the small towns that dot the Jersey coastline. They spent the journey grabbing at one another's coat pockets and then shrieking with laughter

as they fought off the violating hands. These idiot kids are high, I thought, as I watched their antics. I saw images from their lives. The boys farting in math class the moment the teacher wrote a formula on the blackboard, and putting everyone in hysterics. The girls giving blowjobs under the bleachers, passing notes to their girlfriends during typing class. Suddenly I despised them. I despised the careless, crass, stupid waste of their freedom.

Why had my mother died? What had happened to her back in Poland? Did my father always know that he was married to Leah Dansky and not Rachel Arenberg? Would anything be accomplished by bringing a suit against Aiden Sewell? Was it time to sell our songs to Gil Mattison? Was the general's idea of turning my mother into some kind of symbol finally worse than having all her sufferings forgotten, misunderstood? Did I really know enough yet about her life to make any sort of judgment? What was the right thing to do? What was even the better thing to do? How would this affect my father and sister?

The kids on the train got off at Red Bank.



I told the guys in the band how, once again, Aiden Sewell had put us off. They shouted and cursed, righteously chorused and then added to my threat that we would sue him for breach of contract. The guys also wanted to sue him for breach of good faith, breach of being a douche bag, breach of fucking up because he was so fucking stupid and high that he couldn't see his motherfucking balls, they were so far shoved up his fat, fucking ass, that dildo. After expounding in this

manner on Aiden's deficiencies, the guys decided they were hungry—it was time for roast beef subs at the deli down the street. Did I want to join them?

I told them to go ahead without me. I told them that I needed to write some letters to people who claimed to have known my mother. The guys said, "Take your time, Pete," and left quietly. Anything to do with my mother's death, they acted as if they had arrived late at a stranger's funeral. They were self-consciously respectful and desperate to get away as soon as possible.

Actually, I had no letters to write. I was trying to write a new song—any new song—and failing utterly. For months, the guys and I had been practicing the songs that we had already written for our second album, the one we were anxious to record when and if Aiden Sewell booked us studio time. Since then, I had written nothing.

I could not believe this strange thing that had happened: I could no longer compose music. All my life, music had been my great, effortless pride. When I wrote, I heard wondrous rain. I would play a chord, peruse a melody, and lovely echoes of new notes and new joy seemed to touch the keys before my fingers next moved. Now at most all I heard was a scrap of sound. I would listen for a bridge, a chorus, and hear ... nothing.

One day a few weeks before, Billy, Tommy and I had been sitting in the living room, playing acoustic versions of our songs from the album. We were not rehearsing; we were not trying out new arrangements; we were simply whiling away another day of unemployment. Royce came into the room, eating from a large bag of potato chips. He sat down on our lumpy couch. After he had finished the chips, he blew air into the bag then smashed it with both hands. The "pop" sound was

deafening. He glanced at us as if he had performed a death-defying stunt and was expecting applause. He looked happy.

"I could go for some pizza," Billy said, reaching for his guitar case. Tommy unslung his guitar and began putting it away into its case. I sat hunched over my guitar. I had not moved. Royce stood up and yawned: "So when are you going to write us another hit, Pete?"

The question was simple; it was sincere. I noticed that Billy and Tommy were trying to act casual. But they were done putting their guitars away and hadn't yet moved to leave the room.

I put my own guitar into its case and snapped it shut. Then I kicked it across the room. It slid to a stop in front of Royce.

"Try your luck," I said to him. "If you come up with anything, I'll be happy to play along."

It was an enormously cruel thing to say. At first Royce simply stared at me. For a brief moment it seemed that an uncomfortable truth was trying to break through his confusion. Then it was gone. He laughed. Billy and Tommy laughed too, but their laughter was restrained.

"I'm not really hungry," I said carefully. "Guess I'll stick around here." They left without me.

What could any of us have said? We all knew that I wrote most of the songs. We all knew that I was the one who got us the auditions, talked to the record company executives and provided us with our musical direction. But now I was going away.

The thing that I liked best about myself, the thing that gave me a sense of wonder and responsiveness to the world had vanished. I was losing myself, but to what I couldn't say.

Chapter 19

Billy, Tommy, Royce and I drifted for months. We spent our days practicing, sleeping, getting high, practicing some more, and then lulling ourselves into the pretense that, at any moment, the record company would be calling. I had stopped believing in our future as a band months before. Aiden wouldn't return our phone calls, the record company ignored us, we had no dates, not even tentative ones, for going on tour. I knew the band was finished, at least as recording artists. But I didn't know what else to do with myself.

We were all nineteen; in a few weeks I would be twenty. We had been playing together for nearly seven years. Aside from music, none of us had any particular skills or interests apart from bedding girls and imbibing exotic substances. The "outside" world—the world of work and school—was more than strange to us: it seemed degrading, lonely and meaningless. We had never really considered failure; we had never considered growing older. The idea that things might not work out was for other people.

The fight started after Helena began stripping to "Heat," a bluesy, funk-inflected arrangement we used to play during our club days.

That night in May of 1974 our house swarmed with party guests. Most of them were complete strangers to us. They simply came, bearing bottles, bongos, joints and tabs. There were girls no more than thirteen accompanied by guys of twenty, and there were twenty-year-old girls accompanied by forty-year-old men. We had no idea where

they came from, why they were there, or what they expected to find with us.

In the first crush of guests, around ten o'clock at night, a group of junior high school girls, all wearing heavy blue eye shadow and bright pink lipstick, began to make out in the kitchen with a gang of high school boys, who took time out from groping the girls to drink quickly and methodically from their six-packs and were already shoving other people around in a playful but steadily more menacing way. By eleven o'clock, the "townies" had arrived—post high school-aged guys from Sea Ridge who worked at gas stations, landscaping jobs and fast food joints during the day and then cruised the bars at night, where they punched each other's faces over shots of whiskey and beer and obsessively argued sports. The townies occupied the living room as if they had seized the worn carpet and broken chairs after a long and costly battle. They glared at the high school boys and their pink-lipped girlfriends who made the mistake of trying to cross, unnoticed, past the potted plant that stood wilting in a foyer between the living room and bathroom. The townies shouted and laughed every time the bathroom door opened and closed.

Moment by moment, cresting "Yahhs!" swelled from corners of the house in gleeful obscenity or stoned silliness or drunken anger. Bottles smashed in crescendos as girls shrieked in delight or wailed in affected misery. There were arguments, roaring and strident, pitched over silver kegs drowning in beer. In other corners, bodies hunched prayer-like before red bong. The devotees made grave and giggling noises as they inhaled the smoke, bubbled the misty water, and then choked out laughing clouds of blue vapor over teary, streaming eyes.

By twelve o'clock, there were at least a hundred and fifty people

smoking, drinking, cursing, shoving, kissing, feeling, blowing, sucking, punching, smacking, shouting, puking, falling, swaying and dribbling on every surface of our house and on the beach directly outside the house. Someone shouted for us to play. More voices shouted. We thought it might be nice to play a very short set for the sake of our performance skills.

"I don't like any of these fucking people," Billy said in a low voice, as we plugged into our amps. "How did they get here?"

"I think someone invited them," Royce said, adjusting his cymbals.

"Wasn't me," Tommy remarked.

"Let's play 'Heat,'" I suggested. I checked the action on my blue Stratocaster.

"Sounds good," Billy said and tightened his B string. Querulously, he repeated, "Where did all these douche bags come from?"

We were set up on the backyard deck, looking out to sea. About a hundred people had already found places in the sand, where they were dug in with their beer and pot. I tapped my microphone. "Ladies and gentlemen," I announced, my voice echoing over the crowd. "Tonight we bring you the latest musical sensation, Coma, not to be confused with The Master Planets, who for contractual reasons cannot perform unless first sanctioned by their record company, Universal Gas Releases."

"Shut the fuck up and play!" someone shouted from the darkness.

I hesitated for a second. I wasn't used to this tone from our fans.

"Keep that up," I said in a jovial, offhand manner, "and no one will get Quaalude pie for dessert!"

From the massed bodies in the darkness, someone yelled: "Don't kill me, Pete. I'm not a Nazi, I swear!"

Several people laughed. I didn't know how to respond. I fell back a few steps, looked at the ground, shook my head.

Billy was suddenly beside me. "They're assholes," he said. "We don't have to play, you know." Royce and Tommy assented with various "fuckin' idiots," and "cock-suckers."

"It's all right," I murmured. "It's nothing. I can't let myself get upset over it."

Billy said, "Are you sure?"

"I'm sure. Let's play. We need the practice."

Royce hit the tom-toms and bass with an innovative blast of drum fills and kicks. In my life, I've rarely heard a better drummer than Royce Hart. Seconds later, Tommy edged into the rhythm, popping bass notes around the root chords, playing harmonies around the lead and rhythm sections. We swayed into the song, getting the groove tight and nasty before I raised my voice into the mix. Billy and Tommy danced into the song, their background vocals acting in sharp, poignant breaks against the leading melody of my voice. We were good that night. We always seemed to know where we were going in a song, and when we played, each always knew the other's intentions. In 1973 and 1974, we may have been one of the best bands in America, which is a rather grandiose claim—but I believed it then and I still do.

We were about halfway through the song; the crowd on the beach sang along in a ferocious way, screaming "Heat!" more or less on beat. I could see their eyes gleaming in the darkness. As always during a performance, the audience to me was an intensely alive force, almost maddening in its closeness, and yet strangely abstract too.

Suddenly I felt the rhythm of the crowd adjust itself to a new presence. On the beach, dancing just below the sun deck, Helena Majorie stripped off her shirt as she wriggled to the music. The crowd howled in raucous appreciation as Helena's left breast made its first appearance; then the right breast made its way into the footlights. Helena flung her shirt into the crowd. A deep roar reached all the way back, it seemed, to the sea, where the surf crashed heavily after an earlier storm. Working off the enthusiasm of the crowd, Helena arched her hips forward, spread her legs apart, and slowly unzipped her jeans down to her crotch. No one listened to our song or paid any attention to our performance. They were riveted on Helena's hand spreading open her jeans as the zipper moved teasingly down. She put her hands on either side of her crotch and ground her pelvis in languorous circles.

"Helena, I can see your pussy!" some wit shouted uproariously.

"Okay, that's it," Billy said, disgusted. He swung his guitar off his shoulder. "I'm not singing backup for Helena's pussy."

We stopped playing.

Helena looked around. Her breasts were exposed; her unzipped jeans revealed light blue cotton panties. The crowd muttered and jostled one another.

"Keep playing, assholes!" came a threatening voice.

"What's going on?" Helena said, puzzled. "Where's the music?"

"Helena, we're a professional band," Billy said, trying to control his temper. "We have a record contract. We shouldn't even be playing on the beach."

"Oh, sor—ree, Mr. 'I'm Such A Big Fucking Rock Star That I Can't Even Play One Lousy Song For My Friends Anymore.'"

"Helena, turn around!" came voices out of the darkness. "We can't see your tits!"

Royce stepped forward from behind his drum kit; a cymbal fell over and crashed. "Wanna put your shirt on? The show's over, Helena."

"I don't have to listen to you." She crossed her arms over her breasts.

Royce and Helena had once been romantically involved.

As Helena stared angrily up at Royce and he stared angrily down at her, a couple of drunken high school boys playfully grabbed Helena around her waist and attempted to touch her breasts. She spun on her heels and slapped their hands away. "Get offa me, you little shits!" she shouted.

The crowd, watching this performance with moderate enjoyment, made a few suggestions.

"Aw, don't be such a bummer, Helena, let the kids have a feel!"

"Twirl them, Helena!"

Royce roared from the sun deck: "Shut your mouths, you no-talent fuckwads!"

"Where's your record, man?" a voice shouted. "Last I heard, Pete's mother had more hits than you!"

At this comment, several new voices in the crowd expressed their opinion. "That is so cruel!" one girl yelled. "Why don't you O.D.?" another voice suggested. "His mother killed herself, asshole! Have some fucking sensitivity!" someone else retorted.

I had a sudden image of my future. I would play and sing in clubs, bars, and stadiums while people in the audience fought each other over the relative moral outrage of killing Nazis or killing oneself. This

was a foretaste, I knew, of worse things ahead.

At that moment I felt the party was either going to take flight on the sour breath of beer and meanness, or the police would arrive, likewise providing the crowd with wings. I had already packed my guitar away and disassembled my mike when I heard Royce once more, challenging the audience.

"Who the fuck called us derivative?" he said, glaring out over the crowd.

Tommy, Billy and I glanced at one another. This was new. Someone had called us "derivative"?

Aside from a few titters and giggles, no one answered. A moment later, Helena's voice, a mere cheeping sound in the night, said, "I'd like my shirt back, please."

"I'll fucking kill you all!" Royce screamed. Then he flung himself off the sun deck in a very neat dive that took him over Helena, her naked breasts, and down into the packed crowd.

We saw him swallowed up in a thrashing, flailing current of bodies. We had no choice, he was our friend. We followed him into the lurching mob and immediately were caught up in fists, legs, grunts, and curses. A few moments later, the crowd spat Royce out as if he were a bad piece of fruit, and he landed, gasping and bleeding, down by the shoreline, where the surf licked his rolling body. His face was a purplish, swollen mess of cuts and bruises. One lip was severely gashed; his right eye was nearly closed. "Well," he said, groaning, as we pulled him to his feet, "I think I got the guy who said bad shit about your mother, Pete."

"Thanks," I said. "What about the guy who called us derivative?"

Royce spat blood on the sand. "I'm not sure about that guy. But if

he knows what's good for him ..."

Aside from a few sharp elbows in the ribs, we had not gotten hurt in rescuing Royce. People were too interested in him to throw many effective punches our way.

Tommy took Royce to the emergency room at the hospital to get stitches in his lip. Billy went back to the sun deck to collect our equipment before it was stolen. By now the crowd had dispersed, seeking better, more exciting diversions at some other house or sand dune.

Our performance that night had featured barely half a song, cut short by two breasts and a thin wafer of pubic hair springing up around the elastic band on Helena's panties.

In the moonlight the surf made a galloping roll of white foam that boomed over the water and smashed against the sand. I walked north on the beach, far beyond the point where Penny and I had found our mother's body.

I knew this could not continue. I was tired of the senselessness, the squalid eruption of quick pleasures and even quicker disappointments in the way that I lived. Kids and strangers had made crude jokes about my mother killing a man. Was I supposed to laugh at the jokes? Was I supposed to see the broad ironic implications reflected in my own temperament? Was I supposed to enjoy entertaining these people?

In a vague yet insistent way, I knew that I had to change, grow up, become a serious man, or else drown in the debris of my family history.

While I thought about how you become a serious man—what, in fact, that actually meant—I heard my name called.

"Pete! Pete!" Helena came running down the beach. She wore

a large blue cotton men's shirt that billowed tent-like around her shoulders. "Pete," she gasped, "a couple of reporters were looking for you."

"What did they want?"

"I don't know. I sent them in the wrong direction. They're probably in Delaware by now."

I smiled. "Thanks, Helena." I had already been accosted on several occasions by reporters seeking the "human interest" story behind the woman who killed Rudolph Meissner.

"Hey, Pete, I wanted to apologize for wrecking the party," Helena said.

"It was wrecked before you got there." I reached over, touching the material on the sleeve of her oversized dress shirt. "This looks good on you."

"Yeah, Billy gave me one of your shirts. He didn't have any clean ones of his own. You don't mind, do you?"

"Not at all."

We walked a bit. The wind had changed direction and blew a soft mist off the water. Behind us I could no longer see the lights from the town; ahead of us, a slow, cold swirl of fog floated over the sand.

"I took a hit of acid a half hour ago," Helena said abruptly. She added, "I don't feel anything yet."

She stopped walking and looked at me. She was a pretty girl, at times even sexy. She had brown hair with auburn highlights, full lips, and blue eyes with long lashes. But there was something plain and sad about her too. Her self-loathing distorted her features, trampled her attractiveness under an exhausted and blurred appearance.

"Helena, you treat yourself like dirt," I said. "People will take

advantage of that.”

She wrapped herself tighter in my shirt. The fog was cold. “I know, I know,” she said. “I gotta, you know, find different people to hang out with. Cooler people.”

There was no point in discussing this further. Her pupils were enormous. She looked into the mist with fascinated wonder. “Wow,” she murmured. Suddenly she put her hand over her mouth. “Holy shit!” she gasped.

“What?” I said.

She pointed at my head. “Lights, man! Your hair is sparking all kinds of incredible fire!”

“Okay, let’s go back to the house. You can come down at our place.” I gently took her arm.

All the way down the beach, she stared at me and made whispering sounds. I didn’t know who she was talking to—the lights she claimed were dancing around my head or the voices in her mind telling her that she had to hang out with cooler people.



I got up at eight o’ clock in the morning and read the newspapers I now subscribed to. Lately I had changed my schedule. I had discovered that it was quieter in the morning, the light was clearer and sharper, and reading was more pleasant in a calm, bright atmosphere. As I glanced over the front pages of the papers, I noticed a wire service story originating from Berlin. My mother’s name was written on the first line.

I read the story quickly.

Then I put the paper away.

Unsubstantiated sources, possibly from East Germany, claimed that Leah Dansky, housewife from New Jersey, killer of SS Colonel Rudolph Meissner, and rescuer of thirty Jews en route to Majdanek, may have been a Soviet-trained sniper and saboteur during the war. According to the article, this mysterious agent operating in parts of Eastern and Central Poland had killed hundreds, possibly thousands of enemy soldiers in a series of stealthy operations. The Germans called this person, if indeed it was one person or even real, *der stille Tod*, or Silent Death. According to rumors, this entity also carried out the most brutal executions upon certain Nazi officers responsible for atrocities committed against civilians. *der stille Tod* was never captured and never seen by German troops.

The telephone began ringing at eight thirty in the morning and didn't stop until I took the receiver off the hook. None of the calls were from the record company.

Chapter 20

Penny was back in the hospital but she was better. She was off suicide watch. When I visited her, she was sitting in a bright green solarium with her feet up on a chair opposite her, reading a medical text. She wore a red flannel bathrobe over her pajamas and marked passages in her textbook with a yellow highlight pen.

"Can you believe they've got me on Elavil and chloral hydrate?" she remarked. She shook her head, disgusted. "Idiots. Even the dosage is wrong. Obviously the attending physician knows nothing about pharmacology."

She gave me a brief lecture on the composite elements of the drugs she was taking for her depression—their effect upon the chemistry of the body, their statistical probability of altering various moods, their side effects upon the general population.

"That's fucked up," I said when she was through. "You got any pot, Penny?"

"Very funny."

"Dad been out to see you?" I asked.

Penny brought her feet down from the chair opposite her. She closed her book. "Yes," she said. "He came out several times." Penny closed her eyes and grimaced. She put her fingers on the bridge of her nose, as if she were suffering from a migraine.

"What did he say?"

"Goddamn it," she said, and squeezed the bridge of her nose some

more. She muttered, “Fucking dosage all wrong,” and swayed a little in her chair.

I waited. When she finally took her hand away from her face, I saw the dull misery lingering in her eyes.

“What did Dad say?” I asked again.

“He said,” Penny replied, “that I had experienced a terrible shock and that I mustn’t push myself. He also said that none of this was my fault and that under no circumstances was I to hold myself responsible for my mother’s actions.”

“Sounds like good advice.”

“Yes, doesn’t it?” Penny said. She looked at me rather closely. “And how’s rock ‘n’ roll these days?”

I wanted to discuss the newspaper story. I also wanted to discuss my earlier meeting with General Gilaad and his proposal to turn our mother into some sort of public relations venture. But Penny’s hands, I noticed, had trembled when they closed her medical text.

“Penny, are you hungry? Would you like to get something to eat?”

She tied her belt around her robe. Then she stood up. “Cut the shit,” she said. “What do you want to tell me?”

She was definitely feeling better, I thought.

We went down to the hospital cafeteria and there, standing in line with the other patients and their families, I recounted my meeting with the general and his ideas for creating a Leah Dansky Foundation.

Penny sipped a milkshake. It was all she could get down these days, she told me. I drank a cup of coffee. We sat at a table next to an elderly man and woman and across from them a middle-aged woman wearing a bathrobe, presumably their daughter. They all stared in

gloomy silence at their salads.

"I'm not surprised," Penny remarked after a while. "If they want my participation, they're welcome to it. I'll be happy to go to memorial tributes and talk about Mom's drunken blackouts, her nightmares, her clever hiding places for guns all over the house. Makes a lot more sense now that we know she was a highly skilled assassin."

The family next to us pushed their salads around with dull, slow stabs of their forks.

"But she rescued thirty people off a train headed for a death camp," I said. "Isn't that something to consider too?"

Penny finished her milkshake. Then she leaned back in her chair. I suddenly realized how angry she was. She had always considered herself so intellectually talented, so emotionally tough. Now she was drinking milkshakes in a psychiatric ward.

"That makes her some kind of hero?" Penny said abruptly. Her face darkened. "She lied about her name, she lied about her family, she lied about where she spent the war." Penny's mouth twisted in a bitter grimace. "She executed a man in cold blood and killed herself."

Penny was breathing hard; I didn't want to upset her further.

"I don't know, Penny. I'm not sure—"

"Wake up!" she shouted at me. Several people looked at us, even our quiet salad-eating neighbors. "Didn't you understand that newspaper story? She was no freedom fighter. She was a scourge. She might have rescued thirty people off that train, but she put a lot of other people into their graves. And it stank. It all stank. Something happened back there, Pete. And it wasn't heroism."

"All right," I said, "maybe you're right, but—"

"I'm tired of talking to you," she said wearily. "Get out of here."

Slowly, I rose from my seat. The other mental patients and their families no longer stared at us. Penny had stopped shouting.

"I'll visit again soon," I said. As I turned to leave Penny suddenly grabbed my hand and put it against her cheek. "I'm sorry," she said. "Please forgive me, Peter. It's not your fault." She began to cry.

A couple of hospital aides had approached our table and spoke gently to her. They took her by the hand and led her out of the cafeteria. She stopped and turned around. In a pleasant voice, she said, "You know, Pete, we'll always be the ones who found her body. That will never change." Smiling, she added, "She didn't even have the decency to kill herself in a place where we couldn't find her. How selfish of her. Don't you think so, Pete? I think so." She smiled at the aides and they resumed their walk. Penny repeated her lecture on pharmacology as they disappeared down the corridor.

Chapter 21

I had serious questions to ask my father. I felt that I never knew him. Suddenly, understanding him seemed more important to me than ever before. I needed to know whether he ever truly loved my mother. Was he angry with her for concealing her real name and past? Did he feel that he was tricked into marrying her? When did he begin cheating on her? Were other women his only source of comfort? Did he and my mother fight over his infidelities? Or did she not care? Did he want to forget that she ever lived? What were all of us—him, Penny, myself—to do with my mother's legacy? How were we to conduct ourselves in the light of emerging facts about Leah Dansky's life?

I wanted my father to explain things to me.

I came home on a Saturday afternoon, hoping to find him on the sundeck or in the den. I should have called first. He was with Mrs. Griffin. I had parked my car on the street and walked around to the side of the house. They didn't see me. I stood near the music room on the ground level, peering up. My father looked so tired. His eyes, like Penny's, seemed dull with misery. He sat on a lounge chair on the sun deck. Mrs. Griffin sat beside him. Her gray hair ruffled a bit in the wind. She smiled her cheery office smile at my father, the medical assistant's smile that tells you the doctor will see you shortly, please fill out these forms. Then she reached down to a pitcher on the floor, poured a tall glass, and gave it to my father. After he had drunk a few

long swallows, she took a sip from the glass. Then she smiled at him again and stroked his cheek. Afterward, she leaned over, stretched out, and nestled against him so that they lay side by side on the lounge chair. She kissed him. It was a very long kiss. Their kiss lasted for at least ten or fifteen seconds. When Mrs. Griffin lifted her mouth off my father's, she sighed a bit. Then she reached for the pitcher again. My father didn't seem happy, but he at least seemed comfortable. I felt nauseated. I left.

I went for a ride on the Garden State Parkway and then on the New Jersey Turnpike. I paid tolls and more tolls and I kept riding. I wanted to talk to somebody. Soon, I knew, I would contact General Gilaad again. I didn't like him much or trust him, but he was a deadly serious man, and he had known my mother during the war. From what I had already gathered, my mother had spent the war as a deadly serious person too. I was part of her. But what was I part of?

I headed back to the house in Sea Ridge that I shared with the band. If I were lucky, the house would be empty. I had recently discovered solitude and its comforts.



Families, like countries, tell myths about themselves. In our family, there was a myth that my father saved my mother's life in a DP camp. This wasn't untrue; it simply wasn't all of the truth. My father, along with many other army doctors stationed in Germany, treated thousands of refugees and former prisoners of war who were sick and dying. My mother came into his hospital suffering from acute exposure and malnutrition. She was dangerously ill. After massive

injections of vitamins, antibiotics and nutrients, she slowly began gaining her strength back. My father was not the only doctor who took care of her, but he probably spent more time with her because she spoke English fluently, she was obviously well educated, and she was also beautiful. My father came from a small town in northeastern Pennsylvania. He had not dated many women while undergoing the rigors of medical school and then internship. But he was a pleasant man and reasonably good looking, if not socially adept. As my mother grew stronger and more lucid, he came to enjoy her company more and more. He bought her a few gifts—lipstick, a little perfume, a few dresses. I'm sure she enjoyed his company too.

In my family's official version of my mother and father's courtship, my father radiated a princely charm in his American army officer's uniform. He was the most beautiful looking man (according to my mother) that she had ever seen. He was kind and intelligent and displayed a rare sensitivity to the suffering of others. He had, in the deepest sense of the phrase, willed her back to life. She fell madly in love with him (although at first she resisted—he was, after all, a gentile and she a Jew), but eventually he wore her down. After four weeks of good food, clean sheets and plenty of vitamin supplements, she accepted his proposal of marriage.

The idea that my mother with her remarkable record of kills against a shrewd, well-provisioned and well-trained enemy should succumb immediately to my father's devastatingly wholesome charms was rather amusing in retrospect. Apparently my mother's spirit never wilted under the Nazi occupation, but my father's snazzy uniform and his ready supply of chewing gum was simply too much for her. He wore her down.

There were other myths that we passed around and believed or disbelieved, as the occasion warranted. One story credited my father as a plucky but poverty-stricken youth who worked his way through college and medical school through sheer drive. This too was partially true. My father was a very intelligent and hard-working man. However, a great-aunt with no children and a sizeable income supported him while he earned his degrees. His parents, who owned a hardware store, also helped as much as they could. He held a part-time job in the library during his college years and then did some lab work for extra spending money during medical school. My father was frugal and diligent, but he was no Horatio Alger.

Another myth, and perhaps the most complicated in its winding messages, was my mother and father's devotion to each other. It was true that they rarely argued. Then again, they didn't speak much to each other either. It was true that they never divorced, but then again, my father had affairs with other women. It was true that my mother never interfered with my father's affairs; then again, I'm not sure she cared enough to put a stop to them. All in all, they were married. Sometimes during a holiday dinner, they would recount the story of how they met, or of my father's stubborn, Lincolnesque endurance in finishing medical school. I think we all enjoyed these stories. They made everyone seem reasonable and understandable.

Looking back, I do remember a strange woman or two bumping into my father in restaurants and other public places. I also remember my mother's face turning curiously blank as my father and these women exchanged startled greetings, as if running into each other was the most bizarre of coincidences.

I remember my mother's screams in the middle of the night.

These were not the screams of some past, floating fear; rather, they were animal noises, howls of despair carried up out of a deep sleep and delivered in octaves of wailing terror. More horrifying than the piercing cries, though, were the snarling voices, the low throaty breaths of searing, frenzied rage.

I remember those nights as if they were also part of my dream life. I would wake up, hear my mother's shrieks, listen to my father's voice in reply, always calm, always soothing, and then the long silence followed by my mother's footsteps down to the kitchen. A moment later we would hear the steady clink of ice dropped into a glass, the gurgle of liquid poured over the ice, the sharp snap as the cubes trembled beneath the whiskey, and then, more silence.

Sometimes my mother would play the piano after these rituals of sleeplessness, but softly, always softly, so as not to disturb us.

I remember Penny and me sitting together on the stairwell on those nights, listening to the music until our father came out of his bedroom and gently led us back to bed, patting our heads or making those comforting sounds that children need to hear to assure themselves that their world is indeed safe.

I remember that our mother almost never touched us—it was as if she were infected with some nameless disease, and that we were not to catch what she had by getting too close to her. And if we did venture too near her, as an experiment in affectionate abandonment, she would always draw away from us, as if it were we now who carried the infection.

All these things I remember. I also remember that we never spoke of these matters. I remember that, with few exceptions, we considered ourselves a relatively ordinary American family, and that this too was

a myth we passed back and forth during the daylight hours of work and school and growing up.



I allowed myself a day or two and then made the call. My father's answering service said he was in New York. I called Mrs. Griffin's home. She picked up after the second ring.

"Oh, Peter, how nice to hear from you," she said in her warm, elementary school teacher's voice. "How's your band? How are you?"

I cleared my throat. "I'm fine, Mrs. Griffin. Is my father there, by any chance?"

There was a pause. "Your father? Why, no, Peter. Why would your father be here? Have you checked the office?"

"Yes, and they said he was in New York. Only this isn't his day to go into the city. So I thought he might be with you."

There was a longer pause. "I don't understand," she said. "Why would—?"

"Mrs. Griffin, I don't care," I said quickly. "I just need to talk to him. Is he there?"

The nice rounded syllables spoken in honeyed tones came to an abrupt halt. "Look," she said, "I know this is hard for you, but you don't understand. Your father is a wonderful man. He's suffered too."

"You're not the first woman in town who thought he was suffering."

I heard a sharp intake of breath. "That's very unkind, Peter. I know you're a nicer boy than that."

"Did you read the newspaper article about my mother?" I asked,

ignoring her request to behave properly.

"Yes," she said, "I was very sorry—"

"Tell Dad that I have to see him. Tell him that I found his wife's body and I was her son and that I need to talk to him."

I hung up. Fifteen minutes later, my father called. He seemed pretty angry.

"Now what is all this, Peter?" he demanded. "Did you speak rudely to Mrs. Griffin?"

"I thought I was very nice to her, under the circumstances."

My father let out an exasperated sigh. "Peter, I understand you're upset. This has been a terrible time for all of us."

"Dad, I know you've been sleeping with Mrs. Griffin. I know there have been other women too."

"Pete, you're making all sorts of assumptions that are baseless."

"Dad," I said, "I don't care. There was a newspaper report last week that said that Mom might have been some kind of sniper or something. What's going on? You were married to her. Who was she?"

I could hear him thinking. "She was your mother," he finally said. "She was your mother and Penny's mother and she loved both of you very much."

"I'm getting hurt here, Dad. I'm getting hurt all over the place."

We agreed to meet at the family home.



My father was dressed in khaki pants and a green sports shirt. He looked exhausted, but I also noticed that somehow he seemed more

youthful than he had in a long time.

We sat on the sun deck in white curving chairs that we turned toward the sea.

"All right, Pete. What is it you want to know?" my father said.

"Who was she?" I asked.

"I've told you before. I've told the same thing to the police and the attorney general's office and the U.S. Office of Immigration and Naturalization."

"You never suspected that she was anyone other than Rachel Arenberg?"

"Why should I?"

"Dad," I said patiently, "Rachel Arenberg was supposed to have come from a poor electrician's family in a little village in Poland. Mom played the piano like some kind of virtuoso. She spoke five languages. She knew about all sorts of things that poor Polish villagers generally don't know."

"And what exactly am I supposed to know about the life of poor Polish villagers?"

"Come on, Dad. You're a smart guy. What did you really think?"

My father brushed his hair back as it ruffled in the sea breeze. "Your mother was a tormented individual," he said quietly. "I tried with my all heart and skill and patience to help her. But there are some things that are beyond help. After a while, I felt very lonely. I realized that I could never have the sort of relationship with her that I needed with a wife."

"You could have gotten a divorce," I said.

My father's face hardened. "I would not do that to her."

"But it was okay to sleep with other women?"

My father fixed me with an angry stare. "What do you know? What do you know of the years I spent trying to understand her, comfort her, over things that—" He stopped, obviously shaken. "You cannot understand," he continued. "You cannot even begin to say 'I don't understand' until you have seen thousands of men, women and children stacked up in cords ten feet high."

We were silent for a time. Then I said, "Did Mom care about the other women?"

My father sighed. "If she did care, she kept it to herself. I tried to be discreet."

"What kind of marriage is that?" I wondered aloud. "Why would anyone want to live that way?"

"Sometimes it's easier and less painful."

"Than what?" I asked.

"Your mother didn't want a divorce," my father answered in a very weary voice. "She wanted a little peace, even the illusion of peace, within the normal framework of a family—husband, children, work. After what your mother had suffered, would a divorce have given her a greater sense of dignity or meaning? She wanted to live quietly and follow an orderly routine."

"Are you going to marry Mrs. Griffin?"

My father groaned a little. "I don't know. It's too soon for me to think about that now."

"Probably not for Mrs. Griffin," I said.

My father stared at me for a few moments.

"What do you want from me, Pete?" he said quietly. "I couldn't change your mother's life. I couldn't change wanting some happiness for myself. Do you think that I don't know what this has meant to you

and Penny? Do you think I wanted to lose your mother?" He put his hand over his eyes.

Suddenly I felt ashamed of my interrogation. My father was no fool, I knew that. He must always have known, or at least sensed, that my mother concealed dreadful secrets. That was not important to him anymore. Perhaps it never had been. I didn't like his choices—to me they rang slightly false in their assurances of exhausted defeatism. On the other hand, I realized that for a long time my father had been trying to construct a useful and meaningful life for himself. And he had been there during the war. He had treated Nazi Germany's concentration camp survivors. He had married one. Did I have any right to judge him? What choices had I yet made?

My father had already lived a difficult life. I could not expect him to explain my life to me.

I went over to him and put my hand on his shoulder. "I'm sorry," I said.

Chapter 22

It was a sultry hot morning in early June. Across the East River, massed skyscrapers loomed in towering brigades over the slow-moving ships that came and went before the city. There was mist that day. In the distance, the Statue of Liberty's torch hung suspended in the salty air; the rest of the statue, the classical lines of face, arms and legs, was swallowed up in the fog.

I walked down the Promenade in Brooklyn Heights. I saw the general sitting on a bench, quietly reading a newspaper, exactly as I had seen him reading a paper at the commuter station in Sea Ridge.

"Where are your friends?" I asked. I saw no sign of his agents.

He folded his paper and looked peacefully out over the water. "Where they should be," he replied. "I'm glad you called, Peter." He stood up. Again I was surprised by his speed and agility for such a large man.

"Did you read the newspaper story?" I asked. We walked north, towards the Brooklyn Bridge.

He smiled. "The Soviets leaked the story. They will try to 'muddy' the picture."

"What do you mean?"

He was still smiling and after some moments said, "Foreign aid, public opinion, political capital. It's complicated."

He stopped and peered closely at me. "This is all rather bewildering, isn't it?" he said.

I glanced quickly at him and then pretended to be absorbed by the sight of stevedores working on the docks below us. I sensed layers and layers of remove in the general—not irony, exactly, and not insensitivity, either—but he was a man alone, and possessed of a grim, highly focused intelligence.

“I can’t agree to participate in any—” I fumbled for the right words—“advertising campaign about my mother.” I trembled as I spoke. “I can’t agree to something I don’t understand.”

“No, of course not,” he said easily. “I should wonder about you if you did.”

In front of us, a young mother and father walked with their little girl, who was perhaps two or three. She had stopped for a moment to reach down and pick up her doll, which had fallen on the pavement. As she stooped forward, her father picked the doll up for her, dusted it off and gave it back to her with a few hugs and kisses. The young family kept walking; soon they were in front of the ice-cream wagon.

“Today, everything is in tumult,” the general said. “Everything hurts, everything is lost, everyone seems a liar or a fool.” He spread his hands apart. “Tomorrow, who knows? Things don’t hurt in the same way. There are a few good people amongst the liars and fools. Perhaps all is not lost.”

I had no immediate reply to this piece of folksy philosophy.

“Was the newspaper report true?” I asked. “Was she some sort of Soviet sniper or executioner?”

“Let’s wait on that a bit. It’s not answered in a few words.” He lifted his eyes to some point in the distance. A sedan had pulled up on a street running parallel to the Promenade. We were now nearly at the foot of the Brooklyn Bridge.

"Why don't we drop by the consulate?" he suggested. "We can pick up some files that may help explain matters."

After a moment of hesitation, I nodded. At the foot of the bridge, a powerful looking, dark-haired man jumped out of the back of the sedan. He opened the door for us.

The general spoke cheerfully as we rode across the Brooklyn Bridge. "I have always loved the architecture and history of New York," he said, looking out over the city skyline. I said nothing. I watched the suspension cables on the bridge as they flashed past.

In the consulate's lobby, the receptionist gave the general the briefest of nods. After we emerged from the elevator, several people looked up from their desks then stood in silence as we passed by them. We walked down a corridor and into a small, comfortable office.

After the general closed the door, I asked, "Why did those people stand up?"

"They stood up for your mother—for your whole family."

I looked around. On the walls hung pictures of various statesmen. Some I recognized. A framed photograph of Richard Nixon, a short note and signature scribbled near the bottom, stood in neighborly familiarity next to the other official-looking photos. I wondered if the general had followed the Watergate hearings. I wondered if he expected, as did so many others, that Nixon would resign by summer's end.

The general went over to a cabinet against the wall. Inside was a small safe. After briefly dialing the combination, he swung the safe's door open and drew out some files.

"Stuffy in here," he said. "Perhaps we could look at these in the park."

On the way out, he whispered to a secretary, who nodded silently. She wrote on a pad of paper. I noticed a gun lying next to rows of pencils, pens and erasers when she opened the desk drawer.



I had ordered an ice coffee. We were in Central Park near the boathouse. The general sipped a cup of espresso. A pleasant breeze had settled over the café tables. Around the lake, young people walked with ice-cream cones. They smiled and shaded their eyes from the sun, and in between their laughter and chatter, they made cheerful gestures toward the rowboats gliding on the water.

“What do you know of the man your mother killed?” the general suddenly asked.

I collected my thoughts. “He was a colonel in the SS,” I said. “He rounded up so-called ‘enemies of the state,’ most of them civilians, and had them shot. He almost killed my mother. Somehow she lived—and then, of course, she killed him, years later.”

The general pushed several files across the table at me. “Copies of SS documents on Rudolph Meissner and other Nazi criminals,” he said.

I looked at the faded reports, typed in German, and marked here and there with the Swastika stamp. The file on top was Meissner’s. I had seen only a badly reproduced photo of Meissner in the newspapers. In that picture, taken at a recent family barbecue, he had looked calm and elderly, a nice old man enjoying the children and grandchildren around the swimming pool. In the photo attached to the file I saw a younger face, thin, a little pale, dark hair, and remarkably penetrating

eyes. He reminded me of an experienced, more successful, more intelligent Lee Harvey Oswald.

"He headed Mobile Killing Squad 345," the general said. "He and his men destroyed over seven thousand '*Untermenschen*' in the wake of the German army's advance through Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, and the Ukraine. Generally they transported them to isolated places in the woods, forced them to dig large pits, lined the people up against the pits and machine-gunned them." The general paused. "I'm not telling you anything new here. This is all well documented." He tapped a large forefinger on the reports fanned out across the table. "What's not so well documented," he resumed, "are the reprisals that took place against such individuals."

I waited. But as I waited, sweat oozed from the back of my neck. I had not known what to expect, and now I wasn't sure I wanted to know. I felt weak and helpless. From my pounding heart and the sickness roiling in my stomach, I began to think that I had made a mistake. I wasn't ready for this.

The general gave me a hard look. "I want you to understand that for some people there is a depth of suffering that is utterly without shape or density or comprehension and is therefore mysterious in its power over the sufferer. These are people who float in a region where the earth has slipped away from them. They glide through the world and feel certain impulses but have no actual feelings, in the ordinary sense. They are occupiers of dead, empty night."

Now was the time. I could easily tell the general that I didn't feel well and ask to be driven to the station. But the seconds passed and I didn't speak.

The general stared at his cup of espresso. After a while I said, "I

don't know what you're trying to tell me. I'm not sure I could even recognize the truth."

He smiled. "The truth is tricky," he agreed mildly. In retrospect I marveled at the general's skill. He wanted to tell me just enough, in manageable increments, so that I wouldn't bolt from the table and never come back. On the other hand, he wanted my cooperation, my understanding—up to a point, and on his terms. He watched my reactions; he made careful adjustments. He was a clever bastard, as someone had once said about me.

Another moment passed. I said, "You tell me that my mother had no feelings, not in the ordinary sense ... that she was some kind of robot or ghost. The newspaper reports said that during the war she killed maybe hundreds of soldiers and brutally executed a bunch of Nazi officers." I took a deep breath. "Is this true, any of it?" My voice sounded so high and childish to me. The general looked directly at me. "Yes," he replied.

I stared at the melted ice cubes in my drink. The wind pushed a lock of hair over my forehead, nearly covering my eyes. "My life is over," I said. "The life I knew is gone. It will never come back. Do you understand?"

"Oh, yes," he said, a touch of sadness in his voice.

"Why couldn't you have left her alone?"

On the one hand, he looked terribly stern; on the other hand, he looked terribly melancholy. I saw strange, quick passions change his features in subtle ways. Then he was once again the powerful, enigmatic figure I remembered standing on our family's welcome mat nearly a year before.

"We're arranging the first memorial tribute to take place in the

fall. I would like you to be there, Peter. I would like you to speak to the people your mother rescued from that train. Perhaps you will understand more about the kinds of things that happened to people during the war.”

I put my hand over my eyes to shade them from the late afternoon glare. “I don’t want to be there. They didn’t really know my mother and they don’t know me.”

“I understand that you’re very sad, but in time you’ll see that your mother made great sacrifices for very important reasons.”

I glared at him. “Sacrifices? You threatened her with exposure unless she testified against Meissner. She didn’t want to do it. You let an unbalanced housewife from New Jersey kill a man that you didn’t have guts enough to kill yourself. You set her up. What sacrifice are you talking about?”

He nodded slowly. Was I mistaken, or was he smiling a little at me?

“We wanted your mother to testify in court, not act on her own. But we had no choice in involving her.”

“You had all sorts of choices,” I retorted bitterly. “You could have said: ‘Fuck it. We’re not going to ruin this poor woman’s life. We’ll find another way.’”

The general shook his head. “The political and legal machinery is very complicated once these things start.”

The muscles in my arms trembled. I had felt utterly despondent just moments before; now a different emotion churned inside me.

“Please come to the memorial tribute,” he urged me again.

“I will never help you in any way, no matter how you explain things.” In a low voice, I said, “You killed my mother, you killed her as

if you pulled the trigger yourself.”

The general’s expression became oblique, almost crafty. “Yes, perhaps,” it seemed to say, “but what are you going to do about it?”

I leaped off my chair. I reached—my hands stretched far, far forward—for the soft spot on his throat. I had a weird sense of disassociation, as if I were waiting for my other self to commit murder while my real self relaxed at the table with an ice coffee. I saw the general’s face as I reached out for him. Within that infinitesimal moment, he appeared pleased. Unconcerned with his imminent extinction, he actually smiled at me. “Yes, yes, this is good,” his expression seemed to say. “Try to kill me, my boy. You’ll feel much better afterwards.”

Two pairs of strong arms grabbed me, thrust me back then pushed me to the ground. I was down, my face against the pavement, my arms and legs twisted painfully. The general gave sharp commands, and I was up again, the two agents holding me firmly by the arms.

A few people had stopped to gawk at this tableau of spasmodic violence, but after a moment they kept walking. The weather was nice.

“Are you hurt?” the general asked. I didn’t answer. He barked more words at the agents and they reluctantly eased their grip on me.

“Are you hurt?” the general repeated.

“No,” I said.

The general sighed. “Peter, I cannot tell you how sorry I am—”

With an abrupt twist of my shoulders, I snapped at the agents, “Get your hands off me!” and then viciously added, “you fucking foreigners!”

Again the general spoke sharply to the agents. They moved a few

feet away.

The general took a card out of his pocket and wrote something on it. Then he stretched out his hand. "This is my private line. You can reach me at this number day or night."

I looked at the card and the hand holding it as if they were the most unspeakable filth.

"I don't care what happened to you during the war," I said. I spat on the ground before him. "You're a son of a bitch now."

He nodded. Then he made a slight gesture toward his agents and together they disappeared down a leafy path.



For a while, you don't recognize the changes. That summer I watched my sister leave the hospital to resume her medical studies. I even had dinner one night with my father and Mrs. Griffin. He discreetly touched her hand when the waiter served us *crème brûlée*. I felt a dizzying sense of unreality as the rich dessert was placed before us and I saw how comfortable my father and his girlfriend seemed together.

Slowly, June turned into July and July sank into the hot bath of August. I realized that I was on edge with the world. I was expecting a blizzard to sweep the lounge chairs and barbecue grill right off the summer lawns. But the world and its seasons remained disturbingly normal.

Then one morning late in August, over a routine breakfast of Captain Crunch, Billy told me in a soft, nervous voice that he wanted to discuss something. I put my spoon down. Tommy and Royce

played with their cereal. They avoided looking at me. Finally Royce turned to Billy and raised an expectant eyebrow in his direction. Billy cleared his throat.

"The thing is, Pete," he began, "we feel that ..." He stopped. Then he stared down at his bowl of Captain Crunch.

I smiled at them. "What's going on?" I could not understand this halting prelude.

Suddenly Billy stood up. He carried his bowl over to the sink as if he were holding a holy chalice rather than a saucer of sugary gruel. He washed and dried the bowl. Then Tommy and Royce stood up too, and with a few downward, guilty glances, they left the kitchen. A moment later, I heard a car engine start.

Billy leaned against the drying rack on the sink. "The thing is," he began again, and then drifted into silence. Suddenly, with a renewed burst of energy, he blurted out, "Royce is replacing Lost Souls' drummer. They start their tour next week."

I couldn't quite fathom his meaning. "What?" I said.

Billy looked very unhappy. "Royce didn't know how to explain things. He's not exactly—"

"Articulate," I said, without thinking. I finally understood. I felt torn between laughing that Royce was the member of the group to leave first, and begging the rest of them not to make any rash decisions. But I understood the basic facts: The Master Planets, at least in its present form, was over.

"Royce is a great drummer. He loves to play. He has to play," Billy explained earnestly. "You can't blame him." Softly, Billy added, "He's really broken up about this."

I didn't know how to respond. I think I was amazed to discover

that while I brooded in my shabby outpost by the sea, other people still lived engaged lives.

"Why didn't you tell me before?" I said, dazed by the idea of life without a band. "Maybe we could have changed his mind ... maybe we could have gotten another drummer."

Billy shook his head. "We're stuck, man. The record company won't let us play without their permission."

I was having trouble with more dissolution. I felt frantic and weary, a car wreck survivor who can't grasp yet that he is seriously injured. Since the band had left the tour with Cold Star, I had known that our career was probably over. But I knew this in the way an astronomer knows star maps or a mathematician the certainty of proven formulas. I was twenty years old; my life was not an equation. I didn't want to believe in anything that could hurt me anymore—not unless the pain made it impossible to ignore.

"What about the last seven years?" I asked helplessly. "What about all the music we wrote ... all the music we were going to write?"

Billy sat down at the table.

"You haven't written anything since your mother died," he said. "And I can't do it by myself." He looked at me for a long time. Then he sighed. "I'm a pretty good writer of simple little tunes, but it was your energy that made our stuff special." A fly had lit on the table between us, feeding on an ancient residue of corn flakes.

"Let's face it, Pete," Billy said. "You were really the core of this band, and you're not you anymore."

My bowl of Captain Crunch was now a sodden mess decomposing in lukewarm milk.

"What about Tommy? Is he going to play with Lost Souls too?"

Billy smiled. "He's enrolled at Rutgers this fall. He's going to study electrical engineering. He's interested in computers."

I couldn't quite picture it: Tommy in a classroom. I couldn't quite picture myself in a classroom, either, with its formulaic structure of taking notes, writing papers, doing exams.

"And you?" I inquired. I couldn't look at him.

Billy brushed the fly off the kitchen table. He said, "I've been offered session work in Los Angeles. Just give me the word and I can get you in too."

I looked at Billy, my childhood friend and bandmate of seven years. We had recorded a good album and written some spectacular songs together. We had performed in front of screaming crowds all over the United States. We had held our own, and more, as the opening act for Power Train—all when we were just nineteen years old. We were a great band with enormous talent and we knew it.

I nodded slowly. "I have to think about that. I have things that I really ..." I looked across the table at him. "I've been thinking about our contract," I said. "My guess is that what we signed could be contested."

Billy's face brightened. "Yeah?"

"We probably have more leverage than we thought."

Billy pushed his hair back with his hands and then excitedly nodded his head. "So what does that mean exactly?"

"It means that we get a good lawyer to review the contracts and then, if we have a case, we start proceedings against the record company."

Billy's face dropped. "How long will that take?"

I shrugged. "I don't know. I don't know anything about the law or

how long these things can drag on.”

Billy looked depressed again.

“I do know this,” I said. “They want our songs for Gil Mattison and Cold Star. They probably don’t want negative publicity about cheating a famous Holocaust survivor’s son.” I thought for another few moments. “There’s leverage here,” I repeated.

Billy looked at me in a curious way.

“Why shouldn’t my mother’s death help us?” I said. “Especially if we deserve the help.”

Billy still looked at me the way you’d look at a stranger. Suddenly I wanted to throw the table over on him. You stupid fucking choirboy, I thought. Fuck you and that dumb look on your face.

“I was nineteen when we signed those contracts,” I said. “Now I’m twenty. Things have changed.”

I didn’t know what else to say. There wasn’t much I could say. My friends were leaving, and my future, another future I didn’t expect and didn’t feel prepared to meet, now opened a silent and empty path before me.

Billy went over to the sink. With his back turned to me, he washed and dried his cereal bowl again.

“It was all so much fun,” he said. His voice sounded thick and muffled. He was crying.

“Yes, it was,” I replied.

The lease was up at the end of September. By Labor Day, I had the house to myself.

Chapter 23

I read some books and played my guitar. I went for long walks on the beach. By late September the sky's color had changed to a rich royal blue. I saw dark sketches of birds flying in migration. A few times I spoke with my father and Penny. The wind was cooler in the afternoons.

One morning I awoke and watched the sun moving across the edge of my blanket.

That night I received the call.



I felt embarrassed to be standing by the dock, waiting for him. A few months before, I had tried to kill him. When he stepped off the ferry, I almost didn't recognize him. He wore a light cotton sports shirt and dark blue slacks. In his hand he carried a briefcase. He seemed so casual.

"Good to see you again," he said in a pleasant voice.

"What's in the briefcase?" I asked.

"Lunch." He smiled and patted me on the back. We walked over to a picnic table in the shade of a large tree. We were in Liberty Park, on the Jersey side of the river. In the distance, over salt breezes and white dips in the gleaming waves, I saw the Statue of Liberty's imposing arm held aloft in the clear, fall light.

The General opened his briefcase. He spread out generous helpings of cold chicken, potato salad, pickles, and beer on the picnic table. It was a lovely day. I looked around.

"Where are your guards?" I asked.

"They won't be joining us right now."

"Are you armed?" I asked.

"Yes," he said. He put down the potato salad. "You're not in any danger. But there are people who find my existence troublesome."

I glanced uneasily at a couple of toddlers walking with their mothers.

We ate our cold chicken and potato salad in silence. Then I said, "Have you ever killed a man, General?"

He wiped his mouth with a napkin. "Please call me Daniel."

I repeated my question.

"Yes," he said.

I drank some beer. "Is it hard to kill a person?"

"For many, yes."

"How did you know my mother?" I asked.

He carefully gathered up our paper plates, used napkins, and empty beer bottles and dumped them into a trash can. When he sat down, he opened up his briefcase and reached into a small compartment. He drew out a packet of cigarettes. I noticed a gun beside the packet when he opened the briefcase. He lit a cigarette and blew out a stream of smoke. "A bad habit—I allow myself only two a month." He puffed contentedly for another few moments.

"The first time I met your mother," he began, "she and your Aunt Claire were driving a car." The general smiled, remembering. "They came home late and your grandmother was irritated with them. The

family had a dinner engagement.”

I don’t know what I expected to hear. I certainly didn’t expect to hear about dinner reservations. And who was Aunt Claire?

“The second time I met your mother,” the general said and then stopped. He reached up absently and touched the scars on his cheek.

I leaned forward. “Yes?”

The general dropped his cigarette and ground it under his shoe. “She was quite different.”

He smoked his second then a third cigarette as he told me the story.

“In the summer of 1938, my father was contracted to build a potting shed for your grandparents,” he said. “My father was a mason—actually, he would be quick to correct me—he was a master stonemason. He loved his work and was proud of his skill, but he was a perfectionist and difficult to work with. Around Krakow he was sardonically known as ‘the Michaelangelo of bricks.’ I had no interest in being a mason, but I helped my father when I could. I wanted to be a doctor and was saving money toward medical school.

“The Danskys lived near Planty Park, on an estate with gardens, fountains, lovely pools stocked with brightly colored fish. They had cars and servants. They even had something so exotic that it seemed out of the Arabian Nights. They had a swimming pool. That first day, I remember looking at the grounds in stunned silence. Then I turned to my father and said, ‘Papa, do Jews really live here?’

“My father put down his trowel and regarded me with the utmost seriousness. He said, ‘Yes and no, Danny.’”

The general paused for a moment to smile, then he resumed. “Late in the day, around six o’clock, a convertible roadster came up the drive,

throwing up dust and halting and jerking as it ground through its gears. There were two girls in the car. They laughed as the car finally stalled. The girl at the wheel was very lovely. She had reddish-blond hair that fell to her shoulders in waves. The younger girl, her sister, had a cute face with pixy-like features and blond hair cut in a pageboy. They argued with each other, the younger girl playfully trying to grab the keys out of her sister's hand.

"You're bad, Leah. Give me those keys!"

"I can't. If you drive, we'll all die. This is a mission of mercy, little sister!"

"Just then, a tall, beautiful woman, youngish-looking in spite of the middle-aged creases around her mouth and eyes, stepped out from the front entrance of the house and glared down the driveway.

"Where have you been?" she demanded. "We have dinner reservations. You were supposed to be home an hour ago."

"Sorry, Mama," the older girl said. "I let Claire drive the car and we wound up in a cow pasture."

"Claire laughed. 'She's lying, Mama. Leah wouldn't let me drive because she wanted to go down to the Wistula and swim naked.'"

"She's lying, Mama. Claire fell in love with a cow—"

"In spite of her irritation, the woman smiled in a rueful, affectionate way.

"Get in the house, both of you. Leave the car in the driveway for now."

"The girls got out of the car and walked slowly to the house. Along the way they giggled and occasionally pushed each other.

"I watched them, fascinated. The older girl, the one with reddish-blond hair, glanced back at me. She smiled then she waved at my

father and me. We nodded and smiled politely back at her.

"Long after the door closed behind them, I gazed in their direction.

" 'Danny,' " my father said, breaking my reverie. " 'The girls are gone. Time for work.'

"As I slowly mixed the mortar, I wondered about the Danksys. Were they observant Jews? If not, did they swim in their pool on the Sabbath? What did those girls look like in bathing suits?

" 'That must be a great life,' I commented to my father.

"He didn't look up, completely focused upon his work. I thought he had forgotten my remark.

" 'These are people who don't know who they are,' he said quietly.

"I stopped mixing the mortar. " 'What do you mean?'

"Still plastering with his trowel, my father said, 'Danny, these people act like being Jewish is something you put on for dinner and then take off when you go to bed.'

"I thought about that. 'Because they're rich?' I asked, surprised by my father's parochial attitude.

" 'No. Because they think they're free to be who they please.' "

The general stopped speaking. He opened his briefcase and put the packet of cigarettes back in the compartment, next to the gun.

"Your mother came from an interesting family," he said, gazing at me in a somber way. "Your grandfather Leopold was a wealthy manufacturer of musical instruments. He had factories in Poland and sold his products all over Europe. He served on charity boards and was a primary donor to several arts foundations. In Krakow's intellectual circles, he was well known and respected. Your grandmother Irena was a convert to Judaism. During the occupation, her relatives tried to

hide your mother and sister.” The general suddenly smiled. “Did you know that your mother wanted to be in the Olympics? She was trying out for a place on the women’s swim team.”

The wind was considerably cooler now and the afternoon was disappearing in the gray clouds of fall. I rolled down my sleeves. I tried to picture them, my lost relatives, living in a world now completely vanished.

“Your Aunt Claire won a prize for best violin among all the children in Poland,” the general said. We watched the low, scudding clouds spread shadows over the water.

I thought about the pretty girl with the pageboy cut trying to wrestle the car keys out of her sister’s hand.

After a gloomy pause, I said, “And the second time you saw my mother?”

The general reached for another cigarette. “It appears that I’m falling back into some bad habits,” he said, lighting his fourth cigarette of the day. The ferry had pulled into the dock. The horn blasted and people formed a line by the water.

“The second time I saw her,” the general said, staring out past the boat, “was right after I heard a strange whistling noise above my head, and the two Gestapo men about to kill me lay dead in the snow.”

I looked at the general’s scars and then shifted my gaze across the water. I was coming to a blunt realization. My comfortable life growing up on the Jersey shore was a mere shadow of something else, something laced with bottomless misery and hatred.

The general lit his cigarette.

“After I escaped from Krakow, I joined the partisans, first with Jewish-led groups and later with the Russians. The price of admission

to a partisan group was a weapon. I had killed two drunken German soldiers on my first night in the woods. Their submachine guns and ammunition gave me immediate access to a partisan group, not to mention a certain respect.

“During the winter of 1943, I had heard stories of an entity, a dreadful, marvelously adroit Soviet sniper and saboteur who had killed some fantastic number of Wehrmacht and SS officers, as well as destroyed several troop transports, almost as if by sorcery. The Germans searched frantically for the cause of this destruction but could find nothing. As the winter wore on, the tales of this menace grew wilder and more grotesque. I never gave much credence to these ghosts of war. I assumed they were fictions created by frightened soldiers as they attempted to give a name to the terrors that seized their minds in the midst of random death. But call it a heightened sense of danger, call it even superstition, I too felt a strange unease that winter. This feeling was not related to the usual extremes of emotion in times of war. Rather, I sensed a sickly power, morbid and restless, reaching closer to me, spreading through the air like the fragrance of some diseased flower.

“Not long afterwards, I was captured by the German police. A forester—a collaborator, of course—saw me scavenging for food on the outskirts of the woods.

“First the Gestapo broke my arm with a sledgehammer to impress upon me their seriousness of purpose. Then they hurled me into a cell with a pipe that leaked water over the floor. There was no bed and no toilet in the cell, just a bucket and no heat. My broken arm hung limply at my side. When I moved, a sharp, agonizing spear tore up my swollen arm. After two days without water or food, my cell door

opened and a guard led me upstairs to the interrogation room. I was nearly drunk with misery. My arm throbbed in sickening waves; from the upper part of my shoulder to the tips of my fingers, the skin had blackened and then mottled into a dead green.

"They worked primarily on my face. Incisions were made; strips of flesh were pulled back; the ends of fine steel scraped at muscle and nerve.

"I told them nothing. Most of the time I was unconscious anyway.

"Then they were done with me.

"I remember the ground slipping under my feet. Two rough sets of arms held me under my shoulders and dragged me over a path drifting in little mounds of snow and the diamond glare of ice. Around me the bare trees of winter sighed and nodded in the breeze. I was going to die. They were going to shoot me out here in the forest. I would join all the others slaughtered in streets, woods, camps and crematoria. I would join my friends shot down like diseased animals in the thick woods of Poland. Well, I told myself, at least the pain would end.

"On my right was the thin, brusque interrogator, the one who had asked all the questions; on my left was his helper, the man with the gloved fists and the square, blunt face of an angry pig. The snow was quite beautiful. I would fill my eyes with this last tableau of God's white wonderland before they shot me in the back of the head.

"Then I heard a whirring sound. I saw a white slip of energy, broken against the wind, rush over my head like a train draped in white. The ghostly missile scattered the leaves and branches above me, and the wind ruffled my hair. My captor's arms slipped from my shoulders. I fell on my face. The snow felt so cold, so pure. I saw lights

hover before me, two globes of tiny blue sparks. Then the blue light faded. A moment later, I saw two legs standing in front of me. The legs were covered in thick camouflage trousers. I heard a heavy panting noise. To the side of the trousers, a dog stared at me. Rather, it was a face with the general outline and features of a dog, yet something in the eyes contradicted its apparent species.

"A woman's voice spoke gently. She murmured in French. I heard the word 'Henri' spoken several times. Then two shots rang out. For the first time I realized that the interrogator and his assistant no longer made any sounds. The dog then dug his snout into a grayish-red pile of matter on the ground, eating the blown-apart brains of the Gestapo man and his brutal helper. And while he gorged himself, the woman encouraged him in her soothing voice, and in her soft, mellifluous French.

"Then once more, I passed out."

The general stopped. He looked over at me expectantly. But I had learned to wait upon questions, reactions.

"I must get back to the city," he said, glancing at his watch. "We will continue this another time. You will call the consulate?"

"Yes," I said.

We walked toward the quay. I watched him board the ferry with the other passengers. Across the bay, the New York City skyline dazzled with promised glamour and power. As I stood on the dock, the boat became a spark on the water, lost amongst all the other city fires glowing hot and bright beyond the river.



That fall, as I learned more about my mother's past, I began to run—at first a mile down the beach and then, as I gained endurance, two miles, then three. Soon I ran ten miles a day, in all sorts of weather. I joined a local gym and lifted weights.

I cleaned the house every day. The sight of dirt now appalled me. Every time I saw a dust ball gathering under the leg of the couch, I felt disgust, as if the accumulation of ordinary grit were an affront to my dignity.

One blustery afternoon in late October, I heard knocking at my door. Joanne stood there, shivering a little in her jean jacket.

"Hello," I said, surprised.

"Hello." She smiled at me and continued to shiver.

"I'm sorry, come in." I stood aside and opened the door wider.

She looked wonderful. We walked into the living room and sat down on the couch, not too near each other. I was puzzled by her sudden appearance.

"It's nice to see you," I said.

She glanced around the living room then gave a little laugh. "This place is clean. What's going on? Did you have a religious experience or something?"

I shook my head. "I just got tired of the squalor."

She didn't reply. Then she said, "I heard the band broke up and that you were living here by yourself."

I nodded.

"Are you okay?" she asked.

We had never actually broken up. When the band went on tour with Cold Star, she simply stopped calling me and I never bothered to call her back. She had too much self-respect to compete with the

other girls and I didn't have the energy to keep lying about them to her.

"I'm fine," I said. "How are you?"

"Good." She reached out and touched my arm. "Are these muscles, Pete?"

I shrugged. "Could be."

We were silent. Then she said, "I should have come to the funeral."

"It's okay." She had sent a sympathy card.

"What are you doing these days?"

"Well, I've cleaned the house."

"No." She smiled. "I mean, what are your plans for the future?"

"I'm going to sue our record company." She raised an eyebrow. "I expect to win," I said. "I think we've got an excellent case."

Joanne laughed. "I'm sure you will, Pete. You've always been resourceful." She gazed at me. "But then what?"

"I'm not sure. I might go to Los Angeles to do session work. Billy's out there." I paused. "How's college?"

I don't remember her response. I touched her hair and she drew closer to me and then I kissed her and she kissed me back and then we searched each other's eyes, and then we went back to my bedroom. I made love to her very slowly, as if I had never seen her body before and wanted to savor every moment, every inch of her. We made love through the afternoon and then went out to dinner and then came back and made love through the night. When it was over, I felt sad and empty. I didn't know why. We talked about many things, but each time I responded to her questions, I felt as if my answers were spoken through an interpreter's voice, distant and rather formal.

In the morning, before dawn, she touched my shoulder. "Pete," she said. "I have to go soon."

I woke up. In a groggy voice I said, "Okay."

"No. You don't understand. I won't be back."

"What do you mean?" I sat up and rubbed my eyes.

"I mean I won't be back. This was a mistake."

"I don't get it."

"I'm engaged," she said. "I can't believe I've done this."

I inhaled and exhaled very slowly. "Why did you come here?"

She got out of bed and searched among the sheets for her panties and bra. "I wanted to see you, to know that you were okay."

"Obviously I am."

"No, you're not." She found her panties, stepped into them, and then looked under the bed.

I sat up straighter. "You came here to find out if I was okay, then slept with me, even though you're engaged?"

She had found her bra. "I told you it was a mistake."

"Yes, I would say so." I was fighting fatigue, irritation and something more puzzling—indifference.

"I loved you," she said. "You never really understood that."

She had changed. She was more serious, more grown up. Perhaps she had always been a more thoughtful person than I realized. Perhaps I had never recognized how frivolous and thoughtless I had been.

"You were a beautiful, talented, completely self-absorbed guy," she said. "But there was something very fine and nice about you too, Pete."

She walked over to the dresser and brushed her hair in the mirror.

"You're too smart to hang around the beach," she said. "A guy like you could do anything." She turned around. "But do it fast, Pete. You don't want to be waiting for The Master Planets, or some other experience like it, to happen again."

She came over to the bed, leaned down and kissed me. "You'll do great things."

She left my bedroom and I heard the front door close. For a long time afterward, I sat there, thinking. Was that Joanne Larkin, my old girlfriend, who had been talking to me? I felt as if someone had just told me a joke, but I was too slow and dumb to get it.



The general and I met again in Liberty Park. It was late afternoon and we took a long stroll around the perimeter of the park. The tide was coming in. Beyond a sea wall, the waves slapped against the rocks and threw up spray, which sparkled cool and green in the dying light. I was beginning to feel more comfortable in his presence. Our talks, however painful, were helping me understand more about the emptiness I felt drifting underneath my life.

After a while he said, "You haven't asked about your mother today. Is something wrong?"

"No," I said. "Nothing's wrong." Suddenly, I said, "Would your father have liked the sort of man you've become?"

He stopped walking. "Why do you ask such a thing?"

"I don't know." And I really didn't know. There seemed a strange dark place yawning between my mother's wartime exploits and my abortive career in rock 'n' roll. Was there any connection between my

present life and my mother's life in the forests of Poland? Did the general ever wonder about how he lived and its connection to his father, the stonemason?

"But you loved your father, didn't you?" I said. "Now you carry a gun and you're surrounded by other people carrying guns. What would he have thought of that?"

The general smiled. "Well, he probably would have said, 'Danny, I don't like this. I don't like this at all. What kind of life is this for a man?'"

I had no sense of what my mother would say to me about my life, if she were alive. We had never talked much about anything.

"What happened to your father?" I asked.

"That's rather difficult," he said slowly. "We held different views about the best way to deal with the occupation. He didn't approve of violence or understand its uses."

"What happened to him?" I repeated.

The general's eyes lost their patient gleam. They stared flat, cold and dead into the distance. In that moment, I remembered everything I had almost forgotten about him. He was not a "nice" man—not as my father was a nice man, not as the postman or doctor or fireman was a nice man.

"He saved my life," the general said, "in the only way he knew how."

I felt the icy self-possession in his reply, echoes of the many who lay dead by his hands. Then the shudder of power seemed to pass from his silent form and he was once more the genial, mildly ironic man of the world out for a stroll with his favorite nephew.

"I can tell you this," he said, looking at me with grave concern. "My

father would have liked you very much, Peter. And he would have been delighted to know that Leopold and Irena Dansky's grandson lived and prospered."

The general would not tell me what happened to his father, not yet. He was saving that. Let him save it, I thought. He was a vulnerable human being and we both knew it.

We sat down at a picnic table near an empty concession stand, closed for the season.

"You were saved by my mother," I said, resuming our former talk. "She killed the two Gestapo agents who were about to kill you."

"Yes." The general shut his eyes then opened them. "She had uncanny skills."

After a moment, the general said, "I convalesced in a remote village, far into the countryside, in the home of Poles who risked their lives to help me. When I was well, a friend from the partisans visited me and informed me that all our comrades were dead, either killed in actions against the enemy or from cold and hunger. My friend had joined with Russian partisans; they were well organized and had the advantage of men, material, and supplies. I could join too, if I wished. I had no love for Russia or communism—I was a Pole and a Jew. But I hated the Nazis more than I hated the Russians. My decision was made quickly. There were many such strange alliances in those days.

"Then I asked my friend about the woman who saved me. 'I would like to thank her,' I said, barely able to sit up in bed. I was still very weak. 'I don't know how she got close enough to those Gestapo pigs without being seen, or how she got me out of there, for that matter.' I paused, trying to recollect whatever dim memories I could gather from that period of prolonged and agonizing pain. 'I think she had

some sort of dog with her,' I said. 'She spoke French to the animal. I'm not sure.'

"My friend, an older man who had been a professor of German literature before the war, turned a grim face toward me. He said, 'There was no woman. There was no dog. Do you understand?'"

Chapter 24

“My new commanding officer was named Orlov. On my first introduction to him, he sat in a tent in the forest, scribbling furiously on slips of paper and cursing as he wrote, flinging papers to the side as soon as he was done with them. He was a burly, bald, powerful-looking man. After a while he looked up.

“‘You’ve been highly recommended to me by people I trust,’ he said, addressing me with a hard stare. ‘Therefore, I’m sure that I don’t need to tell you that if you betray us, or turn coward, or in any way show yourself not committed to the goals and aspirations of the Soviet Socialist Republic, I will see to it that your balls are roasted in hot oil and thrown to pigs. Is that clear?’”

“‘That is clear, Comrade Colonel,’ I said.

“‘Good,’ he replied. ‘Now to the business at hand.’

“He spread out a map on his desk. He showed me a railroad line about twenty miles from our present position. He explained that there was a small feeder line, off the main tracks, that the Germans had lately been using for their supply cargos of grain, wheat, and other foodstuffs from the Ukraine. He wanted me to scout the area and report back on how many troops guarded the line and what sort of weapons they were concealing.

“As he rolled up the map, he said, ‘Comrade Arenberg will accompany you to the site. She’s very familiar with that part of the forest. You will leave immediately.’

"I saluted. As I turned to leave, he suddenly called out to me. 'Gilaad, one thing more. If at any time you are approached by a woman who gives you the code name 'Dubrovsky,' you are to reply with the counter-sign, 'Incomplete.' Her orders supersede mine, so do whatever she asks.' The colonel frowned then, as if he had eaten something that didn't agree with him. 'Dismissed,' he said and went back to his pile of papers.

"As I walked across the camp, I wondered about the woman with the strange sign and counter-sign. But just then I was approached by a rather pretty girl wearing an enormous tattered overcoat.

" 'I'm Rachel Arenberg,' she said in a soft voice. 'You must be Daniel Gilaad. I am to help you.'

"I shook her hand. A sudden breeze lifted her chestnut colored hair and I noticed that her ears looked small and delicate. She stared in an interested way at my face, and I felt quite self-conscious.

" 'Gestapo,' I said, passing a quick hand over my scars.

"She reached up and with a gentle but firm movement, turned my face a little from side to side. 'It's not so bad,' she observed. She put her hand down and said, 'You're still handsome.'

" 'There are things we need,' I said, a bit awkwardly. I walked over to the dugout that served as a supply depot. As I reached the entrance to what was little more than a cave, I glanced back. She hugged herself in her oversized coat. A small cooking fire in the center of the camp crackled in the sharp air, and the side of her face glowed, shimmered, and distorted in the fire's heat waves. Behind her, a tall birch shook itself in the autumn wind and two or three yellow leaves floated wistfully down, settling near her feet.



“We spotted the Germans cleverly concealed within the deepening folds of the forest. Rachel knew they would be there. It was the most logical position for saboteurs to destroy cargo shipments. Machine gun nests perched on a rise overlooking the railroad tracks. The guns were covered in the brown and orange matting of fall. Branches and leaves swallowed the barrels, tripods and heavy cartridge belts. On descending ridges, spread out over a distance of at least a hundred yards, forty or fifty men waited in the woods, their rifles also pointed at the tracks. Up in the trees, snipers pointed their scopes, getting a proper range. From our position, on the other side of the tracks, where we lay flat and motionless beneath a thick growth of pines, Rachel and I counted a total of at least sixty soldiers.

“They were certainly ready for any sabotage. We couldn’t wire the tracks farther up or down the line. Most of the route in those directions went through open fields, much too exposed.

“We waited until nightfall then quickly crept away. We passed through chilly bogs blooming in mists, crawled along the edges of scattered farms, long since abandoned. Finally, around dawn, we came to a dismal little creek running through a copse of towering pines. Here we stopped to rest.

“I saw her then.

“She stood across the creek. She was too still to be human and too watchful to be dead. I could not have described her at that moment unless you have known the fear that comes from seeing at the edge of your vision a dull gray rock that suddenly coils upon itself and hisses.

This ghost was the Dansky girl, the one named Leah. But the woman standing before me did not resemble her former self. This woman was spectral; power seemed to collect in streaming waves about her person.

“‘You,’ I said. Beside me, Rachel trembled.

“‘Dubrovsky,’ she said. Her voice was low but not harsh.

“I stared, then I remembered. ‘Incomplete,’ I answered.

“Her eyes flickered once and then her dog came out of the woods. He sat down beside her. She petted his head and spoke a few words to him in French. The dog was no breed, or mixture of breed, that I recognized. His fur was a motley shade of gray or black or tan. His snout was long and wide. His eyes, grayish-green, gleamed with intelligence. He was an enormous creature.

“‘Are you with the partisans?’ Rachel asked nervously.

“The woman moved her eyes toward Rachel. They rested on her as if she were a dead rabbit. Then she looked at me.

“‘You will follow my directions.’

“The dog took a step forward. He gazed at something above my head. Then he growled and dug his claws into the earth.

“‘Keep up,’ the woman said in her low, toneless voice. Then she turned. She moved with a quick, fluid motion that was too fast for the eye to assimilate. I don’t know how Rachel and I managed to stay with her.



“We had waited, Rachel and I, down in the swamps. We were soaked from wading through icy water and freezing mists. In the

distance, out of the darkness, we heard gunshots. Rifles cracked in high, scorching echoes. Lights sparked and raced across the tops of the forest.

“Then we saw the dog. He stared at us from a mound of earth above our shallow hiding place. His breath came in thick, panting clouds of vapor.

“She had told us to follow him.

“From our positions, high up on the ridge, the German soldiers looked like so many dark smudges. They were all out in the open now. This breach of military discipline was unaccountable, but she had told us to expect it and to be ready. We pulled up the heavy machine gun the Germans had abandoned.

“Then we heard the deep concussive explosions. A second later, rivulets of fire creased the center of the meadow, and drew flaming lines up and across, up and across, until the dark smudges fled in all directions, caught helplessly inside a checkerboard of fire.

“Pointing the machine gun down at the meadow, and seeing the soldiers so well illuminated, we opened on them. We cut them down in neat slices, raking the gun over them as they fell and writhed and jerked under the swift current of bullets. A few halting figures rose in the smoke and attempted to escape. Leah walked into the carnage, apparently impervious to the dying heat or flames, and either shot the stumbling soldier in the head or with a quick slashing thrust of a short sword, separated his head from his shoulders. Occasionally her dog dashed into the checkerboard and tore an arm or leg off a sizzling torso.

“Even now, I cannot understand how she drew the soldiers away—or persuaded them to drop their weapons. How did she lead them to

this killing place? How had she set fire to that field? How had she managed to put so many complex factors into operation? Amazement did not begin to describe my reaction to these seemingly impossible deeds. Later, I learned that she had a “helper.” But if I believed in her secret ally, then I would also have to believe in the legend that had begun to spring up around her; I would have to believe in “Silent Death,” the supernatural force ascribed to her by the Germans. I did not believe in such magic. But I couldn’t explain Leah Dansky’s actions, either.

“Soon, aside from a few lingering wisps of smoke and the stench of burning human flesh that accompanied this grey plumage, the field was silent.

“Later we dragged the gun back to the ridge that overlooked the railroad tracks. Leah rigged the detonators and explosives. When the train blew up, the cars lifted on a bright hot glow that sent up showers of sparks into the night sky. A few soldiers came out of some of the cars—not many. They were dazed, and Leah easily shot them to pieces.

“I don’t know why I didn’t see it when she was down in the meadow. It was only afterwards that I realized Leah wore the long, gray coat and stylish cap of an SS officer.

“Then we ran through the woods and deepening silence. We did not speak of the dead Germans.

“During this flight from pursuing enemy units, Leah often went ahead of us, sometimes disappearing for hours before she would return and tell us to lie flat against some tall reeds at the edge of a swamp. Once, after stretching ourselves out in a marsh and remaining motionless for what seemed an entire day, we asked Leah why she never

hid herself in the mud and freezing water. Wasn't she jeopardizing our safety, if not her own?

"‘You're in danger,' she said. ‘They can't see me.’

"I sensed an abstract amusement in her response, a humor so buried, so transformed, that even to call it humor would ascribe to her a humanity that didn't quite exist.

"I noticed many strange things about Leah in these wanderings. She seemed eerily attuned to presences, and the violent emotions attached to them, over long distances. She would sometimes stop, crane her head forward, and then, with an odd mixture of intensity and dreaminess, murmur, ‘I feel them.’

"‘Feel what?’ Rachel once asked her.

"Leah was standing. Her head made minute adjustments to the left and right, as if she were the most sensitive of weathervanes.

"‘Their rage,' she replied.

"Rachel had spoken very little since we blew up the train.

"‘Aren't you ever afraid?’ she asked Leah.

"‘No,' Leah said.

"Rachel was huddled against me. She said, ‘I don't understand you. Where did you come from? How did this happen to you?’

"Leah finally turned her attention away from the wind, the sky, the unseen enemy, to look directly at Rachel. ‘Nothing's happened to me that hasn't happened to others.’ She kept staring at her and then said, ‘You are a very brave person.’

"Rachel seemed stunned by the remark. She said, ‘I'm always sick with fear.’

"‘I can help you with that if you wish,' Leah said.

"‘Don't touch her,' I said. I put my arms around Rachel.

"Again, I sensed that deeply buried humor in Leah's eyes as she gazed at me.

"*"Thank you for protecting us," Rachel said softly. She stood up then and walked over to Leah. With a tentative hand, she reached out and touched Leah's shoulder. Leah looked at her and remained still.*

"If you ever need help," Rachel said, 'I am your friend.'

"Leah was quiet for some time. Then she said, 'You cannot be my friend.' In a voice so low that it was almost a whisper, she added, 'You can't help me.'

"When Rachel and I awoke the next morning, Leah had disappeared. But she had left a brief note with instructions on how to reach Colonel Orlov's new command post. As Rachel and I walked, she stopped momentarily to pick up a yellow leaf. She twirled the leaf between her fingers. As the dusty pieces scattered to the ground, she murmured, 'Poor woman—to be that alone.'"



The general stopped talking. I waited for him to resume, but the light was nearly gone now, and his face was obscured in the early fall dusk. The hollows in his strong face were sharper now, more angled. His eyes looked sunken.

"I must return," he said. With that blunt statement he rose from the picnic table and walked briskly toward the dock. As we walked, he said, "Peter, I want you to find something to do. Go to school, find a job—anything."

In the distance I saw the outline of the approaching ferry.

"This is not over," I said, standing by his side. "I never promised to

participate in anything until I understood.”

“No, no, of course not,” he said quickly. “There’s a great deal more to explain, a great deal more to understand, but I’m afraid ...” He stopped. Then, “You are not her. You must not get the idea ...” His words were drowned out by the blast of the ferry’s horn. I saw his lips moving, but I couldn’t make out what he said. The last words I heard, when the horn grew silent were “your life.”

“We’ll see each other soon,” the general said, shaking my hand. “Call the consulate.”

I watched him board the ferry.



I had been living alone, but that hadn’t stopped the world from finding me. Every day, it seemed, I received letters from people who wanted to tell me something, or sell me something, or who wanted to establish with me a private club based on conspiracy theories of a new Nazi order attempting to dominate the Americas or Asia or Europe or at least the local school board. Well-wishers informed me that my mother’s death was not suicide but was in fact murder—somehow she had stumbled upon the truth of Martin Bormann’s escape from Germany at the end of the war and now she had become a liability to that secret and powerful society of Nazis who had infiltrated the very highest levels of the U.S. government. One letter suggested that my mother, along with JFK, Martin Luther King, and Amelia Earhart, had been destroyed by aliens who had first stolen their DNA in order to create a new hybrid race of super beings scattered across the galaxy.

Of course, most of the letters were from perfectly reasonable, decent people. Many of them were holocaust survivors who simply wished to express their sympathy to me and to my family. Nevertheless, I changed my address to a P.O. Box. All the letters referred to Leah Dansky—to me, a mysterious figure out of a terrible chapter of history. My mother's name, the mother I knew, was Rachel Arenberg. And Rachel belonged to the Jameson family history, which, as I now understood it, barely existed at all, except as a stage prop for formal occasions while we otherwise led our separate and individual lives.



That October, my father called Penny and me. He wanted us to join him for dinner at the Sea Grill Tavern, a restaurant we all liked when my mother was alive.

The Sea Grill was at the southern end of town, near the Yacht Club. When Penny and I were growing up, we ate there at least once a week. Our mother was a rotten cook. She had the peculiar talent of taking perfectly good food and reducing it to dust in your mouth. We ate out a great deal. We all had our favorite dishes at different restaurants. At the Sea Grill it was baked stuffed shrimp for Penny, steak for me, lobster for my father and swordfish for my mother. For dessert it was always rice pudding for Penny, chocolate pudding for me, apple pie for my father and cherry pie for my mother. Every once in a great while, someone might order blueberry pie, but that was rare, and the person had to be out of sorts in some manner.

We hadn't been to the Sea Grill in years. When I entered the darkened restaurant, I immediately noticed the absence of the sailfish

model over the bar. I mentioned this to Penny. "And where's the big fishing net and the buoy over by the cashier's counter?" I added. "And what happened to the old sea captain with the pipe in his mouth over by the restrooms?"

"They all went to hell," Penny remarked. "I hope this won't spoil your dining experience. Where's Dad?"

We finally saw him standing by a table near the back of the restaurant. The big fishing net had been moved against the far wall, closer to my father.

He kissed Penny and hugged me and then we all sat down and reflexively picked up our menus.

"It's so good to see you kids," my father said. It occurred to me that we hadn't been together since my mother's funeral.

"What are you drinking, Dad?" Penny asked.

My father picked up his glass. "Bourbon and water."

Penny called over the waitress. "Scotch, neat. No ice," she said.

"I'll have a coke," I said.

We drank our drinks and then my father said, "Penny, do you remember the time, oh, you must have been around seven or eight, when the waitress listed about twenty different desserts and then you very politely said, 'Could you please repeat that?'"

My father laughed with the memory. Penny nodded. "Yeah, I remember that." This was a favorite story in our family and was supposed to evidence my sister's pugnacity and penchant for detail when she was just a little girl.

"Dad, why are we here?" Penny said.

My father put down his drink. "Because you're my children and I wanted to see you. Isn't that enough?"

Penny took a deep breath. Then she called over the waitress and ordered another Scotch. My father watched Penny, but he didn't say anything.

"Congratulations, by the way, on your residency," my father suddenly said.

She nodded and tipped the glass to her mouth. After a long draught, she said, "Thank you."

Penny had been accepted into a residency program in neurosurgery at a hospital affiliated with Harvard's medical school.

"And how is our young rock 'n' roll star?" my father addressed me.

"I'm going to sue our record company for damages and I'm learning a lot about Mom's past."

My father and Penny stopped drinking. Our mother was the silent guest at our table. She would always be the silent guest at our table.

"First," my father said to me, "you're initiating legal action without consulting me? What is the matter with you, Pete?"

Penny drained her second drink. Then she said, "Oh, come on, Dad. What's the big deal? Pete's grown up. He saved his mother's life and then he discovered her dead. He's not hurting anyone. If he wants to sue somebody, then let him."

My father pointed a finger at Penny. "I am not talking to you right now."

"Okay," Penny said. Once more she called over the waitress.

"You've had enough," my father said.

"Oh, shut up," Penny said pleasantly. "Who the hell are you to tell me anything?"

My father snapped at the waitress. “Don’t bring her anything more. Understand?”

The waitress looked embarrassed. She moved away from the table. Penny called after her: “Miss, I am of legal age and I hold a medical degree from Columbia University. If Dr. Penny Jameson wants another drink, then she’ll have another drink.”

“Behave yourself,” my father said sternly.

“You know, I miss that sea captain by the restrooms,” I said. “This place doesn’t seem the same without him.”

“Have we ordered dinner yet?” my father said. “I don’t remember.”

“We haven’t,” I said.

“All right, let’s order dinner.”

My steak tasted like overdone cement. Penny’s baked stuffed shrimp didn’t contain enough crab in the stuffing and my father’s lobster was rubbery and old.

“Goddamn it,” my father said, pushing his plate away, “this place has really gone downhill.”

“This is crap,” my sister agreed pleasantly.

My father called over the waitress. “I’ll have another bourbon and water,” he said.

“Another Scotch for me,” Penny told her.

My father, I noticed, said nothing about Penny’s drink order.

Several moments into the new round, my father sighed expansively and said, “We have to discuss the business surrounding Mom.”

Penny and I waited.

“People,” my father continued, “want to use her life, particularly for profit-making ventures.” He briefly enumerated several offers

already made to him about book deals, movie rights and television specials.

"Of course that's not all the people," my father said. "Some want to do serious research for scholarly studies. But I think we need to come to some agreement on how we handle these requests."

"I've been approached by General Gilaad," I said. "He's attached to the Israeli consulate in New York. He knew Mom during the war."

My father looked curiously at me. "When did this happen?"

"Several months ago. I've been speaking with him on a fairly regular basis."

My father fiddled with his glass of bourbon. Penny stared into her Scotch.

"The Israeli government is going to set up memorial tributes to Mom. These will be part of fund-raising drives to create a Leah Dansky Foundation." I looked at my father and sister. "We can't stop them from doing it. Of course, we don't have to be involved. I'm still trying to figure out if I want to be any part of it."

"What have you been learning from this guy?" Penny asked.

The question was so broad, so fraught with complexities. "A lot," I said. "We had grandparents who lived in Krakow. Their names were Leopold and Irena and they were supposed to be very nice people. They sat on all sorts of charity boards and arts foundations. They manufactured musical instruments. Mom had a sister, our Aunt Claire. She was some sort of child prodigy with the violin." I suddenly remembered something else. "Our grandmother was a convert to Judaism. Ethnically, Mom was actually half-Jewish."

Penny's head had been sinking lower and lower as I gave this recitation of our family history. Now she put her hand over her face.

"That means we had just a quarter of all the fun," Penny mumbled.

My father gently swirled the bourbon in his glass and stared off toward the cashier's counter. I put my hand on Penny's shoulder.

"It's okay," I said quietly. "Don't cry, Penny."

"Too late," she said.

I kept my hand on Penny's shoulder until she composed herself.

"Mom's life and death aren't going away," I said. "For a lot of reasons, there will be people wanting to know about her for a long time. We can't stop that. But for her sake and the sake of our privacy, I think we should refuse all the requests, especially the ones that would sensationalize her suffering."

My father and sister stared at me. This was the longest and most direct commentary upon my mother's life that anyone in my family had ever made.

"What about this Israeli general and his foundation?" Penny asked. "Do we tell him to go to hell too?"

I thought about General Gilaad. "That's more complicated," I said. "He was Mom's friend."

At these words, "Mom's friend," I realized that I had already made a decision about Danny Gilaad. I had never been my mother's friend. I had been nothing, not even her son.

"Peter, how are you doing for money? Do you need anything?" my father asked.

"I'm okay, Dad. I saved a lot from the tour. I might go out to Los Angeles in the spring to work with Billy."

We paid the bill and walked out of the restaurant and into the fall twilight. My father left first. I drove Penny to the train station

so that she could return to New York. We were silent in the car. At the platform, waiting for the train, Penny leaned against the lamppost that once sported the advertisement for tooth paste. The wind blew cold in the dark and Penny turned to look up the tracks.

"You know, Mom really loved you," Penny said, shivering. "You didn't notice, but I did, the way she looked at you whenever you sang or played the guitar."

The headlight carved a wide, bright cone as the train rumbled up the tracks.

"You don't owe her misery for misery," Penny said. "She wanted you to be happy."

I stepped back from the edge of the platform. The wind was sharp against my face.

"I won't be happy like that again," I said. "I don't know what I owe, but it's something."

The train stopped. The doors opened.

"You're my brother," Penny said. "That's all you owe to me."

I went back to my house in Sea Ridge. I was scheduled soon for another meeting with the general. There was always death in our conversations—death in our voices, death in my questions, death in his smile, and death as the power connecting our lives. I was getting used to death. I didn't know it yet, but I was already a new man. I was becoming more Leah Dansky's and less Rachel Arenberg's son.

Chapter 25

The general and I met under the arches in Washington Square Park. The air was quite cold now, and when the wind blew, little particles of dust got into people's eyes and made them blink and wrap themselves tighter in their coats and mufflers. A man selling chestnuts out of a vending cart glowing with coals sniffled and rubbed his nose and shuffled back and forth on his toes as we passed by. Everywhere people put their heads down against the icy wind and rushed into the doorways of restaurants and apartment buildings, stamping their feet against the cold and wiping their teary eyes when they entered the vestibules. Thanksgiving was just around the corner.

We took a taxi to a rather famous delicatessen down near Wall Street. This was my suggestion. I wanted to talk in a bright, warm, cheerful place where people ate sandwiches and drank milkshakes and talked about their holiday plans.

We found a booth. After we ordered, the general scrutinized me and then nodded approvingly. "You've put on some weight. You look very fit."

"I run five miles every morning now. I also lift weights at a local gym."

"Good," the general said. "Keep it up. You were a little too thin."

We ate in silence for a while. Then I asked about Rachel Arenberg. "Why did my mother choose that name? Why not some other name, a name that didn't belong to anyone?"

The general smiled, a bit sadly. He ordered a cup of hot tea with lemon. "Your mother got those thirty people off the train, but Rachel Arenberg got them to safety. I think your mother admired Rachel, perhaps even regretted that she could not have been more like her. In some way, perhaps your mother was trying to honor Rachel by taking her name."

"What happened to Rachel?"

The general took a sip of his tea. "She died."

"Were you close to her?"

The general put down his tea. "I loved Rachel." He smiled at me. "I was very young, not much older than you." The general shook his head. "You know, Peter, sometimes, when I look at you, I see so much of your mother, what she might have been."

A few months ago I would have felt deeply affected by this comparison of my existence to my mother's ghostly potential. Now all I felt was a sharp curiosity about my mother's rescue of those thirty people and how Rachel Arenberg had helped to secure their safety. I wanted information. I would evaluate its meaning afterwards.

I settled back in my seat and raised my eyes to him, curious and attentive. I was a good listener now. I could watch his face as he spoke and note the changes in his voice and expression as he told his story. I could hold his eyes with my own expression and fall into his memories as if I experienced them myself. I had learned the trick, without knowing how, of reflecting back to the speaker a consummate interest in every detail.

The general folded his hands and looked across the table at me, smiling faintly. Perhaps he saw that I had learned the trick.

The general spoke to me.

"I remember the snow came early that winter.

"After the destruction of the supply train, the colonel invited me to have a toast with him. We drank to the bravery of the partisans; we drank to the struggle against the Nazi fascist pigs. Then the colonel sat down heavily and with an abrupt wave of his hand, entreated me to sit down as well.

"‘You were helped, were you not, by *der stille Tod*?’ he asked.

"The question unsettled me. I did not wish to discuss Leah Dansky. I had remembered her from years before, when she was a pretty girl coming home late with her sister.

"‘It doesn’t matter,’ the colonel said. He sat back in his chair and regarded me with a pleasant, slightly inebriated smile.

"‘Moscow finds and trains certain ... types. Then they let those types loose, knowing what sort of mayhem they will create. Every time *der stille Tod* kills a few German officers, the Germans retaliate, usually on the local population, by killing ten times or even a hundred times as many people. God knows how many people they’ll kill over this latest incident.’

"I did not answer. The colonel sighed. He reached down beside his leg, where he kept the bottle of vodka and a glass. He waved the bottle in my direction. Politely I shook my head. He shrugged then poured himself another drink.

"‘There are things that the Germans will never reveal, for obvious reasons. Sometimes they’re the same things that we won’t reveal.’ The colonel paused. ‘But you hear things ... you always hear things.’

"I waited. The colonel resumed. ‘Near Radom a rather notorious Gestapo captain was found dead one Monday morning. His eyes had been cut out. He was hanging from a clock tower in the center of the

village. In his pocket was a note, written in very neat, precise German. It said, "God is not blind." No one saw anything, no one heard anything. Then in a little town near Lodz, a Colonel Joachim Goehrner forced dozens of villagers to drink rat poison. No one knows why Goehrner was so incensed. About three months after this incident, Goehrner was found lying on his back, in bed, with his feet cut off and a dead rat placed over his mouth. He had been poisoned as well. In his pocket was the same note: God is not blind.'

"Again, Colonel Orlov paused. Then he said, "These are but a few examples of scores of such incidents. Some people claim they saw an old peasant woman or a young soldier near the German victims around the time that they were killed. But the real culprits were never apprehended.'

"The colonel looked at me. I still said nothing.

" 'People like her foment terror and retaliation, but they are always used as pawns in a wider political agenda. When this war is over—perhaps before—she will be annihilated and then forgotten as an untidy detail. My guess is that she won't die easily. It might be better for everyone if she disappeared before that happens. Of course, I never said these things. Are you sure you wouldn't like a drink?'

" 'All right,' I said."

The general stopped talking. I was so immersed in the story that I didn't see the waiter approach our table. "More tea?" he asked, looking at the general.

"No, thank you," the general said. "Would you like something else, Peter?"

I shook my head. "No, thanks. I'm fine." The waiter disappeared.

I had learned something new from the general. No matter what

you are doing, no matter whom you are talking to, never lose sight of your surroundings. The general had been aware of the waiter's presence before I noticed a thing. But I had noticed something. I was in control of my emotions. I was learning to absorb information, highly personal, even shocking information, without losing focus.

The general learned forward.

"That winter another partisan joined our group. Lazer Rossman was a detonations expert. He was about thirty years old, tall, dirty, thin and seemingly put together with all bony knobs and angles. When he moved, there was an ungainly energy in his actions, as if he were a broken toy wobbling furiously on the spark of a dying battery. He was full of rage and bitterness.

"He gazed at me with a skeptical look when we first met. 'I've heard about you,' he sneered. 'You used to be with David Rudke's group.' He laughed unpleasantly. 'David Rudke, the great martyr for Zionism. And now Rudke's dead and you're here, his second in command, the practical, cool-headed one.' He continued to stare at me. 'So what are you?' he demanded. 'Zionist? Communist? Democratic Socialist? We've got all sorts of believers in a new world among the last of the Polish Jews.'

"I reached over and dusted some light snow off his shoulder. 'I'm here to kill Germans,' I said simply.

"He gave me a sort of grin—not a smile, exactly, but not a sneer, either. 'All right, Comrade Commander. That is something I believe in.'

"One freezing night, a few weeks later, we heard distant cries coming from north of the camp. We scrambled into our hiding places, burrowing underneath fallen trees, crouching behind muddy slabs of

rock, disappearing beneath mats of dense brush. In five seconds, the camp looked deserted.

“They came stumbling through the forests. They clutched small children and bundles of food. They all looked confused and terrified. There were perhaps thirty of them, all wearing the yellow Star of David sewn onto their ragged clothing. Behind this dazed band of frightened faces, Leah came galloping up on a big blue roan horse. She, too, wore a coat with a yellow star affixed to the chest, but over her shoulders were slung twin machine pistols. She slipped off the horse’s back and moved quickly to the center of the camp. There she gathered the people with their bundles and suitcases into a circle around her. She spoke quietly to them. An elderly woman suddenly eased herself forward. She carried an infant wrapped in a blanket. With a look of terrible sadness, she reluctantly offered the baby up to Leah. Just then a little girl cried out. She pointed, trembling, to the edge of the forest. There stood Leah’s dog, staring impassively, his gray-green eyes glowing in the dark. Leah called out to the animal. Immediately he flattened himself on the ground and buried his enormous head between his paws in a sort of pantomime of servile obedience.

“At that moment, the colonel whistled and the partisans came out of their hiding places. They approached the strangers carefully, their rifles pointed down, but not away. The colonel motioned to Rachel, Lazer and me. We approached Leah.

“She held the baby in her arms, beneath the stock of one of her machine guns. The sight was compellingly bizarre—if at that moment she were dressed in a formal evening gown, with a diamond tiara on her head, she could not have presented a stranger figure.

“‘Who are these people? Who are you?’ the colonel demanded.

"Leah nodded at the colonel. 'You know who I am,' she answered in Russian but in her flat voice. He took a step back. 'These people were headed for the crematorium. Now they're not. See to their safety.'

" 'We're not a refugee camp,' the colonel protested. 'What am I supposed to do with them? How am I supposed to get them out of here? Where are they to go?'

"The baby in Leah's arms smiled and gurgled happily at her. She pushed the submachine gun a little to the side, so that the baby's head wouldn't accidentally hit the weapon.

" 'For Christ's sake, what are we supposed to do with a baby?' the colonel said, staring at the child.

"Leah leaned toward Rachel. 'Will you take him for just a moment?' Rachel stared at the baby with wide, startled eyes. 'His mother died on the train,' Leah said. 'His name is Zinni.'

"Rachel took the child. As she looked down at him, her lips trembled. 'Thank you. I will take good care of him.'

"Even Lazer seemed moved by the sight of the child. He pushed back the baby's blanket and in his rough voice said, 'He should be fed.'

" 'I repeat,' the colonel insisted, 'what are we to do with these people? Are the Germans after them now?'

"Leah stripped off her ragged garment. With a careless gesture, she threw it on the ground. Underneath, she wore a thin, brown, army tunic. The temperature was well below freezing, but she stood motionless and calm.

" 'The Germans who were on board the train are dead,' Leah said. 'They were transporting mostly livestock. You may find quite a few pigs roaming these woods, so enjoy the extra rations. Tomorrow

morning, before dawn, move the people out in small groups.'

"She ripped open the lining on her shirt; she took out a small, folded piece of paper. She handed the paper to the colonel. 'Take them to these locations.'

"He briefly examined the paper, then looked up at her in surprise. "These are all underground agents. If any of them are compromised—'

"Leah interrupted him. "They won't be. You have your orders.'

" "This is madness,' the colonel remonstrated. 'We are not here to move refugees. I must get confirmation from Moscow.'

" 'If you disobey my orders, I will have you shot,' Leah said evenly.

"Colonel Orlov grew pale. Finally he said, 'Yes, Comrade.' He shouted to the gaping partisans and they looked for food and blankets for the refugees. The colonel left to supervise.

"While they were engaged in tending to the survivors, Rachel rocked the baby and kissed his forehead. 'Zinni,' she murmured to him. 'Zinni, you are so beautiful.'

" "That's not how you hold a baby,' Lazer lectured her. 'You have to support his head. Like this.'

"They argued over the way to hold the baby for a few moments.

"Then Leah said to Rachel and me, 'I need you two.' She reached for the baby, but Rachel suddenly turned away from her, hugging the child in a fiercely protective gesture. 'You cannot keep him,' Leah said. 'He will be in danger where we're going. Someone better suited will care for him.'

"Rachel shook her head. 'No. I must take care of Zinni.'

"Leah said, 'You wish to stay with these other people? You wish to

be smuggled into Russia?’

“Rachel’s mouth opened. She looked at me.

“‘Rachel, you go with the other people,’ I said. ‘Stay with Zinni. I’ll find both of you.’

“Rachel said, ‘I can’t abandon this baby. Do you understand?’

“‘I do,’ I turned to Leah. ‘How much time?’

“‘Now.’ She spoke to Lazer. ‘You will come with us.’ I noticed then that Leah had turned to Rachel and gazed at her. Her look was pensive, almost wistful, as she watched Rachel nuzzling the baby.

“We left Rachel there, with the other survivors. In her arms she carried Zinni. He was a beautiful baby. I remember that he smiled at me.”

Zinni. I knew that name. It was the name my mother spoke on the day I rescued her from drowning.

The general had stopped talking and I knew from experience that he was about to leave again. He always stopped talking at a critical point, when his recollections elicited more questions than answers.

“How did she do it?” I asked. “How did she really get them off that train?”

The general shrugged. “Talk to the survivors. They all remember things a bit differently.”

He wanted me at the memorial tribute, wanted me as an active promoter of the Leah Dansky Foundation.

The general stood up. “Next time we’ll meet at the consulate. There are some documents you need to look at. Very few people have ever seen them.”

I rose from my seat and shook his hand. “Goodbye,” I said.

On his way out of the restaurant he opened the door and a blast

of cold air swept past me. He turned. With a bleak look, he said, "Peter, no matter what I say, no matter what anyone says, you will never completely understand."



For weeks I had been calling lawyers about the band's contractual problems. Most of them wanted a retainer, a very large one, to pursue legal action against the record company. A few attorneys agreed to work on a contingency basis, but they wanted a staggering percentage—at least in my opinion—of whatever damages they could collect. Finally, I contacted Power Train's management company and asked to speak to their legal representative. I explained to him who I was. I reminded them that Denny Sharpe, Power Train's lead guitarist and singer, had thought The Master Planets were great and that he had insisted that we join him on stage for their encore number, "Combustion." Before I had the chance to explain my legal dilemma, he interrupted.

"You're not auditioning for me. What sort of help do you need?"

I explained briefly about our record contract.

"I'm sorry," he said. "That sort of litigation can take months, even years to resolve. And frankly, even if we were to take the case, I'm not sure that the eventual damages awarded would make it worth the firm's time and expenses."

He was about to hang up. Many lawyers had already politely hung up on me.

"My mother was Leah Dansky," I said. "She killed Rudolph Meissner, the Nazi war criminal, about a year ago. It was in all the papers around the world. Maybe you heard about the case."

Now I had his attention.

"You're Leah Dansky's son?"

"That's right, so I think representing me would be a nice addition to your résumé."

"When do you have time?" he asked.

"Today."

"All right. I think I can move a few appointments around."

He was an unctuous, publicity-mongering whore. But he was a good lawyer and I alarmed him sufficiently with threats to take my case to other, similarly disposed professionals, that he agreed to work for me on a 25 percent contingency basis, lower than the usual standard.

I discovered that I was right. There were grounds for damages against the record company. Heavy damages. But I didn't want one huge payoff. I was thinking ahead. I wanted complete ownership of our songs. During his drunken lectures, Gil Mattison had taught me that ownership was critical in demanding and getting real money for your music. Perhaps he hadn't realized that while he was delivering this slurred lesson in economics, I was listening intently. If Cold Star and QV Records—or anyone, for that matter—wanted to use our songs, they would have to pay dearly for the privilege.

While the lawyers prepared the case, I did a series of interviews with reporters who wanted the background story of what it was like to grow up with Leah Dansky. I made a point of inserting the saga of how a disreputable record company executive was trying to cheat a holocaust survivor's son out of his royalties. I was careful to repeat Linda Firestone's name several times. Eager to bury the bad publicity, QV Records fired her as quickly as they came to the negotiating table.

The legal wrangling took over a year to settle, but when it was done, Billy and I owned our own music. We also collected over thirty-five thousand dollars in damages against Ophelia Records and imposed huge royalty rates against all future profits on Cold Star's recordings of "Oh, Laurie!" and "The Battle of Britain." For years afterwards, Billy and I each received checks that totaled fifty to a hundred thousand dollars a year—more during the years when "Oh, Laurie!" became the theme song for a television show about adolescents growing up in the sixties and seventies. And still more when "The Battle of Britain" became the soundtrack logo for a major car campaign advertising luxury line vehicles.

Linda Firestone's "grave error in judgment" made her unfit to hold a top position in the industry again.



That fall, I woke up several times in a blind panic, my heart pounding, my body drenched in cold sweat. For a dizzying moment or two, I couldn't remember where I was. Was I home, on tour, lying on the beach? Then I would see my desk against the wall. Above the desk hung the poster of *The Master Planets*, a blowup from our album cover. Immediately I would feel better. I would almost fall back to sleep. Then I would catch a glimpse of her running through the forest, the animal racing beside her. In these quick, flaring snapshots from my consciousness, I would feel as if I were the one running smoothly and assuredly through a deep wood, the outline of trees rushing past. I ran with incredible strength and power. Then I would catch other glimpses—a man hanging from a clock tower, his tongue sticking

grotesquely out between dead lips, his eye-sockets black and bleeding where there were no longer any eyes.

Once or twice, I threw up when I had these episodes. Afterwards, when I washed my face, I looked in the mirror and searched for some imprint in my reflection. Where was she?

Eventually I learned to negotiate the damages of loss within myself. But even with that knowledge, and for years afterwards, I would still wake in the middle of the night with the lingering memory of a nightmare in which I ran through the woods, ferocious, inexhaustible, drawn forward by something I couldn't see ... something elusive, mysterious and hated.



Royce Hart called me at three in the morning. It was Thanksgiving weekend. He was drunk or high, or possibly he was just upset. You couldn't easily assign a "normal" wavelength to Royce's speech patterns in order to make a comparison.

"Pete? Pete? Is this you?" In the background I heard a din of voices, screeching laughter, and then Royce's roaring edict: "Shut the fuck up, you assholes! I'm talking to my friend!"

There was a brief cessation of party noise.

"Sorry," Royce said. Then, "Hi, Pete, how are you?"

I cleared my throat. "Well, I'm okay, Royce." I cleared my throat again. "Royce, do you know what time it is?"

"No," he said, "but I can find out."

"Never mind."

"Pete," Royce said in a musing tone, "Lost Souls are fuckwads."

I hate their motherfucking guts and wish they would all die eating putrid shit.”

I took the phone over to the kitchen table and sat down. “What’s the matter?” I asked.

“Well ...” Royce began and then sighed. “They don’t understand their own music.”

I heard a resumption of the screeching laugh from earlier in the call. Then a crashing boom resounded in the background and someone whined, “Oww, that hurt, douche-bag!”

“Sorry,” Royce said. “I just got out of jail and there’s a party going on here.”

“Jail?” I said.

“Yeah, Cranston McLaren, the lead singer of Lost Souls, and I got into a fight and then we sort of wrecked the lobby of the Ramada Inn in Topeka, and then the police came and I sort of punched a cop in the stomach and then he hit me over the head with his nightstick and then they took me to the hospital to get stitches and then I got put in jail for resisting arrest and some other things. But I’m out now.”

“Are you okay?”

“Oh, yeah, I’m fine,” Royce said. “But here’s the thing. You know that part of ‘Tina ‘n’ Bobby,’ when Bobby gets run over by a car after Tina dies on Christmas day?”

I winced. Every person in America who owned a radio in the fall of 1970 knew that part of the song.

“Well, Cranston wanted me to hit the cymbals very lightly when he goes, ‘My little girl, her dog, that night, they both got to meet Santa Claus.’”

“Yeah?” I said.

“Well, that’s stupid,” Royce said. “You need a few light taps on the tom-toms, just slightly off beat, to really capture the moment, you know?”

I grinned. I missed talking to Royce. I understood him. And when I thought about it (as much as you could think about the song “Tina ’n’ Bobby”), he was probably right. That miserable interlude did need syncopation. Royce’s instincts about percussion were usually on target, if not truly inspired. He possessed a wonderfully inventive feel for the subtle emotions carried by rhythm.

“Cranston is not a very creative guy,” Royce said, “so I told him to get a little loose with this shitty song and listen to how it could be better. But then he told me that the audience wants to hear it exactly from the record and that I’m not playing in some lousy bar band from Jersey anymore.”

“What happened?” I already knew the movement of this story.

“I told him that The Master Planets would have been the greatest band in America and that Lost Souls would have been lucky to haul our shit from gig to gig.”

“He didn’t like that?” I said.

“Well, he punched me in the head. Then I kicked him in the guts and started pounding him with the rhythm that I told him he needed for that punk-ass song. He still didn’t get it. Then the police came. And now here I am in Topeka, without a job.”

There was silence. Then in a small, forlorn voice, Royce said, “Pete, we were going to the top, man. I know your mother died, but, you know, people die. I loved my Grandma Hart when she died, but then I planted a little flower in the backyard for her and then I said, ‘I’ll never forget you, Grandma Hart. Rest in peace, man.’ Can’t you

do the same, so we can get back together and record another album?”

I almost wanted to board a plane for Topeka and start the band all over again.

After a few moments, Royce said, “The greatest thing in my life is gone. I loved being the drummer for The Master Planets. I felt so good then. You’re my friend, Pete, but you fucked up my life. You fucked up all our lives. I’ll never understand that. Don’t call me again, okay?”

Royce hung up on me.

I sat at the kitchen table until dawn.



Billy had been calling me regularly with news about his session work. He was excited about the creative process in music production. He was also meeting some of the greatest musicians in the country. He was learning the business, from playing pop guitar for bubblegum groups to laying down electrified “hums” and “whispers” in alternative jazz. Repeatedly he asked me to join him. “You’d love it out here,” he assured me. “Hell, a great guitarist with your background and your ideas could almost write his own ticket.” Then in a more wistful tone, “We could form a new band, Pete. There’s so much opportunity here.”

A few times I almost booked a flight to LA. It did sound exciting. I had not forgotten my earlier ambitions. I still wanted to write and perform music, and yet I hesitated. The world had changed for me, less because of the bullet that had ended my mother’s life than because of the knowledge that power spreads mysterious lines over the earth, connecting us to fates we can’t grasp in our bustling little triumphs

and disappointments. I could no longer wait upon an Aiden Sewell or a Roger “Rap” Coutrell. It was not simply a matter of impatience. I would never again feel a part of that world where everyone implicitly accepts everyone else’s motivation to scramble for dominance over a theater full of clapping hands and then calls that success. I did not feel superior to that world; indeed, I felt bowed down by a curious sense of isolation.

I was also experiencing another power. It was not joyous or flattering, but it felt real. If only vicariously, I was coming to know a particular antechamber to hell, and the people who inhabited that place. I was coming to know General Gilaad, Rachel Arenberg, my mother, my grandparents, and yes, even Rudolph Meissner.

At the first snowfall in December, rare for that time of year in New Jersey, I contacted the admissions department at Rutgers University. They sent me an application form. As part of the application package, I was to write a five-hundred-word essay on how an experience from my life had helped me to mature. I don’t remember what I wrote. I included a copy of my album, the single off the album, ticket stubs from ‘The Master Planets’ concerts when we toured across America, and several newspaper clippings from the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* profiling my mother’s murder of Rudolph Meissner.

A week after submitting the forms, the dean of admissions called me and offered me a full scholarship. I told him I was in the midst of complex litigation over ownership of my songs. Could I defer my answer until the spring? He readily agreed and then told me how his youngest daughter loved our band and was devastated to learn that we had broken up. She had our poster mounted on her bedroom wall.

I told the dean how flattered I felt.

I had no interest in going to college. What did I have in common with the average undergraduate? But I recognized higher education as a key to my future life, wherever that might take me.

Chapter 26

New York's Christmas wattage crackled hard with the brilliance of fast money burning up the seasonal shopping circuits. Fake snow dusted the tree top in Rockefeller Center. Later, real snow iced the heads of traffic cops and happy tourists as they crowded the streets, and homeless rags stuffed with people shuffled among garbage cans.

I knew the way to the consulate now. I was a traveler. There was a skeleton staff on duty for the holidays. I was admitted to the general's office, where he sat at his desk examining a document with a magnifying glass. When he saw me, he put the magnifying glass down and warmly shook my hand.

"Should I say Happy Hanukah or Merry Christmas?" he asked me.

"I'll answer to both," I replied, "or nothing." I sat down. "I wasn't raised to be anything, particularly."

"Congratulations, by the way," the general smiled at me. "I understand that you've been accepted to Rutgers on a full scholarship."

I raised my eyebrows. "Are you intercepting my mail?"

He shook his head. "No. But do you think for one moment that I would let some maniac with a grudge against your mother or what she stood for get near you?"

"What did she stand for?"

The general smiled very faintly, then he opened a drawer to his

desk and put the magnifying glass inside. "Not for you to get hurt, for one thing," he replied.

"You have some documents for me to look at?"

The general went over to a wall safe, dialed a combination on the lock and drew out some papers. Of course, the general first had to remove the gun that lay as a sort of paperweight on top of them.

He placed a file before me. There was a photo attached. The woman in the picture was my mother. She was very young. As I examined the photo, I realized why I reminded the general of her. Both Penny and I bore a strong resemblance to this young person. The writing on the file was in Russian.

"What is this?" I asked.

"It's an NKVD file, the Soviet Union's secret police. It's an arrest warrant for your mother, who was accused of turning traitor and collaborating with the Nazis."

"What?"

The general removed another file from the folders spread out before him. He pushed it across the table. The photo attached to this file showed a bald, jowly-looking man spread-eagled on the ground in that grotesque, floppy posture of death. There was a hole in his forehead with blood-spattered tracks painted over his face.

"Colonel Demeitre Orlov," the general said. "Shot outside his tent while he smoked a cigarette. Again, no one saw or heard anything."

At the bottom of the file I recognized the name "Leah Danksy" in the Cyrillic alphabet.

"Leah killed him," the general said. "Now she was wanted by both the Nazis and the Russians."

I was having trouble keeping up with this new information and

its possible ramifications.

"Why?" I asked.

"Orlov undermined Leah's authority."

I looked numbly at him.

"I told you that Orlov had resisted when he was asked to arrange transport for those refugees your mother saved."

"Yes," I said. "I remember."

"As it turned out, he kept resisting, and then Rachel died."

I almost forgot whom the general was talking about. For just a second I thought he meant that Rachel Arenberg, my mother, had died.

"She was no communist," the general said. "The Russians knew that. But they also knew that she was no double agent for the Germans."

"Then," I said, confused, "who ...?"

"It would seem that she answered to another authority," the general said.



"After we left Rachel and the survivors at the camp, and for several days afterwards, we diverted the German pursuit in order to give the refugees a chance to go into hiding. Leah had anticipated the Germans' reactions. She knew how many would come after us, where they would come from, and with what manner of weaponry they would attempt to track us down and kill us. She sent Lazer and me off to detonate a series of ammunition dumps. Toward the end of this operation, Leah joined us as we blew up a small bridge that hung

over a steep ravine. An hour later, as we hid in a dense undergrowth of leaves and twisted branches, we spotted three German scouts making their way through the woods. They were at least half a mile away, on the opposite side of the ravine. Lying flat and still within her cocoon of branches and leaves, Leah took aim with her sniper's rifle. Her gun made small 'puff' sounds, hardly more noise than when a tennis ball is released from a new canister. She killed all three scouts in rapid succession.

"Afterwards we took a short rest on a bank overlooking a river. Leah wore her thin tunic. She wore no coat, no hat.

"Lazer said quietly to her: 'Why aren't you cold?' Since her first appearance with the refugees, Lazer had regarded her with a mixture of fear, distrust and awe. He too had heard the stories of *der stille Tod*.

"Leah looked off across the river. After a time, she said, 'Why aren't you warmer?'

"'Because I'm a human being and it's bloody freezing out here!' Lazer exclaimed.

"Leah didn't speak. Then she said, 'Oh.'

"'What's the matter with you?' Lazer cried, 'Can't you feel the cold against your body?'

"When Leah didn't answer, Lazer muttered, 'Like talking to a goddamned corpse.'

"She wore her usual calm, flat, imperturbable look as she continued to gaze out over the river. Henri the dog sat beside her.

"Curious, I asked, 'Where did you find that dog?'

"Her reply came at least five or ten seconds later. I noticed that questions of a personal nature always took longer for her to answer.

“‘One day I was walking through the woods,’ she said, ‘and we found each other.’

“Lazer and I waited for more information. None came.

“‘Why do you talk to that thing in French?’ Lazer asked. ‘Are you afraid that we’ll understand what you’re saying?’

“‘No,’ she said. ‘I talk to him in French because he likes it. It soothes him.’ This bland assurance of the dog’s sensitivity to language would have been amusing if I had not seen his intelligence and ferocity.

“A few moments passed. I said, ‘Do you remember me from before the war?’

“‘The bricklayer’s son,’ she responded without looking at me. Lazer glanced in my direction.

“‘What happened to your parents and your sister?’ I asked. This was the first time that I had ever directly inquired about their fate.

“‘Dead,’ she replied, this time with no preface of silence.

“‘I’m sorry.’

“‘Yes,’ she said.

“‘How did you come to work for the Soviets?’ Lazer asked.

“Leah didn’t speak. After perhaps a minute or two, she said, ‘I crawled out of a pit. I was naked and everyone else was dead. For a long time I wandered through the woods. Some partisans found me. I couldn’t speak. One day my voice returned and I was different. They sent me to Moscow.’

“Lazer and I could think of nothing more to ask.

“The next morning we continued through the forest. We hoped to learn how the refugees had fared and whether they were now safely on their way to Russia. In particular, I was anxious to hear about Rachel and the baby. As we walked through the bright winter cold, I felt

strangely happy. For the first time I believed that I might live through the war. I believed that I would find Rachel again and that we would marry and adopt Zinni as our child and begin a new life together.

“‘Lazer,’ I said, as we walked, ‘will you go to Israel when the war is over?’

“He snorted contemptuously. ‘Israel? You mean Palestine, don’t you? And no, I hadn’t thought that far ahead. I think that expecting to live is a good way to make sure you die. I don’t make plans any more.’

“‘What about you, Leah?’ I asked. ‘We will need people like you if there is to be a new Jewish homeland.’

“‘Why?’ she said. ‘So that I can kill more people.’

“Her answer surprised me. I didn’t know that killing held any more significance to her than did jogging through frozen forests.

“‘No,’ I said, ‘because we would need dedicated people to help build a country that belongs to Jews everywhere, a place where Jews may finally say, “This is our rightful home and no one may ever persecute us in our home again.”’

“‘You would need me to kill people,’ Leah said. ‘If I live through the war, I’ll go to America.’

“Lazer laughed. With characteristic scorn he asked, ‘What are you going to do in America?’

“‘I’ll open a flower shop,’ Leah said.

“I had never seen Lazer so amused. In a way, I was just as amused, if not baffled, by Leah’s replies.

“‘A flower shop?’ Lazer said, after he had managed to stop laughing. ‘What do you know about flowers?’

“‘Nothing,’ Leah said.

“‘How are you going to get to America?’ Lazer asked. ‘A lot of

Jews want to go to America. They can't because America won't let them in.'

"'I'll go in through the cellar,' Leah said.

"Lazer chuckled. I was glad to see him so happy. His contempt was so complete that he beamed with good humor.

"'You know,' he said in a conspiratorial manner, 'they have anti-Semites in America, too. What are you going to do if someone comes into your flower shop and decides he doesn't like the service? What if he calls you a dirty kike Jew bitch?'

"Leah responded calmly. 'What do I care if some fat American calls me a dirty Jew?'

"Several moments passed. Then Lazer said softly, 'Yes, but what if some fat American called your child a dirty Jew?'

"Leah stopped walking. 'That will never happen,'" she said, gazing directly at him.

"'Why not?'

"'Because I will never have children. I will never own a flower shop. I will never reach America.'

"Her answer seemed to depress Lazer and after we continued walking for several minutes, he murmured, 'I'm sorry. I shouldn't have spoken to you like that.'

"Leah didn't respond to the apology and I thought that was just as well. Discussions of a future after the war often seemed to carry a note of black humor. It was not easy to imagine yourself in a place where existence was no longer dependent on an extra bowl of soup or an extra blanket. It was not easy, for that matter, to imagine survival at all. Still, her abrupt dismissal of a life that included having children or running a simple business saddened me. In my own way, I, too, had

climbed out of a pit and had become 'different' in the process.

"We walked in silence for another five miles. Somewhere along the way, Henri disappeared. I was glad not to have his company.

"Later he returned. In a sleek, blurring leap he came to a halt before Leah. She spoke to the animal. He growled and his bristling mane went down. 'Stay here,' Leah said to us suddenly. 'Wait for me.' She disappeared into the forest. She never explained her absences, never told us when she would return. A few hours later, around nightfall, she approached us in the woods with Henri trotting beside her.

"'Rachel is dead,' she said.

"I stared at her, uncomprehending. 'Dead?'

"Lazer moaned; he covered his eyes and wept.

"Leah glanced at me and then looked away. 'The agent handling her passage to Russia was compromised.'

"I felt the return of a great, floating emptiness. 'How?' I asked.

"'Colonel Orlov asked for confirmation from Moscow after we left. He used the wrong codes. The Germans intercepted his message.' Leah looked at me. It was the first time that I had seen even a flicker of sympathy in her expression. 'I'm sorry.'

"After a long time, I sat down.

"We learned that Rachel had waited until the last possible moment. She would not leave until she was certain that all the Jews had been delivered into safety. By that time, the Germans had discovered the plan and with a bit of torture and deductive reasoning, they had tracked down the last underground agent currently operating in that region. Rachel and her contact, a young Polish nurse, were surrounded by thirty or forty Wehrmacht soldiers and an assortment of Gestapo. In the first volley, the Polish nurse was killed. Afterward, Rachel kept

the soldiers busy for at least half an hour. When the soldiers finally entered the house, Rachel pulled the pins on several grenades and, along with herself, sent at least twenty of them into oblivion. She and the Polish nurse had saved the refugees' lives. They had diverted the Germans' attention long enough for the refugees to be smuggled back behind Soviet lines. Zinni too. Rachel kept her promise about him.

"‘She was a science teacher in a primary school.’ I said. I heard my voice, a flat hollow sound scratching against the silence of the woods.

"I was done then," General Gilaad told me. "I would no longer fight with the Russians, the Poles, or any other group connected to the old world. I spent the next few weeks hiding in the woods. Lazer went back to another partisan group. Leah, I presumed, continued with her secretive tasks. Every day, it seemed, the Soviet army made new advances, and the Germans kept falling back.

"I waited for my contacts to give me the word. It was time to escape Europe. Then I discovered that Leah was near death.

"One morning I awoke and found her dog standing over me. Before I could react, he sank his teeth into my sleeve. I cursed and tried to knock his head away with a sharp blow, but he wouldn't budge. 'You filthy animal!' I shouted. His bite was not painful, but it was certainly not playful. Eventually he let go. He gazed at me with his curious blend of hatred and intelligence. I rubbed my bruised arm and looked around. Where was she?

"It didn't take long to find her. She sat shivering in a blanket, underneath a gigantic pine tree. The radiating pulse of fantastic vigor was gone; her face looked pinched, sallow and weak.

"As I knelt before her, she smiled a little. I was shocked by her appearance. I had never thought of her as quite human. Her skills, her

stamina, even her lack of emotion had surrounded her with an aura of invincibility. In a way, I did not want her to be human. There was comfort in that.

“Leah, what’s wrong? Are you sick?” I said.

“‘Yes,’ she replied.

“I put my hand on her forehead. ‘You’ve got a fever.’

“‘Yes,’ she said.

“‘I’ll find a doctor.’

“‘No, I don’t need a doctor.’

“I started to get up. She grabbed my sleeve. ‘I don’t want a doctor,’ she insisted. The intensity of her gaze stopped me. ‘Sit down.’

“Reluctantly, I sat beside her. She shivered for several moments; her eyes lost focus and became glassy.

“‘I couldn’t protect her,’ she said abruptly. I took off my coat and placed it over her. Her skin was icy to the touch and waxy white.

“For a while her body trembled uncontrollably and she thrashed about, repeating incoherent words incessantly and monotonously as she clutched the air with outstretched fingers. Then the wind passed over her face and her eyes grew wide. She stared at me—she stared at nothing,

“At that moment, Leah’s face changed color. Her blanched pallor drained away to an almost translucent tone. I thought I could see the blood vessels and capillaries working in stark relief against the pale white hue of her skin.

“She spoke quietly to me. Her words were often interrupted as she gasped for breath or convulsively twisted the blanket in her fists. Then, after a period of quiet, she would continue speaking, her disembodied voice rising and falling, as if carried over the frayed wires

of a bad telephone connection. Aside from an abrupt command or explanatory statement, I had never heard her speak more than a few sentences at any one time. Now she spoke unceasingly; there was hurriedness about her speech. Perhaps she felt that her life was coming to an end and that her incredible endurance, even her talent for killing, had been a short-term loan. I have often wondered whether Rachel's death—at least in Leah's eyes—was the mysterious promissory note that had come due. In any event, the more she spoke, the more human she became. The more human, the more I pitied her.

"She told me that when the occupation came, her parents sent Claire and her to live with relatives in the country. They were her mother's cousins, Polish Catholics. The relatives hid the girls in a cellar underneath the kitchen. They lived there for six months. Then the Germans found them. They dragged the girls out of their hiding place. After killing the cousins, they took the girls to a stone well near the back of the barn. Leah begged them to leave Claire alone, but they ignored her. There by the well, they raped Leah and Claire all afternoon in a sort of communal ritual. After this, Claire sank into a catatonic state.

"Later, the girls were taken to a vast pit in the middle of the forest. Along with several hundred other men, women and children, they were beaten by guards and told to strip naked. Huddled at the edge of the pit, some Jews in this brutalized crowd chanted the 'Shema Y'Israel.' Many of the children screamed. Some people wept quietly. Leah put her arms around Claire and was thankful that her sister no longer seemed capable of understanding where she was, who she was, or what was about to happen. As the soldiers adjusted their machine guns, Leah heard one of the soldiers call out to a thin, intelligent

looking man who stood a little distance away. His hands were crossed behind his back. The soldier addressed this man as ‘Colonel Meissner’ and advised him that all was in readiness. With an impassive gaze, the colonel raised his hand. At that moment, Leah shouted, ‘Colonel Meissner! God is not blind!’ This pronouncement, coming as it did from a naked girl standing at the lip of a mass grave, provoked a murmur of stunned laughter from the soldiers. Colonel Meissner actually smiled at Leah, a bit ruefully, as if the jabbering from these people was finally unaccountable. Then, with a stern nod, he brought his hand down.”

“I remember being hit. I felt the bullets enter my body as massive blows punching through my muscles and organs. My sister stared at me as we fell together. My arms were still wrapped around her. A wisp of her blonde hair floated across her eyes. Then I felt my bones rattle as my body smashed against the earth and then the slapping, thudding weight of bodies and more bodies heaped down upon me.

“Later it was night. A blue spark, an emanation of spirit, dropped from the sky. I watched. The light grew bigger and more intense. Soon I was enveloped in this spark. My body rose, as if upon a whisper. As I floated from the pit, I saw the lovely—it was unbearably lovely—folds of triumphant wings beating against the stars. The wings caught me in their embrace and a pale fire, searing though without pain, burned its way through my being. Without words, the fire revealed itself to me: it was the Angel of Death who held me above the pit. He spoke to me in a language that slipped over the edge of my understanding yet seemed familiar in some remote way. He conveyed to me His meaning. I was now a part of Him, a messenger of His spirit in this world. I had been chosen to fulfill His vengeance. I would bring suffering to many,

but I must never doubt my actions, for I was a carrier of mercy as well as destruction. The world was a cataclysm of struggling energies. I would consume the ragged embers in this latest conflagration.

“ ‘I remember running and running. I was starving and I was naked. The Russian soldiers found me. I tried to speak but couldn’t. My tongue would not obey my mind. After several days, I spoke my first words. I said, “Colonel Meissner.” As soon as I said the words, I realized that I was changed. I was no longer Leah Danksy. I was someone else. I would be someone else forever. I discovered my power then. My body and mind were no longer different tenants occupying the same house. I was complete. The whole world seeped into my sphere of understanding. I would do as I wished. There were no limits, no regrets, no memories to thwart my actions. I was complete.

“ ‘I stood over the world and I saw the dust swirling in the sunlight. I could hold the dust in my hand or I could scatter the dust across the earth.’

“Leah’s voice was barely a whisper now.

“ ‘They sent me to Moscow, and from there to the woods to train,’ she said, staring past me. ‘I’ve killed hundreds, possibly thousands of people. I’ve used their weakness to destroy them as easily as you would pick up a pebble and toss it into the air. I killed Meissner’s brother. He was a Gestapo captain operating near Radom. I cut his eyes out.’

“She was quiet for a long time. With bitterness, I noticed that her ferocious companion, the ravening dog, had abandoned her.

“ ‘She pressed my hand. ‘I should not have left Rachel.’

“ ‘It wasn’t your fault.’

“She began coughing again, great, convulsive, rattling spasms. When she was quieter, she said, ‘I killed Colonel Orlov. Now the

Russians will be after me.'

"I will find you a doctor,' I said. 'You will not perish.'

"None of it matters.'

"I rose from my kneeling position beside her. 'I will bring help.'

"Leah shook her head. 'It doesn't matter,' she repeated.

"I took off my shirt and wrapped that around her. Then I arranged my coat and the blankets to fit as tightly and snugly over her as possible.

"I am your friend, Leah. I will bring help.'

"She gave me a tiny, inscrutable smile. 'Goodbye, Danny Boy,' she said.

"I moved as fast as I could toward what I hoped was a town and a doctor. When I returned, she had disappeared. I didn't see her again until last year, when you opened the door for me, Peter."



It was very late. The general's face was half lit from the small lamp glowing on the corner of his desk. I felt that I should say something. The consulate building was quiet in that hollow way when all the people have gone home for the night and there is only one light burning in an office down the hall.

"I'm glad she had some friends," I said. The words sounded so ridiculously trite. I was ashamed of my inability to feel much of anything. "I'll be at the tribute," I said. "But that's all. I won't be a shill for any political agendas."

"That would be fine. I couldn't expect anything more."

That was a lie and we both knew it, but I let it pass.

When I returned to Sea Ridge, I removed the poster of The Master Planets from my bedroom wall and placed it in a box that I stored in the attic. Then I sat down in the living room. My body hunched forward as if in prayer or sickness, and began to shake. I sat like that for a long time.

Chapter 27

I've led an affluent life. Among certain business types in New Jersey, I am known as a lawyer who understands how money can vanish and then reappear in a great many legal shapes and sizes. I am very careful about what I choose to know in these sleight of hand tricks, both for my sake and that of my clients. After law school I worked for two years as a prosecutor in the district attorney's office. Then I opened my own practice, taking with me a rather select client base. Twice I've been brought before the Bar on ethics charges, and twice I've been exonerated. They couldn't find any hard evidence that I ever acted improperly within professional boundaries.

Over the years, I have accumulated several properties. Some are making tremendous profits while others are going broke at a leisurely pace. In reality, they are all making money, on time, in their own way, in support of one another. There is a ratio involved in success.

Once, very briefly, I was married. It was shortly after graduating from law school. She was a nice girl. We met in our torts class. She was intelligent, attractive, charming. She wanted a husband and a home (children too, of course), and pleasant memories of a long, shared life. In the end we were not suited to each other.

I've had relationships with several types of women. Some thought I might be dangerous, troubled, sexy. I remember the way they would look at me when I caressed their bodies, the quick glance from down behind the eyes, the wondering whether the killer's blood in me might

leave a thrilling mark upon their psyches in the heat of coupling. These women, the ones who came for the fast ride, were disappointed that I displayed an even temper and no signs of sociopathology. When they wandered into my study and saw framed pictures of Penny standing with various dignitaries, they would become even more puzzled.

“Who is this woman?” they would ask. Then, peering more closely at the photos, they would exclaim, “Isn’t that President or Prime Minister so-and-so standing next to her?” I would explain that the woman in the photos was my sister, and that, yes, that was President or Prime Minister such and such with her. Then I would give a brief summary of Penny’s medical volunteerism. I would not enumerate every award that Penny had received from the World Health Organization or the tributes bestowed upon her by grateful countries she had assisted. There were too many of them. I would simply state that Penny was a wonderful person and a brilliant surgeon.

This would effectively complete the overall confusion about my status as a desperate character. Loving your sister is perhaps endearing, but it’s neither dangerous nor sexy.

Sometimes during college and then law school, when my name was called out from attendance lists, I would see a teacher or student wrinkle his brow in studied concentration, trying to remember why that name sounded familiar. For history buffs or even just celebrity watchers, there has always been a certain morbid glamour associated with my name. Perhaps the most bizarre notoriety I achieved during my adult life was my inclusion in a ’70s Trivial Pursuit board game. “His mother killed Nazi war criminal Rudolph Meissner. He also wrote the rock classics ‘Oh, Laurie!’ and ‘The Battle of Britain.’ What was his name?”



The first memorial tribute to Leah Dansky was postponed until the spring. By then, a rather nice, sanitary little book had been published about her exploits. The book did not explore Leah's belief that, for a particular time and place, she was the Angel of Death's executor. The book also didn't reveal Leah's many creative ways of neutralizing her enemies. I attended the first tribute in New York. I've attended subsequent ones held in different cities across America. I attended long after the general himself ceased to attend, long after he joined the Mossad and became too secret and powerful a figure to be affiliated with such public events, long after my only contact with him involved watching his televised press conferences, like everyone else in the world. Yet although we no longer met, I've never had any doubt that he and his organization continued to keep track of Penny and me. We were too important to the cause.

I've spoken to most of the survivors who were on that train, and their children and grandchildren. Over the years I've developed a few simple speeches for these occasions. I show respect for the survivors' suffering. I acknowledge their gratitude on behalf of my mother. I assure them that, were she here, she would have felt so proud to know them better as people. Then I escape as quickly and politely as possible.

Over the years, I have sat in cheerful solariums with Penny and watched her recuperate from periodic spells of nerve-deadening depression. We are close in a way that is both sad and comforting. Once, early on, I started to tell her more of the story that Daniel Gilaad

told me, but after a while she began moaning and pulling on her hair, so I stopped. Sometimes, when she doesn't realize that she's doing it, she'll look at me with the most intense hatred. I think I understand. I found my mother's body. I made it real.

Penny has gone to all the memorial functions with a rigid resolve. That has not kept her from dousing herself in alcohol for several weeks before the event, or covering herself afterwards in a sort of self-imposed blanket of brooding silence. Her ex-husband (she married her first serious boyfriend, the cardiologist) once confided to me many years later that he simply became worn out by her problems. "I just got tired of Penny's brilliance and her constant need to prove it," he told me as we found ourselves sharing a taxi up Broadway one hot July day. "I also got tired of her acidic wit, her high dives into a bottle of Scotch, and her hatred of most people in this world, even the ones whose lives she was saving. Aside from that, Penny was a dream to live with."

Realizing that his catalogue of woes against Penny was perhaps insulting to her brother, he added in a more conciliatory tone, "You know, it's a shame. Underneath all that rage, she's a lovely woman. But your family's history is just too complicated, too ... Jesus, every time she went to one of those goddamned tributes, it was like she impaled herself on a spear."

I remembered that in the last weary episode of Penny's marriage she had discovered that her husband was "impaling" his office assistant at a variety of motels along the Jersey shore. When the taxi dropped the cardiologist off, he turned around on the sidewalk and extended his hand to me with a genial smile. "Good to see you, Pete. You know, I always thought you were the most well adjusted one in your family."

His smile faded. No one was shaking his hand.

"You don't know anything about my family," I said. I waved the taxi on.



I met Genevieve a few weeks after my forty-second birthday. She was talking to a rather excitable man, who held a wine glass as he spoke and spilled more and more of its contents on the carpet as he gesticulated to emphasize some important point that he wanted her to grasp. She kept moving backward toward the hors d'oeuvre table in slow, incremental steps, but very carefully, so as not to alarm even further those chopping, waving hands in front of her.

We were at a fundraising party near Princeton. The proceeds from the event would assist environmental protection groups dedicated to maintaining safe, clean waters for coastal New Jersey. I regularly donated money to such organizations, but never agreed to sit on any boards or to endorse personally any political platforms. I was known among a select group in New Jersey as a charitable individual, prosperous and involved, but not so involved that my name could be held hostage by any one party or agenda. Very few people truly understood my business, and those who did were eager to separate themselves from public association with me.

As I tasted my insipid glass of white wine and glanced at my watch for the first opportunity to exit politely, I saw the trapped woman imploring me with her eyes. She leaned uncomfortably back against the table, her suit jacket almost dipping into the crab cakes and stuffed mushrooms. The excitable, sloppy-wine man nearly bent

over her. I put down my drink and stepped forward.

"Hello," I said to her, pretending to be delighted and amazed. "Why, I haven't seen you in—in—what's it been?"

"So many ages!" she replied, and edged away from the table.

"I'm Peter Jameson," I said, shaking her confused suitor's hand. He looked at me, stupefied. His glass was now empty.

"Oh, Peter," she laughed, "What a funny way you have of suddenly showing up."

She took my arm. As we walked away, she called over her shoulder, "He's an old family friend. I'm sure you understand. Please call me next week."

"I never got your number," the man said peevishly.

We vanished into the nether regions of the banquet hall.

"Thank you," she said, after we had settled comfortably near a dessert table. "I met him at a conference a year ago. I made the mistake of appearing interested for five minutes and now I can't shake him loose."

She was lovely. Her auburn hair waved down and then up across her brow in a romantic sweep. Her mouth was generous and amused.

"You're Peter Jameson," she said with a bright, eager smile. She continued to smile, as if my presence were some happy quirk of fantastic luck. "I know all about you."

My face went rigid with disappointment. Very few people knew of me, and the ones who did usually associated me with things I didn't want to talk about.

"You signed my Master Planets album when I was fourteen," she said, and then burst into laughter. "It was at the Rahway Mall,

off exit 105. You signed the album, ‘To Genevieve—all my love, Peter.’ I thought you were sooooo beautiful.” She laughed at her own impersonation of a ’70s teenybopper.

I smiled back, relieved. “Yes, I’m that Peter Jameson, but I’m afraid my beauty has vanished, along with vinyl records.”

“Well, I think you’re still pretty handsome.” She extended her hand to me. “My name is Genevieve Ronceau.”

I was suddenly having a nice time. I wanted to talk with her and kiss her and find out who she was and why she was here and whether she might be as much fun in the future as she was right now.

She was a professor of American Studies at Temple University. Her special area of scholarship was in early colonial history. We talked for a long time and sampled quite a few desserts. By the end of the evening I learned that she had written several books on the Massachusetts Bay Colony and its system of government. She was second generation American; her grandparents were French Canadian. She liked comic book art, and adored Egon Schiele and Käthe Kollwitz. When she was in junior high, she bought the one and only album by The Master Planets; since then, she had moved on to ragtime and jazz. Her only sibling, a younger brother, died when he was twenty-two in an automobile accident. Her father and mother were divorced. Her father had been an aeronautics engineer. He drank and then, after his son’s death, his drinking grew steadily worse until he died in a V.A. hospital. Her mother had sold real estate, and was now retired and living in Naples, Florida, with four cats, a parakeet, and a rabbit. Her mother’s name was Betty.

Genevieve had been married once, directly after college. The marriage lasted one year. The husband, a high school guidance

counselor, married again and now had three teenaged sons. Genevieve always assumed that when she was ready to have children, she would “hear the bell.” But for her, the bell had never rung.

“I can’t believe I’ve told you so much about myself,” Genevieve said, as we stood outside the entrance to the hotel, ready to give the tickets to the valet for our cars. She glanced up at me, mildly curious, as we waited. “You’re a nice man,” she said. I guessed that she knew about my connection to Rudolph Meissner.

“Is that surprising?”

“A little, yes.”

The valet drove up then. He jumped out, handed her the keys and accepted the tip, all in one fluid motion, as if he were practicing a gymnastic routine.

“Well,” she said, turning to me, “I had a very nice time tonight.”

I hesitated, but only for a second, then I drew closer and kissed her. Her mouth tasted voluptuous and warm. I felt the jazzy heat spiraling between us and when I pulled away, I felt flushed and slightly disoriented.

She smiled and touched the lapels of my suit jacket. “This is funny,” she said quietly.

“Yes,” I said. “But I hope in a good way.”

A few years later I asked Genevieve to marry me, but by then she had discovered that I was not entirely a “nice” man, and she left soon afterward.

Chapter 28

Genevieve was curious about my work, but aside from the most mundane details of how real estate and tax law pertained to corporate investment, I couldn't tell her much. I would never endanger her, even indirectly, by discussing my clientele. But I enjoyed hearing about her work. I found her research interesting and her stories about her students funny and insightful. Sometimes I gave her a little advice when she was trying to navigate the politics of her department for extra funding or for sabbatical release time. But in general, I simply listened.

On one of Genevieve's summer breaks, we took an extended holiday through Australia, New Zealand, the Tonga Islands, and then China. We traveled well together.

As we toured through Central Mongolia, Genevieve took a picture of a boy riding a camel. He wore headphones and dreamily shook his head to music as he moved along with his mount in that loping, awkward gait of the dromedary. Our group had asked him to pose for several pictures. He clicked his tongue, drew back on his reins and took off his headphones, handing them down to me as the cameras whirled. Curious about his musical preferences, I put the headphones on and heard a techno-pop version of "The Battle of Britain."



We stopped in Shanghai on our way back to the States. I wanted to show Genevieve Xiang Yang, the huge outdoor bazaar where knockoff products bearing such labels as Gucci, Adidas and Gap lay heaped in haphazard piles in hundreds of booths all selling similarly suspicious items. I spoke a little Mandarin—I had done business with several reconstructed communist officials now quietly turned venture capitalists—and as we wandered through the bazaar and occasionally stopped to inspect the wares, I interposed my objections to the price of the handbags, sweaters and watches offered to the “pretty American lady.” Eventually, after the obligatory round of bids, shocked refusals, more bids, more outrage, more stunned disbelief—“No! No joke price, mister! I have no time for joke—” the merchants agreed to a price. Then came the ultimate wrapping of the parcel, accompanied by a pleasant smile and warm words of praise: “You very good bargainer, mister!” issued to virtually every shopper who passed through.

Later that evening, I took Genevieve to a restaurant operated by people from a province in northwestern China. The cuisine was a mix of traditional Chinese food and Middle Eastern dishes. We were served a spicy lamb stew and delicious bread along with plates of dumplings and shrimp. There was a belly dancer too, and musicians who played instruments that sounded like Asian harps restrung by Baghdad street performers.

“Belly dancers in China?” she whispered with an amazed smile.

“Big country. Lots of ethnic groups,” I answered, delighted by her delight.

As we sipped our beers and watched the performance, a man approached our table. He was a very slight man, with a thin mustache and wide, frightened eyes.

"Mr. Jameson, sir?" he inquired in a polite voice.

"Yes," I said.

"I apologize for interrupting your dinner." With an abrupt half-gesture, he bowed to Genevieve and gave her a quick smile. Then he bent forward and spoke in a low voice to me.

"I'm on vacation," I said when he was through speaking.

The man whispered again in my ear. I shrugged.

"That is not my problem," I said evenly. I looked over at Genevieve, who regarded this exchange with an expression both concerned and sad.

The man nodded. Once more he whispered to me, this time his eyes glassy with fear.

I put down my napkin. "All right," I said. "But there's really nothing I can do."

"I'm sorry," I said to Genevieve. I took some money out of my wallet and put it on the table. For a moment, she stared at the money as if it were an unusual fungus that had climbed off the floor. "I have to speak with someone. It shouldn't take long. I'll see you back at the hotel."

The meeting took three hours when it should have lasted ten minutes. The Chinese investors had heard a rumor that tax incentives for the riverfront project would be summarily retracted unless the city was guaranteed a certain percentage of the revenues. Supposedly, the city was worried about housing costs for the displaced population living near the waterfront.

I assured them that the rumors were false and would not affect the tax structure currently in place. One of the investors, a genial man with a daughter at Harvard said, "We will not keep paying city

officials for that rate. There must be balance here." I agreed. "They are simply making noises to placate the community," I told him. "They would sooner live in—" I mentioned a particularly poor province in China—"than jeopardize the riverfront project."

The investors laughed. I had done business with them before. They knew that I was a key stakeholder in the complex machinery of building and destroying for profit.

Before I left, they asked me, with a great deal of concern, if they could do anything to make my stay in China a more pleasant one. Would I like a girl? Perhaps some fine hashish? I thanked them and explained that I did not need a girl or drugs, but that I appreciated their spirit of hospitality.

At the hotel, Genevieve waited for me on the glass-enclosed balcony. Our room looked out over the Huangpu river and the new skyscrapers of the Pudong District. At night, the contours of the buildings, space-aged minarets ringed at the top with elliptical hoops and weird jutting spires, resembled the architecture of the planet Krypton. Our hotel was in the Bund, an old, historic part of Shanghai that in the nineteenth century housed numerous banks and trading houses from various European nations.

"Sorry," I said, opening the doors to the balcony. I put my arms around her. She barely moved, but she did move, if only a centimeter, away from my embrace. She didn't look at me.

I dropped my arms to my sides. "Unfortunately, many meetings in China last a long time. They're generally about judging the qualities of the person you're speaking to rather than the business at hand."

"That's very informative," she said, still not looking at me. "I've asked you before—I've given you plenty of opportunities to explain

it—and now I'll ask you again: What do you do for a living, Pete?"

I passed my hand through my hair. "I've never done anything illegal, if that's what you're asking."

Genevieve laughed with abrupt cynicism. It was not a pleasant sound. "You're right. That's not what I asked. But it is informative."

Tiredly, I said, "I'm an agent, so to speak, for various investment groups. I make recommendations on where and how to put money into certain communities." I had explained this many times already.

Far below us, streams of people walked into the clubs and bars that blazed with color against the night. On the corner was a restaurant with a red-striped awning over its entrance, the signature decoration of a pub from America that served beer and burgers with supposedly infectious enthusiasm.

Genevieve gazed at me. I could tell that she was reassessing a former view of me and that this new data did not seem promising.

"Why do you work for such people, Pete?"

"Who?" I asked. "The McDonald's hamburger assassination squad?"

"Be serious, please."

"I am." I took her arm. "The world is a complicated place, Genevieve. Most of what you see is not what you get. Anything but, in fact."

She moved away from me again. "I'm a history professor. I'm also an adult with some common sense. I find your attitude patronizing."

I walked over to the connecting doors between the balcony and bedroom. "Let's go inside," I said to her. "We leave tomorrow on that six-thirty flight. We need to get some sleep."

Genevieve didn't move. "This is very hard, Pete. Because I do love you and I respect you. But that doesn't change certain facts."

I was very tired now. "What facts?" I asked.

She looked up at me. "That you can't keep your professional and personal life entirely separate. You're kind of a scary guy, Pete. I never really understood that, or let's say, I didn't want to see it before."

I felt the old poison, the densely packed power of contempt rise up within me. What did she know, this college professor, about "scary" people?

"I wouldn't expect you to understand," I said carefully.

Genevieve walked past me. She walked into the bedroom and then into the bathroom. "I'm taking a shower," she said and closed the door.

We spoke gently on the flight home: her courses the following year, the weather in America, whether I might buy a new car. We had hurt each other and now the jet was hurrying us back to our real lives.

Upon arriving in Newark, we waited at the carousel for our luggage and then took the shuttle to long-term parking.

"I am trying to protect you, don't you understand that?" I said, as I hoisted one of her bags into the trunk. The roaring sound of jets landing and taking off muffled some of our words.

"Pete, I don't want that kind of protection. I shouldn't need it, and neither should you."

I closed the trunk and walked around to the driver's side of the car. "I work with deeply cynical people," I said. She stood on the other side of the car.

"You're not a Politburo member. Let's get that straight before you start claiming that you're caught between bureaucracy and party dogma."

I smiled in spite of myself. “Genevieve, I simply want you to be untouched by the more ... ruthless strains of my business dealings.”

“And yet you fuck me. But you don’t expect your cynicism and ruthlessness to touch me.”

Hearing Genevieve speak so casually about being “fucked” by me was strangely shocking. It sounded obscene. I didn’t know that I could be affected any longer by verbal obscenity.

I opened the car door, got in and adjusted my seat belt. Genevieve slid into the car beside me. She reached over and tenderly touched the back of my neck.

“I understand more about you than you realize,” she said tentatively.

On the ride to my apartment, we spoke very little. I understood that we had reached an impasse in our relationship. She wanted me to give up my role as a player in the kind of world that I both despised and yet took pleasure in dominating. Genevieve loved me, but she also respected herself. When she finally made up her mind to leave, she would leave. Afterwards, she would make a good life for herself without me.

When we put our bags down in the middle of the living room, Genevieve sighed and said, “I’m exhausted. It’ll probably take a week before I’ve adjusted to the time change.” She took off her clothes and went into the bedroom. Within a few minutes she was asleep.

I checked the messages on my answering machine. I had given instructions to my secretary not to contact me while I was on vacation, except for the most dire of reasons—a client faced with jail, for instance.

After I listened to the machine, I looked out the balcony windows

at the sea. The sky was deep, dark blue, the autumn light clear and brilliant against the drifting clouds on the horizon.

The message was from Billy Warwick. Our old friend, Royce Hart, had died last week. He died quietly in a motel room outside the city limits of Las Vegas. The manager of the motel found him curled up in bed, his feet bare, his arms folded across his chest. He was alone.

Chapter 29

I invited Billy and Tommy to fly out to New Jersey. I wanted to see my old friends. Royce was gone. Soon, I knew, Genevieve and I would be over. I felt a sharp longing, painful and deep as a serious wound. I wanted to arrange my memories and properly honor them.

Over the years, I had spoken with Billy and Tommy on the phone—Billy mostly, because of the royalties. Nevertheless, it had been many years since I'd seen them. So I shouldn't have been surprised when I walked into the lobby of the hotel and saw my old bandmates lounging around one of those gigantic potted plants near the check-in counter. At first, I didn't know who these middle-aged guys were. But as I got closer—they still hadn't seen me—I recognized the personalities hidden underneath the erosion and bruising of time.

Billy's eyes registered the first comprehension of my older self. He came forward excitedly. "Pete, hello! Man, look at you. You've barely aged at all!"

This was politeness.

I grinned back. I shook hands with Billy and Tommy. I was so happy to see them.

Tommy pointed at my hair. "A little thin on top," he chuckled. He pointed to his own head. "Happened to me too."

We looked at one another, gauging the changes from the time we were delirious youth until now, as we stood awkwardly around a giant philodendron in a hotel lobby in Jersey. Billy, that wafer-thin rocker,

was now a deeply tanned California hipster, with richly streaked gray woven into his mane of hair, tied back in a ponytail with a turquoise-blue elastic. The wrinkles in his face looked faint and well chosen, as if etched there by an artisan working in a chic pottery studio. He had remained in the music business. He was considered a “professional’s professional” in the studio, a hired diamond-cut in any arrangement of jewels. Between his session work and the royalty checks from our teenaged collaborations, he was comfortably well off. He lived in Northern California and produced the music of emerging artists in a small recording studio that he owned. He had been divorced twice and had three children, two girls and a boy.

Tommy, the tall bass player with waves and waves of long, brown shaggy hair falling past his muscled shoulders, was now a little puffy in the jowls, a town father with a balding spot on his crown and a slight stoop in his walk. He looked ready to pass an ordinance for fifteen miles an hour in the business district. His life had followed a more academic path. He taught computer science at the University of Rochester and was currently working on new software programs for video games. He had married late in life and had no children.

“Man, Royce would have loved this,” Tommy said, in the midst of our excited conversations.

We all stopped talking for a moment. Royce’s absence was a palpable reminder of why we were here.

On the ride to my apartment, Billy explained what little he knew about Royce’s death. We had heard most of it in snatches over the years; the actual end was less an announcement than a summary caption to the same frustrated grief, over time, pounding its head against the wall.

Royce had died of a drug overdose in a crappy motel. He had been living there on disability.

His life had been a spasm-shaking, nosedive-plowing crash into the ground. He'd been arrested several times for drunk and disorderly behavior, possession of narcotics, and a series of other infractions, most of them evidencing the poor judgment of the advanced inebriate. He had three children with three different women. He had found Jesus, then lost Him, then found Him again, all within the time it takes to speed-read the gospels. After the debacle with Lost Souls, he played drums for Las Vegas lounge acts. That lasted for a few years. Then he became enamored of a prostitute whose pimp nearly beat him to death in the parking lot of an all-night convenience store. After that, Royce drifted from welfare checks and halfway houses to pushing the broom across sympathetic employers' floors. His last job was night clerk in the same motel off the Vegas Strip where he had died.

Royce had been cremated and his remains scattered in the Nevada desert.

"I talked to him last Christmas," Billy said. "He was telling me about a plan to reunite The Master Planets, you know, go on one of those Golden Oldie tours. I told him that our two big hits were recorded by another band. People wouldn't know who we were."

"I spoke with him about two years ago," Tommy said. "He was into Jesus. He testified for about an hour. Then he asked for a hundred dollars."

There was silence in the car. Then I said, "He stopped talking to me years ago. Every time I called he told me that my soul was damned because God had given me a great gift and I had flung it back in His face."

I drove. My eyes filled with tears. I noticed that Billy and Tommy's faces were rigid with some cloaked emotion. I wondered if it was resentment. We all knew that I had effectively derailed Royce's life, and theirs, all those years ago.

At my apartment, Genevieve warmly greeted Billy and Tommy and told them how much she had loved *The Master Planets* as a young teenager. This bit of fan worship embarrassed and pleased them. They made self-deprecating remarks about a "misspent youth," but in their eyes shone a sort of wistful pride.

"I was so sorry to hear about your friend," Genevieve remarked as she led them into the living room.

When they came into the penthouse's ocean-front room with its wide, spacious windows and the light sparkling off the sea, they turned to me, as if confused once more by this sudden apparition of a middle-aged man pretending to be their childhood friend.

"This is nice," Tommy said, looking around appreciatively. "Do you own this place?"

I owned half the building, but such information would have sounded crass when considered against Royce's plunge into a life of food stamps and methadone treatments.

"Yes, I was lucky," I said off-handedly. "I bought it years ago when the housing market was down."

This was the sort of remark that had no easy rejoinder. No one who ever cared about you judges your existence on the basis of fluctuating real estate prices.

Genevieve touched my shoulder. "I'm going out for a while. I promised myself I'd look for a winter coat this weekend." She turned to Billy and Tommy. "I'll be back in a few hours. I hope you'll all still

be here.”

After she left, Billy said, “She’s very nice, Pete.”

“And beautiful,” Tommy added. “You always got beautiful girls. How did that happen, anyway?”

“Because you were never that good looking,” Billy said.

“I know,” I smiled.

“And you were never that bright,” Tommy added.

“I know that too.”

We spent the next few hours drinking beer, talking about Royce, reminiscing about other old friends and experiences. It was nice. I explained my ideas for a college fund for Royce’s children. I would set up a trust and oversee the tuition payments as well any other educational costs. Tommy and Billy could donate whatever they wished, but I would assume the primary legal and financial responsibility.

“The housing market must have been good to you,” Tommy mentioned at one point, somewhat wryly.

“I’ve been lucky,” I reiterated in a careful tone.

They knew I was wealthy. They had both done well in life, but perhaps they felt some lingering sense of irony over my success, coming as it did after the dissolution of our shared dreams for commercial and artistic triumph. Suddenly I wanted my part in ending the band out in the open. I wanted no more ghosts hovering about me, whispering blame for lost youth or lost anything into my ear. If there were blame to be passed, then let it be loud and clear.

I set my beer carefully on the glass coffee table.

“I couldn’t help being Leah Dansky’s son,” I began slowly. “What I did with my life was my choice. Things acted upon me and I acted upon them and now here I am.”

Billy and Tommy listened to me with calm, interested looks.

"I feel responsible for Royce. I am responsible. I remember his voice when he called me from Topeka after he got fired from Lost Souls. I was his friend. I was a stabilizing factor in his life, a guy he could rely on. Some people need help, a lot of help. I knew that. I let him down."

There was a long moment of silence. My former partners looked at me. Finally Billy spoke quietly, gently.

"Not your fault, man," he said. "Not your fault. Royce was a great guy, but he had no brakes. He didn't know how to care for himself."

"It's true," Tommy spoke up. "I loved Royce, but even if we'd gone to the top, he'd still be out of control. That's just the way he was."

"I let you guys down too," I continued as if they hadn't spoken. I looked away from them, frustrated. "What happened to you wasn't your choice. I can never forget that." I stopped again. I wanted to reach into myself and strew before them the cherished, happy pictures of our youth. I wanted them to understand how the pictures of myself, of all our dreams for success, had begun to curl and smoke at the edges after my mother's suicide. I wanted to explain things better to them. They deserved that. I drew in a deep breath.

"I'm sorry," I finally said, looking directly at them. "I'm sorry for everything. I know that I screwed things up for you."

Billy put down his beer on the glass coffee table. Tommy and I looked up at the sound.

Billy leaned back and crossed his hands behind his neck. Then he chuckled. He looked at us, and chuckled some more. Finally he spoke.

"For a long time I wanted to kill you, Pete," he said breezily. "Then

I wanted to forget that I was ever in a band called The Master Planets. I did studio work for so-called 'great' bands that weren't half as good as we were at nineteen. I watched people become famous who were bullshit talents with bullshit skills. I used to think to myself, 'You guys got lucky, that's all. You were in the right place at the right time.'

"The Master Planets were in the right place at the right time too, and then we weren't. And it pissed me off to think that World War II—something that happened before I was goddam born—killed our band. Lots of times I wondered, 'My career got trashed because a bunch of assholes a million years ago messed with Pete's mother? What the hell is that about? I'm a fucking American. I don't let shit like that get in my way. And it shouldn't get in Pete's way, either.'"

I gave a brief smile at his sentiments. I had once felt the same way about my destiny.

"I used to think you were a weak, stupid asshole, Pete," he continued. "Then after a while I started looking more at myself. I wondered why I couldn't form a new band, make a new start. I finally realized that I just wasn't that good without you. And that was hard too. But then I discovered I was great at helping other musicians develop their talent. I'm a good producer. So yeah, things acted on me and I acted on them and now here I am too. I've done okay and I'm pretty happy. Maybe not deliriously happy, but what the fuck. Pretty damned happy." Billy grinned at me. He picked up his beer.

Tommy leaned back and looked at the ceiling. He shook his head and smiled. "Well," he began, "I didn't write the music, so I didn't have the chance to lament my lost career while collecting royalty checks—"

"Hey, you didn't do badly," Billy remonstrated gently.

"Exactly true. I didn't do badly at all," Tommy said. He cast a quick glance in my direction. "Listen, I was an excellent bass player and a good singer in a band that might have gone to the top. But it didn't. I never had illusions about myself. I wasn't going to form my own band or go solo. I was interested in computer science and I've done well in my field. Unfortunately, Royce didn't have our options. He lost his whole life after the band broke up. He couldn't adjust."

We were silent again, thinking about our friend. Then Billy smiled at me and softly said, "Listen, Pete. I know you didn't leave The Master Planets. I know that thing took you away. And I'm sorry. I've wanted to say that to you for a long time. And I've also wanted to thank you for protecting our music. Those royalty checks gave me a lot of options in life."

Tommy lifted his beer to me in a sort of salute. "Hey, thanks from me, too. I had a wonderful experience at a critical time in my life. It helped me grow up fast and it helped me do things with real confidence."

I felt a lovely silence breathing within me.

Billy suddenly reached into his overnight bag sitting beside him on the couch. I had wondered why he brought that bag along with him to my apartment. He took out a video tape.

"Last week I spoke with Royce's ex-girlfriend on the phone." Billy shook his head. "Her name is Arlene. Nice woman," he added wryly.

Billy explained that Arlene had gathered up Royce's belongings from his motel room and immediately placed them on her lawn in an impromptu yard sale. Royce's drum set, the most expensive item among the collected remnants of his life, went for a hundred dollars. There was also a videotape that she displayed on the lawn next to some

old albums. The tape was labeled "Master Planets, Garden Arena, 1973." No one bought the tape. Arlene complained to Billy that she had watched it with Royce so many times that she never wanted to see that "shitty goddamn thing" ever again. After a few minutes though, in the throes of grief, she did some quick math and reluctantly offered the video to Billy for two hundred dollars.

"I haven't seen this," Billy said, and held up the video as if it had mysteriously appeared before his person, like a magic trick. "I didn't even know it existed. Supposedly, Royce got it from some other old girlfriend, a publicity agent for Power Train. They were going to release a concert film of their '73 American tour, but it didn't happen. There were legal problems.

"Anyway," Billy continued, "a few years ago, this old girlfriend of Royce's transferred this part of the film onto videotape for him. It's our opening act. I thought we might all like to see the 'shitty goddamn thing.'"

He handed the tape to me. I got off the couch and put the video into the VCR. My body tensed. I had lived through what we were about to watch. It had been a critical part of my history, a sort of demarcation point between one life and another. Now I was going to see that moment from the outside, a spectator in the stands, considering the show's promise a lifetime of years later. Tommy and Billy also leaned forward, rather nervously.

The screen turned black; then static crackled in white, snaky, ghost-like rivers against the background. Suddenly, the picture came on, a cavern-deep gloom punctuated by thousands of swaying lighters, pin-points of fire racing across the screen as shouting, rustling noises filled the stadium. The camera panned the crowds, catching the quick,

nervous movements and breathy sounds of the seized mob waiting to ignite.

The stage went dark. A single dot of light switched on over the headboard of a massive amplifier.

"Ladies and gentleman," an announcer's voice echoed. "Please welcome ... Tanzar Recording artists ... The Master Planets!"

We broke into the glare, the wild applause, and then Royce was there, behind us, the solid, booming rhythm of his drums propelling us beyond the stage as we played the fevered arrangement of our first song. We sang it up from the gut and then strung it past sparking wires. There was newness and heat to our music, tracer bullets of true talent. Within moments the camera caught the stunned look on the fans' faces, their awakening exhilaration as they sang and rocked in their seats and even stumbled into the aisles for a closer look at where this raw blast was firing its anvils.

We didn't stop between numbers. We played one song right after another, no separation, no segue, just one leap up to the next battlement, and then the next charge up the higher hill. It was lovely and frenzied and absolutely right. Our blended voices caught somewhere up around the top tiers of the stadium, hung with sweet toughness on the roof, and then swept down over the rioting fans. We were a muscled shoulder shoving old pop music to the side, and announcing the creation of something new.

We played the "Battle of Britain" our way, before Cold Star's dyspeptic performance had robbed the song of its grit. Billy's ascending and descending lines crossed with my ascending and descending melodies in a contrapuntal dance that made the blood explode with joy. We sang the last note and broke the last chord against our guitars.

Then we bowed deeply to the audience and left the stage, accompanied by the throat-piercing roar that follows victory.

The videotape ran out; twenty-three minutes had passed before our eyes and ears.

I shook as I stared at the dark screen. I had not known, had not really remembered, at least not in such shocking detail, the promise of our talent. A long time ago, The Master Planets had torn off a piece of rock 'n' roll heaven and flung it before amazed crowds. When we were young.

"God," Billy said in a quiet voice, "what the hell happened?"

I knew what he meant. It was gone, all of it. We would never be that young or good ever again. Somehow it was both terrifying and wondrous to see yourself at that precise moment when your whole life spun on a delicate but powerful wheel.

Tommy stared at the floor. He seemed exhausted. "So this is what Royce was watching. Over and over again," he said.

Then we heard the door open and Genevieve called out, "Hello!" in a cheerful voice. She walked into the living room with a big box under her arm.

"I got a great sale," she said. She took her new coat out of the box and modeled it, after a fashion, by putting the coat in front of her and turning it this way and that before us. After a moment she put the coat down and said, "What's going on?"

I briefly explained the existence of Royce's tape.

Genevieve sat down beside me on the couch. She glanced over at the guys. "Well, what was it like?"

I sighed. "It answers a few questions," I said.

Billy smiled at Genevieve. "We were quite an amazing little band,

actually.”

“I knew that,” she said evenly. “I bought your album, remember? I was also there that night when you played the Garden Arena. I didn’t need to see the tape.”

“You never told me you saw our show,” I said, surprised.

Genevieve laughed. “Must I tell you everything?”

Tommy lifted his six-foot-four-inch frame off the couch. “I should get back home,” he said apologetically. “I’m running a graduate seminar and I’m way behind in my preparations for the course.”

“So soon?” Billy asked.

Tommy smiled, a bit sadly. “Royce is gone. We had a great band when we were virtually kids, but we’re all grown up now. It’s time for me to go home.”

I offered to drive Tommy back to the hotel, but he insisted on calling a cab. He didn’t want to interrupt my reunion with Billy. He told Genevieve how nice it was to meet her and then he shook hands with Billy and me at the door. “So long, fellas,” he said. Then he turned to me. “God knows what would have happened to you if you had stayed with the band. You did okay, Pete.”

After Tommy left, Billy and I talked for another hour or so. We discussed the drift of rock ‘n’ roll’s evolution since the seventies. We found that we shared the same sensibilities. Talking to Billy about music was still exciting, still satisfying. Then he also decided it was time to go.

“You still playing?” he asked me as I drove him back to the hotel.

I hesitated. From time to time, perhaps once every few months, I played a few tunes on the piano, sometimes even picked up the guitar. I shrugged. “Doesn’t seem to be much point.”

"You ever write?"

"Well," I admitted reluctantly, "I get a few ideas."

"I'll bet you do," Billy smiled.

We pulled up to the entrance of the hotel. He said, "Would you consider coming out to California sometime? We could lay down a few tracks in my studio, maybe play around with a few songs."

The idea seemed intriguing. What would it be like, I wondered, to write music again with Billy?

"I don't know," I finally said.

"Like riding a bike," Billy assured me. "It's muscle memory, in a way." He smiled warmly and shook my hand. "I think Royce would have loved the idea of it too."

He disappeared into the hotel. On the ride home, I thought about Royce telling Cranston McClaren how to perform "Tina 'n' Bobby." Of course, Royce's advice was absolutely right, even for that miserable song.



A month later, Genevieve asked me a different question about my work. We were in bed. She was reading a book on Roger Sherman's colonization of Rhode Island. She had been writing notes as she read and muttering "insupportable" and "cause and effect assumption, very shoddy," as she stuck little pieces of paper between the pages.

I was reading a detective novel.

Suddenly she took her glasses off. "Pete, exactly how much danger are you in from your investors?" she asked.

The question was so unexpected that for a moment I was

speechless. Then I dog-eared the page in my book and took my glasses off.

"Don't bullshit me, Pete," Genevieve said seriously. "I want a straight answer."

I knew what she was getting at. I was just surprised that she had chosen this moment to explore it.

"I'm not in any danger," I answered calmly.

This was true, as far as it went. What I didn't tell Genevieve was that my personal safety was tied to absolute silence. If I told the secrets of our investment groups, I would probably be found floating peacefully one morning in the shallow waters off Red Bank. However, my partners knew that I was a careful man who didn't wish to float in Red Bank's harbor. My partners were reasonable men. So was I.

"Is that the truth?" Genevieve asked me.

"That is the truth," I said.

"Then why don't you get out? You've probably made enough money to keep you rich for ten lifetimes."

I folded my glasses and put them on the night table. "It's quite complicated. I shouldn't say anything more, for your sake."

"Oh, for my sake," she said lightly.

I didn't respond. We had had this discussion, or one very similar to it, many times before.

"Pete," she said, not quite looking at me. "How can I be with a man, much less marry him, when he willfully and consciously exploits others, regardless of his motivations. I love you, Pete, and I always will. But I won't be your silent partner in perpetuating power over the 'less informed' members of our society. Frankly, Pete, considering your background, I find your ambitions rather sad, if not reprehensible.

But you know all this, don't you, Sweetheart? And that's why it's even worse."

I had no reply.

Genevieve put her book on the night table by her side and then turned her light off.

She was supposed to stay at my place for the week. She was on fall break from her college. The following evening when I returned from my office, I found her engagement ring sitting on the small table in the foyer to the living room.

The actual moment was worse than I had anticipated.

I went into my den and sat at the piano. Above the keyboard was the name Dansky. I had found the piano at an auction house in London. Although not a Steinway or a Baldwin, my grandfather's company had produced a decent instrument. After I bought the piano, I replaced and retuned the strings and had all the woodwork and keys refinished. The piano's new tone, as per my instructions, resonated with a perfect, tinny, dance-hall sound, the sweet, shrugging slide of Motown echoes. I used to play the intros to classic pop tunes for Genevieve. She usually guessed the song titles from the first four bars.

Now as I sat quietly before the lovingly restored Dansky original, I wondered what strange impulse, what pride of ancestry, had led me to buy the piano in the first place.

Chapter 30

The general stared placidly at me, his blue eyes and calm manner masking, I was sure, layers of calculated strategy. It was a week since he had asked me how old I was when I wrote “Oh, Laurie!” and “The Battle of Britain.” His grandson, a rock “historian,” apparently, wanted to know. The general knew how old I was when I wrote those songs. He knew everything. I had already told the general that I would not attend this year’s memorial tribute for my mother. But saying “no” to General Gilaad usually meant a lot of chatty conversation that went in one direction and then another, until suddenly you found that you’d just said yes. He’d asked me back for another visit, and I, cursing myself, had agreed.

The general put his glasses back on. He was an old man now, with a slight tremor in his hands, but I was certain that, given the right motivation, he could still pull the ever-present gun out of his desk drawer and kill someone as easily and dead as when he was young.

“My grandson loved hearing about you,” the general said appreciatively. “He’s very excited that I know you.”

“Well, I’m very excited to have known his grandfather these many years.”

We looked at each other.

“Perhaps you’ll reconsider coming to the memorial tribute.”

I smiled. “General, I’ve made the same speech, with very few changes, over the years. I have nothing more to say, and neither does

my sister. You could read my speech for me. You're better at that sort of thing anyway."

"You never had children," the general remarked. "It's a shame." He looked carefully at me. "Children add meaning to life."

"I suppose I never got the point," I answered easily.

The general shook his head in a fussy, distracted manner, as if the waiter had placed French fries before him instead of a plain, baked potato.

I was surprised by my testiness. Seeing the general again after so many years was eliciting a younger, more emotional response from me.

"What are you worth now?" he said in a musing way. "Somewhere around forty, fifty million?"

I smiled faintly. The figure the general had thrown out was remarkably close.

"You have no children, no wife," the general continued. "What have you done with your life, Peter? Whom have you made happy by your existence?"

"This is new," I said. "You're Rabbi Gilaad!"

"What have you done with your life?" he repeated.

"What have you done with your life?" I shot back. "Let's see. Among the many brutal deaths meted out to your enemies, you also pointed my mother in the direction of an assassination. Tell me something: were you ever concerned that she might decide to kill you as well as Meissner? Or were you so certain that her gun would be aimed at just one person?"

"I told you before," the general said. "We wanted her to testify in court, not take actions into her own hands."

"Maybe you didn't get my point about that junkie in her flower shop. When she broke the kid's hand and shoved a gun down his throat, my mother was just being playful. The woman was unbalanced. You knew that about her. You knew what she was going to do to Meissner."

The general moved a few papers to the side of his desk.

"From the moment that Leah climbed out of that pit," he said quietly, "people were going to die."

We were silent. Then in a meditative voice, the general said, "Peter, I've watched you grow up." He cleared his throat. "In many ways, I'm responsible for what you've become." He stared at me. "You will never avenge the powers that took your mother's life—or yours—by using that power as your armor." He suddenly sat forward. "You dishonor your mother and father, you dishonor yourself, when you become a violent man. And you are a violent man, Peter. You destroy pieces of the world with your choices. I've wanted to tell you this for a long time."

"You are lecturing me on violence?" I said.

The general's eyes blinked. "It might never have happened, you know, none of it, if it hadn't been for that candied apple."

I frowned. What was he saying? A moment ago he was cautioning me about the misuses of power and now he was making original sin references?

"What candied apple?" I asked. "What are you talking about?"

The general suddenly smiled. "It's been a long time, Peter. It's good to see you again. You know, it's amazing how much you resemble your mother."

I watched the general's benign expression.

"What candied apple?" I asked again.

The general's face turned cloudy, puzzled. Briefly I wondered if he were ill. Then the dim veil seemed to lift from his eyes. He stared at me once more with a cold, penetrating gaze.

"We knew your mother had survived the war," he said. "We knew about it for years before we contacted her."

"The candied apple," I reminded him, this time more gently. "What were you going to tell me, General?"

He paused then he said, "Her strength had left her. She was picked up near the end of the war and put in a concentration camp. She was tattooed, finally, like all the others. Then she married your father and came to America. We knew all this. I made the decision. I said, 'She has found peace, of a sort. She wishes to disappear. Good. Let her.' It was my decision. 'Let her disappear,' I said. 'It is her wish. She has done with the world and so let her.'"

I noticed that the general's lips moved now even when he wasn't speaking. It was as if he were conducting a private conversation with himself, under his breath.

"But a pony ride," the general said. "Can you imagine it? A pony ride in a small town in Ohio."

I knew what he was referring to. Rudolph Meissner had been spotted at a 4-H fair where he had been accompanying his grandchildren.

"That old man, Oberman," the general remarked, in a wondering way. "Someone bumped his arm, he reached down for it, that's all it took."

"Oberman, the old guy who identified Meissner," I interrupted. "Who bumped his arm? What are you talking about?"

The general sighed.

“Oberman was visiting his daughter in Ohio. His granddaughter was riding a pony at a 4-H fair. She had won a blue ribbon. A lovely day all around. And then, the granddaughter asked for a candied apple as they headed off the fairgrounds. Her mother didn’t want to stop; they were already late for dinner. They were going to a nice restaurant in Dayton. But the grandfather had loved seeing the little girl ride her pony and win a prize. He insisted on going back to buy her the treat. He got her the candied apple. Another child jostled his arm after he bought it—just an accident. As the apple fell from the old man’s hand, and he reached down for it, he happened to glance in the wrong direction. Not five feet away, another elderly man was buying his granddaughter a candied apple too.

“He looked like any other old man enjoying the sunshine at the fair with the grandchildren. It had been over thirty years, but Oberman recognized Meissner. During the war, in Lithuania, Meissner and his mobile killing squad had annihilated Oberman’s family and almost his entire village. When he saw Meissner, Oberman began to wheeze and gasp for breath. He fell down, clutching his heart. They called an ambulance.

“They took him away to the hospital. He died soon afterward. But not before he identified the man he saw holding the apple.”

The general’s large hands were clasped tightly together. He stared down at them. “They asked for my recommendation, so I made it. She was the last credible witness, perhaps the only one, who could positively identify him.”

The general glanced at me. There was a surprising look in his eyes, something I’d never seen before, almost pleading. “But you and your

sister, your father—I never wanted this to happen to you.”

I had nothing to say. I had never heard the story of Oberman going back to buy his granddaughter a candied apple. Somehow this detail had gotten lost, or perhaps I had simply forgotten it in the uproar that followed my mother’s death. Perhaps I hadn’t wanted to linger on the idea that something as random as a fallen sweet had drastically altered so many lives.

“There will always be a place for you and your sister in Israel,” the general said. “Have you ever thought about it, Peter?”

I looked at the general. I was concerned now. Something was the matter with him. After a brief pause, I said, “General, we’ve had this conversation before. And I’ve told you before that I won’t leave this place. It’s my home.”

“Right, right,” the General said with a moody little wave of his hand. “You’re an American. Now, are you coming or not to the memorial tribute? It’s next month, you know.”

“I’ll think about it,” I said slowly, “I’ll get back to you soon.”

I stood up then. The general stood, too. He looked into my face with great zeal. He might have been examining a rare objet d’art. “Amazing,” he said, and then touched my cheek with his quavering hand. “Amazing,” he repeated.



I awoke early the next morning beside the young woman, the lawyer’s ex-wife, the one who was full of things. She was asleep. She would be asleep, as I knew from experience, until at least ten or eleven in the morning. She was a very good sleeper; I didn’t need to be

terribly quiet as I got up, dressed, brushed my teeth, poured myself a cup of coffee and left the apartment. Soon we were going to “part company.” I wasn’t going to marry her, I wasn’t going to invest in her business schemes, I wasn’t interested in her ideas or emotions that seemed ready-made and only needed to be cooked for two or three minutes in a microwave.

Genevieve, as I knew she would, had moved on. I had tried calling her on occasion over the last two years, but our conversations always ended in the same way. She asked me if I was still in a life that ruined others even as it was ruining me. I would remind her, as always, that my business dealings were extraordinarily complicated. At that point she would make some ironic little retort and then quickly get off the phone. I had heard that she was dating a mathematics professor. I imagined him as a man with dark, horn-rimmed glasses, who rode a bike on his days off and wore black socks with thick sandals. But now I remembered the general’s summary of my life and character: you are a violent man. Perhaps the mathematics professor was a better man than I.



My entire day was blocked out with appointments. In the morning I was to meet with a city councilman; in the afternoon I had a series of meetings with corporate investors; in the evening I was to have dinner with investors—more people from the Far East—who needed a great deal of assurance that they could never be legally identified as shareholders in the proposed renovation project. I made a note to call General Gilaad the following day. It had been a few days since our last

meeting. He would want a commitment, one way or another, about Penny's presence and mine at the memorial tribute. I had originally decided not to go, but the general's behavior had seemed so strange that I thought it might be best to show up one last time and observe the general more closely. I also made a note to call the embassy and inquire about his health.

My cell phone rang. It was my secretary.

"You're not going to believe this, Pete," she began. I checked my watch. I was already late for my appointment with the city councilman. I tapped my hand impatiently against the steering wheel as I waited at a red light.

"Let's see," I replied. "God is not dead and all my hair is growing back."

She laughed. She had been my secretary for many years. "No, Pete, your hair is still thinning, but here's the strange part: The head of some Brazilian trade delegation wants to talk to you. He says it's important. He's in New York now."

"I don't know anyone in Brazil," I said. "What does he want?"

"He has information about someone your mother saved."

"Oh, Christ," I said, impatiently. "You know the drill. Did you tell him that I won't endorse any political party or agenda, I won't do speeches or rallies, I won't give my cooperation in any manner for book deals, movie rights, television specials, documentaries—"

"He didn't want that. He said he wanted information on 'the real Rachel Arenberg.' What's he talking about, Pete?"

The light turned green. The car behind me honked. "All right. Tell him I'll call tonight."

For the time being, I didn't think about the Brazilian. My day

consisted of assuring various parties that the riverfront project was magic and they were all wizards. The city councilman was craven and greedy, a pleasure to do business with. The corporate investors were insufferably proud, bullying, and greedy, also a pleasure. The men from the Far East didn't bother trying to conceal or distort their interests: they wanted the money when the project was going up, and they wanted even more money when the project came to ruin. By ten o'clock that evening, I was exhausted. Rapacious greed, particularly in others, is tiring.

When the doorman came to the entrance of my building, I wanted nothing more than to sit on my balcony with a beer and watch the boats on the water with their lights winking against the dark. I hoped the young woman was gone. I needed to end things with her. I could no longer even pretend that I listened when she spoke and I found sex with her to be a dull and routine business. She had a rather large mole right at the base of her spine, between the separation of her buttocks, and now, when I entered her from that angle, I would look at the mole and think, "A surgeon could have that thing off in a minute." Obviously, we were done.

The doorman had news for me. "Mr. Jameson, there's a man waiting here to see you. He's been sitting in the lobby for a long time." At first I was angry. I imagined that the Brazilian delegate had found my home.

"Thanks, Bobby," I said.

Sitting in a chair against the marble walls of the lobby was a man about my own age. One glance told me that he was not a trade delegate from Brazil or from any other country. He was dressed in an ill-fitting suit. His eyes were small, pale and blue; his brown hair receded rather

sharply. His hands were dirty. He clasped them nervously in his lap. His blue tie did not match the colors of his suit. Around his thin lips, he wore the expression of futility, resentment and baffled unease. I had seen the look many times before. The greatest country in the world had ignored him; it told him that he was a nothing and that he would be wise to accept his nothingness.

He didn't look violent, but that only meant that right now he didn't carry a gun or a knife in his hand. I kept a fair distance from him, closer to Bobby, the doorman, and to Charlotte, the concierge. I reached into my pocket and pulled out my cell phone. I smiled and winked at the man, as if to say this cell phone business was a damn nuisance but what could you do. After nodding at the cell phone's screen, I put the phone away in my pocket, but with my finger on the send button to the police.

"Yes?" I said pleasantly. "I understand you wanted to speak to me."

"Yeah," the guy said, rubbing his chin. He stared at me, still with the baffled look in his eyes. Then, as if steeling himself, he got up and glared at me. "Do you have any idea who I am?" He tried to sound tough but did not quite carry it off.

"Shall I call the police?" Charlotte asked from behind the front desk.

At the word "police," the man turned pale. He made a movement to run, but after a step or two, he stopped. He turned around to face me. "I done nothing wrong," he said belligerently. "I'm not breaking the law by being here."

"Who are you?" I asked. The man's face did seem familiar, but I couldn't quite place it.

The man drew himself up in a pathetic show of righteous dignity. "I'm David Krausse. My father was Jurgen Krausse, the man everyone thought was some sort of Nazi. Only he wasn't."

Now I remembered. I saw in the man's face the remarkable resemblance to Rudolph Meissner's SS photos. The lips were the same shape and in the same proportion to the rest of Meissner's features. Only the eyes differed. Meissner's eyes showed a sharp, cold intelligence; the man standing in front of me had eyes blurred with disappointment and confusion.

"I'm not going to hurt you," the man said with a kind of bluff nonchalance. "I saw in the papers that there's going to be another one of those fake ceremonies for your mother. I just wanted to see what you looked like and how you were living all these years."

Bobby the doorman walked slowly toward Krausse. "Buddy," he said, "do yourself a favor and get out of here. Because in about three seconds, I'm going to escort you out personally."

"I done nothing illegal!" the man repeated. "I just wanted to say hello to the guy whose mother killed my father. Is that so wrong? Is that so wrong, Mr. Jameson?"

In spite of his bluster, Krausse began to edge toward the door. "You look like you done okay for yourself, Mr. Jameson. Do you know what my life has been like?"

"I've got an idea," I replied. I watched him as he moved backward. I put my hand out in Bobby's direction. I wanted him to leave Krausse alone, at least for the time being.

"You've got no idea!" the man suddenly shouted at me. "No fucking idea! Your fucking bitch of a mother put a bullet in my father's head and the whole world called her some sort of Robin Hood. It was all

a fucking lie!”

“Mr. Jameson?” Bobby implored me.

“Not yet,” I said.

David Krausse leaned against one of the revolving glass doors. He was crying. “My father wouldn’t hurt a fly. He was the nicest, quietest guy. He wasn’t a Nazi. That’s bullshit. It was all bullshit.” He looked up at the chandelier hanging in the main lobby. “So this is what happens when you come from a murderer’s family,” he said. Then he nodded at me. “Not bad. Not bad at all.”

“Mr. Jameson?” Bobby said. I shook my head.

“I’m an American!” David Krausse shrieked. He stared at me in wonder and hurt. Then he groaned miserably and said, “My life, my life!” and twisted his hands in front of his chest. Slow tears leaked from between his tightly shut eyes. “I’m an American,” he whispered again. Then his body fell back against the swinging doors. Caught up in the turning glass, his face lost distinctness. As the doors swung about, he ran down the front steps of the building, and with an odd, loping gait, disappeared into the night.

“Jesus,” Bobby muttered. “What do you want me to do, Mr. Jameson?”

“Nothing,” I said. “Leave him alone.”

This was the first week of October, the anniversary of Krausse’s father’s death. The anniversary of my mother’s death.

“Thanks again, Bobby,” I said. I gave him a twenty-dollar bill.

On the way up in the elevator, I thought about my father. He had died of a massive heart attack a few months after I graduated from law school. He had never remarried. His relationship with Mrs. Griffin had ended shortly after I entered college. For the rest of his

life, he went out with a series of women, each less interesting and bright than the last. He had left instructions in his will that he was to be buried next to his wife. I missed him. He was a good person and a nice man. I had not even understood what it meant to be a “nice” man until I realized that I wasn’t one.

In my apartment, there was a note left on the table in the foyer. I read the note as I sat on the balcony with my beer.

My darling Peter: We have been through so much together and have grown so much together too. That’s why this is so hard. I think we should spend some time apart to work on our separate issues. I’m afraid we may become codependents and that’s not good for either one of us. I’ve been hurt and angry that you have so little confidence in me. I really think that your reluctance to loan me fifty thousand dollars for my love charm antiques from around the world import-export idea is less about my business acumen than it is about your lack of commitment to me as a strong, autonomous woman. This is as much my fault as it is yours. I should have maintained my boundaries better in our relationship and claimed ownership of my ideas instead of asking you (subconsciously) for your validation.

Please don’t call me—at least not for a few weeks. I think this is best for both of us. I love you. Pamela

I put the note aside. I thought fleetingly of the large mole between Pamela’s buttocks. Then I gratefully sipped my beer and watched the lights over the water. I wondered where David Krausse had run off to.

Around ten o’clock, I called the number of the Brazilian trade delegate. A man answered with a slight accent. After establishing

the fact that he had called my secretary and that I was indeed Peter Jameson, attorney, and the son of Leah and Walter Jameson, he said hesitantly, "I think we might be related in some manner."

I smiled. "And what makes you think that?"

"I've recently found out that my mother might have been a woman named Rachel Arenberg. Apparently she was a partisan fighter in Poland during the war. Wasn't your mother known for many years as Rachel Arenberg?"

"That was my mother's assumed name," I replied. "There was a real Rachel Arenberg, but she died during the war."

There was silence. Then he asked, "Who was the real Rachel Arenberg?"

"That's not a simple story. What makes you think that you are her son?"

"That's not a simple story, either. Do you think we could meet?"

Something bothered me. "What did you say your name was again?" I got out a pad of paper and a pencil.

"Francisco Serrano."

I frowned. "Why does that name sound familiar?"

He laughed. "It shouldn't. My parents named me after a rather obscure Portuguese explorer, a cousin of Ferdinand Magellan."

"When and where were you born?"

"In 1944. In Poland somewhere."

"Where do you live now?"

"Sao Paulo. I'm here in New York as the Brazilian trade delegate to an international conference on steel production."

I wrote all this information down. Then I said, "Francisco, how did you get to Brazil?"

"I was adopted," he replied. "My parents, Carlos and Maria, found me in a Catholic orphanage in Portugal when I was about eight months old."

"All right," I said, "I'll call you in the morning."

"Please. This is very important to me. I wish to know where I came from."

"I understand," I said. After I hung up, I went into my study and unlocked my desk drawer. I took out my address book. A few minutes later, I was speaking to General Gilaad. I related to him my conversation with Francisco Serrano.

"Do you have a gun?" he asked me when I was finished.

"No, I don't have a gun. I have no need of a gun."

"That's a mistake. You should have a gun."

"I'll consider it," I said. "Now what do you think of this Serrano?"

"We'll do a trace on him. Call me in the morning. Please think about getting a gun."

"All right. I'll talk to you tomorrow."

An idea was forming. I wondered if the general was getting the same idea.



Penny called me very early. She had been crying and her voice was heavy and thick.

"I had a terrible dream," she said.

I cleared my throat; I blinked my eyes. It was five-thirty in the morning.

"Penny," I said. "Do you know what time it is?"

"It was a very bad dream," she said.

"Oh. Well, in that case."

"Mom was here. She held her arms out to me and she was crying. She kept saying, 'Help me, Penny, help me.' It was horrible, Pete. Her face was bleeding and swollen. There was an entry wound on the right side of her head, just as there was on the day we found her. Her pupils were fixed and dilated. I wanted to help her, but I didn't know what to do. I knew she was dead, but she didn't know it."

I rubbed my hand over my forehead. "Mom was always going to kill herself, with a gun or with alcohol, but something."

"Yes, but if we had known about her life, if we had tried to find out what she had suffered, maybe things might have been different."

I was quite weary now. Penny had the same bad dream, in one version or another, every few months, and we had the same discussion, in one version or another, after her dream.

"You know what Mom would tell you if she were here, Penny. She'd tell you to run ten miles and then swim three hundred laps in the pool."

"Pete, when is this going to end?"

I had a sudden vision of David Krausse—his confused face, the tears wandering down his unshaven cheeks.

"We're all getting old," I said. "It should end soon."

"No," she said. "It will never end."

We spoke for another few minutes. After I hung up, I went into the bathroom to wash my face. There was no point in trying to fall back to sleep. In the mirror, I saw a pleasant looking, immaculately barbered, middle-aged man with thinning blonde hair. My rock star

days were so far behind me that an archaeologist would be needed to unearth them.

Around seven o'clock in the morning, the general phoned. He sounded strangely excited. "Call Serrano and tell him to meet you at the boathouse in Central Park at one this afternoon."

"Who is he?"

"That's what we'll find out."

"What's the matter with you?" I asked. "You sound almost happy."

"I wouldn't put it that way," the general said. "When you meet Serrano, make sure you stay near the lake."

"Do you think he's dangerous?"

The general paused. "Unlikely. But let's not take any chances."

I called Serrano and set up the meeting in Central Park. He sounded eager to talk to me.



He sat at a little table.

I knew him instantly from the way he sat, expectant but hopeful. He was leaving middle age, but with the fine, healthy look of a man who has lived happily and well.

"Francisco?" I inquired.

He stood up, smiling. We shook hands and he invited me to sit down. "Please," he said, "What can I get you? A coffee? Beer?"

"May I join you?" the general said. I had not seen him approach. "I am Daniel Gilaad," he addressed Francisco. "I may have some information for you."

Surprised by the general's sudden appearance, Francisco nevertheless graciously extended his hand to the little table and we all sat down.

"I'm an Israeli," the general explained, after we had given our orders to the waiter. "I've known Peter and his family for many years. I also knew Rachel Arenberg."

Francisco nodded. In his quiet, accented voice, he told us how he came to believe that Rachel Arenberg might have been his mother.

"A few years ago, I went back to the orphanage in Lisbon where my parents adopted me. I thought there might be records of how I got there. After my adopted parents died, this search became very important to me"

The general stirred his coffee. "How did you get those records? They're usually sealed." Francisco looked embarrassed. "You bribed the right people," the general said evenly. "You're a wealthy man, so it was no problem."

"Who did you say you were?" Francisco asked, looking at the general. After a puzzled glance at both of us, Francisco said, "I'm not saying how I got the information. But I did find out that a peasant girl brought me to the orphanage at the end of the war. I was about eight months old then."

"And you were supposed to be the illegitimate child of a young Portuguese peasant girl, correct?" said the general.

Francisco frowned. "Yes."

I looked at the general and he looked back at me.

The general said, "So you spent more money to track down this peasant girl to see whether she might be alive."

"Yes," Francisco said. "By then she was a very old woman, living in

a small village.”

“And you found out that she was not really your mother,” the general said.

“That’s right,” Francisco replied. “During the war, a man and a woman had given her a very large sum of money to pretend that I was her baby. She was then to give me up for adoption.” He sighed. “I begged the old woman to tell me anything she could remember about this couple.”

The general and I waited.

“She told me that they were a strange couple. The man was middle-aged, very scholarly, like a professor. The woman was very young and spoke good Portuguese. They were both well dressed. Before they left, the young woman kissed my forehead. Then she turned to the Portuguese girl and said, in Portuguese, ‘This baby has a proud heritage. In Poland they tried to kill him, but he lived, in spite of everything.’ It was obvious that the older man wanted her to be quiet, but the young woman was angry and crying. She spoke rapidly in a language that sounded close to German. Then she turned to the peasant girl and, in Portuguese, said, ‘A very brave woman fought the Nazis in the forests of Poland so that this baby could survive. Her name was Rachel Arenberg.’ Then the young woman bent forward and kissed me one last time. ‘God keep you happy and well, beautiful Zinni. At least you’ll be safe.’ Then she left with the man.”

A sudden breeze lifted Francisco Serrano’s carefully barbered hair. A gray wisp floated gently about his temples then settled back into place.

I looked at the general. His eyes were sunk into quiet speculation.

"Well?" I said, turning to him.

Still the general didn't speak.

"We believe we know who you are," I said to Francisco.

He seemed stunned; however, happiness spread across his face.

"General?" I said.

The general rose from his seat. He walked over to the back of Francisco's chair, put his hands on Francisco's shoulders, leaned forward and kissed the top of his gray head. "I am so happy to see you again," he said.

We spent the rest of the afternoon talking at our table. The shadows angled lower and lower through the fall trees. I had never seen the general look so exultant. Once or twice, a gust of chilly wind blew down through the park, and from the swirling dust and the brisk way that people walked, I knew that winter was approaching sooner than anyone really expected.

Francisco was a wonderful man. Intelligent and shrewd, yet innocent in his curiosity about life, he showed us pictures of his wife, their four sons, and the villa where he lived. Several times he shook his head as we talked. "All those people," he said wonderingly.

Mysteries surrounded his emergence in Portugal. But the general did not seem concerned. He told Francisco that he already had some ideas of what had happened. In the morning, he would make more inquiries. But it was not really important, he assured him. He knew that the man sitting before him was Zinni.

By five o'clock we could barely see each other in the gathering dark. I needed to get home. "Francisco," I said, once more shaking his hand.

He rose and grasped my hand. "Peter, my whole life—"

"No need," I said.

"Yes, yes there is," he said. He put his hand on my shoulder. "You will come and visit with my wife and sons at our villa?"

"Yes, someday, I'm sure I will."

"Peter," he called after me, "you are such a strong man, such a good person. I thank you."

He was nearly delirious with happiness. I left him sitting at the table with the general. They were deep in conversation.

Chapter 31

I had one more meeting with an investor, a man from the Netherlands. I was supposed to meet him that evening for dinner in New York. I cancelled. I felt oddly buoyant after talking with Zinni. Suddenly I had no desire to confer with dull men with no imagination about the kinds of projects that have been orchestrated, in conspiratorial whispers, since before the construction of the Tower of Babel. The Dutchman was furious. "I had understood that you were an absolutely reliable man!" he reproached me in his guttural accent. "I do not have a great deal of time!"

"I have a problem with my family," I told him in a level voice. "I will see you tomorrow morning."

He cursed (I assumed) in Dutch. I hung up the phone after confirming the time we would meet. I didn't need his involvement. For that matter, I didn't need the riverfront project. The man from the Netherlands could wait a day. They could all wait one more day.

When I returned to my apartment, I called the private number of the Israeli deputy ambassador. I knew him slightly. I had met him a few times at the memorial tributes and we were both admirers, in our separate ways, of General Gilaad and his remarkable life.

"Peter, this is an unexpected pleasure," the deputy ambassador said with smooth assurance. "What can I do for you?"

"Is this line secure?" I asked.

"Wait a moment," he said. We hung up and a moment later my

phone rang. "All right," he continued, "Is there a problem?"

"No problem, but I wanted to be sure that our conversation was private."

I briefly explained my concerns about the general's recent behavior.

There was a slight pause. "This is a difficult time of the year for him," the deputy ambassador replied soberly. "His son, Ari, was killed in the '73 war. He was a pilot. Danny never got over it. No parent ever does."

For a few seconds, I said nothing. I hadn't known the general even had a son. In fact, I knew nothing about his family. I had never inquired. It was as if his life had gone into a waiting room, gray and amorphous, while his real life, the war, the Nazis, the partisans, made violent, intermittent appearances and then left through a side door.

"Is the general married?" I asked.

"His wife died ten years ago. They had just the one son."

I thought about the general waiting for me at the train station in Sea Ridge. His son had been dead then for only a few months.

"Is he suffering from any physical illness?" I asked again.

"Not that I know of," the deputy ambassador said and then added, "He is retiring from the diplomatic service."

I had caught the slightest hesitation in the deputy ambassador's voice. Perhaps not even hesitation, a shift in tone, more or less. I had grown up around experienced liars—my business was about complicated lies—and I knew he was holding something back.

I thanked him and hung up.



The general wanted to walk and so we met on the Promenade, in Brooklyn Heights. The view of the East River with the skyline of Manhattan rising from the opposite shore would always remind me of my first real introduction to politics. It was here, many years ago, that the general had informed me that the Soviets had leaked the story about my mother's alleged role as a brutal executioner of German officers. At that time, I had no idea that stories, even true ones, were often used to support entirely unrelated political agendas.

He stood at the railing, his scarf blowing back in the wind. He peered at a tourist boat crawling past Manhattan Island. He was alone, but I knew that the ubiquitous bodyguards, always hidden, were nearby.

"Has Zinni gone back to Brazil?" I asked, leaning on the rail next to him.

"Yes." He didn't bother to turn his head. "He was disappointed, of course, to learn that his mother died on that train. But he was at peace, I think, with his survival, and I know that he was happy to learn of his true heritage.

"How did it feel seeing him?"

The general crinkled his brow. "Wonderful ... but odd." The general still stared off into the distance at the tourist boat. "I never expected to see that boy again."

I took the general's arm. "It's a little cold today. Do you want to go inside?"

He shook his head. "I like the fresh air. We can walk, if you like."

After five or ten minutes I said, "General, are you feeling well these days?"

He stopped and peered over the railing again. "It was down there,"

he said and pointed to what looked like the old Brooklyn Navy Yard. I was puzzled by his words. "Washington," the general continued. "He and his men managed to escape slaughter from the British that day because of heavy fog. It was considered divine intervention. The Americans beat a hasty retreat from Manhattan back to Brooklyn Heights."

I smiled. I had forgotten that bit of history, even though we were standing nearly on top of where the American troops had landed in their flight from the British.

"I have Alzheimer's disease," the general said slowly. "The doctors tell me that I'm in the earliest stages."

I was shocked but not completely surprised. My head went down, but just for a second. I took his arm again. "Let's go inside, General. It's cold as hell out here."

He removed my hand. "I want to walk," he repeated. "The fresh air feels good."

Instinctively I darted quick glances around me. Where were they? Who was protecting him?

"Relax," the general assured me, "my people are around."

Of course. His people were around.

The general patted me on the shoulder. "Don't worry."

I didn't reply. I was going to lose my friend.

"My father would have liked you," the general smiled. "He didn't understand the Danskys, he didn't approve of them, but I think he secretly admired their openness to the world."

I wondered why he was now thinking about my mother's family.

"What happened to your father?" I had put the same question to him years before.

The general leveled a serious gaze at me. "My father saved my life. He had to make a choice, a very quick one."

Once more, we came to the railing. The general grimaced and pressed his fingers against his temples. Then he began to speak. Perhaps we stood over the very spot where Washington and his troops had eluded the British in the thick fog of 1776.

"We lost our house in the first month of the occupation. One day, we heard knocking at our door. Three Wehrmacht officers stood there. I remember the smell of their leather boots and holsters. They had been laughing about something before they arrived, and the amusement on their faces was still evident as they shook their heads at the door, remembering the incident. They were quite polite, all things considered. The major, a tall pleasant-looking man, and the senior officer among them, shoved a piece of paper at my father.

"The lieutenant in the group, and the interpreter, suddenly walked forward and gave my father a little push. In very precise, accented Polish, he said, 'Yid, this house now belongs to us. Get out!'

"The last member of the group, a captain, had a cold; he sniffled at the door and looked as if he were trying to prevent an attack of sneezing.

"'Please come in,' my father said.

"The officers walked into the house and rubbed their hands. I remember the smell of their woolen uniforms. It was cold outside. The major looked around in a satisfied manner. He had a small, triangular birthmark on his left cheek. He carried himself with the air of a man who has journeyed for a long time and is happy to be home.

"'May I get you some tea?' my father offered.

"'No, Yid, you and your bastard son can get out,' the lieutenant

said. "Are you deaf, old man?"

"My father continued to smile, as if he didn't quite understand. After a brief silence, he said, 'Of course, sir. May we gather a few bits of rags and some potatoes before we go?'

"The lieutenant gave my father a searching look. My father continued to smile in that bland, inoffensive manner. The lieutenant pulled out his gun and placed it against my father's forehead.

"Are you trying to be witty, Yid?"

"My father frowned a little, as if puzzling over the meaning of this question. The gun was still against his head.

"No, sir,' my father said calmly. 'I was attempting to be practical.'

"The tall man, the major, turned to the lieutenant and spoke what appeared to be a series of curt commands. The captain with the cold sneezed and then sneezed again. The lieutenant lowered his gun. He kept staring at my father.

"You and your son are to leave by nine o'clock tomorrow morning. Agents will arrive before that time to inspect your home for items of value to the war effort. Do you understand?"

"Yes, perfectly, sir,' my father said.

"The officers turned to leave. At the door, the lieutenant stopped. "The major thinks you are a brave man. He's in a sentimental mood tonight. If it were up to me, I would have killed you. I don't like filthy Jews and I certainly don't care for their insolence. Do you understand that?"

"Yes, sir,' my father said.

"From down the street, we heard the major calling to the lieutenant. "I'll see you again,' the lieutenant said to my father.

After my father closed the door, I sank down on the sofa,

trembling. 'If only I had a gun,' I said.

"My father stared at me. Then his face lit with rage. 'And then what?' he shouted at me. 'You get a gun and then what? No! You will live through this war. I don't give a damn what I have to do or what you have to do either. But you will live through this war. Promise me, Danny. Promise me that you will do nothing stupid, nothing dangerous.'

"I wanted to kill him for talking to you that way.'

"My father stared at me, incredulous. 'For talking to me that way?' A faint smile brightened his face. 'Danny, you wanted to kill a man because he called me a filthy Jew? Danny, that's nothing.'

"I held my head in my hands. After a moment, my father sat down beside me and kissed the top of my head. 'I thought you wanted to be a doctor,' he said. 'Now you want to kill people?'

"I began to cry with suppressed rage. My father put his arm around me. 'Listen,' he said quietly and with great dignity. 'We must use all our wit and all our strength and above all, we must stay together and be patient. That is how we have survived for centuries.'

"They're going to kill all of us,' I said. 'You know that, Papa.'

"My father hugged me in a fierce embrace. 'You will live, Danny. You must get through this and live. I insist that you live.'

"I laughed a little at his stern warning. I said, 'And what if I don't, Papa?'

"My father brushed my hair back from my face. 'Then I will be very disappointed in you, Danny.'

"I had been quite ill that winter. My father and I were afraid that I might have contracted tuberculosis. Through connections, my father arranged to have me examined by a doctor. The X-rays came back

negative. We breathed a sigh of relief. At least I would not die of TB. My father, however, grew thinner and thinner. He gave most of his rations to me, in spite of my protestations. I have no idea what he survived on. By the summer, I was feeling much better. I was ready to join my father on a job outside the ghetto. We had special permits from the German police. We were to build the foundation of an outdoor sauna at the residence of some high Nazi official.

"The residence was on Starowislna Street.

"A huge red Nazi flag hung over the portico of the Danskys' house. Officers and their adjutants rushed in and out. We heard the continuous ringing of the telephone from inside the house. Black powerful sedans, all sporting the Nazi emblem, were parked three deep in the circular driveway.

"We were to lay the foundation for the sauna behind the pool, near a winding path adorned with roses and yellow dahlias and pansies. Young officers and their girlfriends swam in the Danskys' pool. They shouted and made splashing noises. Fortunately, a column of tall, thick hedges blocked out the sight of their happy faces. I could not have worked while I saw them enjoying themselves with their stolen property.

"‘Control yourself,’ my father commanded me. ‘Eyes on the work. Nothing else.’

"I pushed a wheelbarrow. I glanced in the direction of the pool.

"At the end of the day, we were exhausted. A guard at the entrance to the house inspected our papers, as he had inspected our papers when we first came there in the morning, and then waved us out. We trudged home, filthy with dirt and cement. Our clothes were rags, but not so worn that the yellow stars on our chests and backs didn't gleam

with what appeared to me a peculiar and obscene luminescence. My father and I didn't speak. What was there to say? The Danskys were probably dead, sent off to Plaszow or Auschwitz, like so many others. Why should the Danskys be any different?

"We walked through muddy, bombed-out streets. On either side of the streets, the walls of blasted houses and shops rose before us, a procession of ruin. I saw a rat slip over a pile of bricks. Its tail was an ugly thing. It squirmed through a crevice in the masonry, as if the bricks were devouring a last, live morsel.

"My father spoke to me. I barely heard him. 'Tomorrow we'll talk to the foreman. He promised us work down by the granary mill. Two soups every day on that job. We start right after we're finished with this job.'

"I wasn't listening to him. His relentless practicality, his optimism that 'things would get better' now depressed me. I had learned to block out his voice.

"Suddenly I stumbled against him. He had stopped. In an instant, he had grabbed my hat off my head.

"'Good evening, sirs. My son and I were just returning from work. Here are our papers—'

"The lieutenant, the same officer who came to occupy our house, stood impassively. Next to him stood a young corporal with acne sprinkled over his chin.

"My father held out the papers to the lieutenant. He didn't take them. Instead, he stared at me. My father cleared his throat. 'We were coming home from work, sir,' he began again, 'and we—'

"The lieutenant took out his gun and told me to get on my knees.

“‘No, sir. Please, sir,’ my father said. ‘It is my fault that he didn’t take his hat off. I was talking to him and he wasn’t looking.’

“The lieutenant repeated his order to me. Very slowly, I felt myself sink down.

“My father dropped to his knees. Then he put his face against the lieutenant’s boots. ‘No, sir. I’m begging you. Not the boy. Please kill me but not the boy.’

“‘All right,’ said the lieutenant. He stepped back a pace or two, pointed the gun at my kneeling father and shot him in the head.

“I fell. I fell. I fell to the ground. Mist covered my eyes. Blood splattered over my forehead, my mouth. A taste of salt—such a thick taste. Then dust in my throat, and wretchedness.

“The mind orders reality in odd ways. At first, I didn’t relate the sound of the pistol shot or my father’s head exploding as occurrences relevant to my immediate world. I remember wondering—for just the briefest of moments—where that loud report came from. I remember, in that same infinitesimal moment, wondering where my father had gone. A man was next to me, but the face had disappeared. Who was he? All of this happened inside those silent ticks of time before we see or understand.

“I didn’t scream. My father’s head lay in wet, pulpy pieces across the broken bricks on the ground, over my ragged shoes.

“The lieutenant wiped his boots with a handkerchief. He made disgusted sounds. The corporal with acne frowned at me, as if I were unspeakably filthy and didn’t know enough to clean up.

“After the lieutenant was finished with his boots, he gazed at me. ‘Next time, take your hat off, Jew.’

“He and the corporal walked away.

"I hovered over my father's body for a long time. I didn't know what to do. I couldn't leave him there. But if I left to get help, I was afraid that when I returned, he would be gone. I knew he was dead and yet the fact of his death hadn't quite reached me.

"I finally went home. I didn't run. I walked slowly. At the corner of my street I saw two small boys fighting as they struggled to get the shoes off another corpse.

"A short time later, I escaped Krakow and joined the partisans."

The wind had whipped the general's scarf off his throat. Now the long end of the woolen garment hung nearly to the ground. I picked the scarf up, wound it through my hands, and placed it back around the general's throat. He didn't seem to know or care about the scarf. His eyes blinked against the wind; he stared at a garbage barge trolling down the river.

"I can see my father so clearly," the general said. His tufts of gray hair lifted and spread in the cold breeze. "He was a good man. Such a good man."

"Let's go, General," I said quietly. "It's too cold out here. You'll get sick."

With a sigh, he turned his head and stared at me. "I miss him. Sometimes he seems more real to me than anyone living."

I didn't know what to say. His losses were so enormous. "I'm sure he would have understood that you had choices to make, too, General."

I was surprised. The general made a short, disgusted sound in his throat and looked down at the river, his mouth a thin, hard line.

I didn't know what to think.



I spent the rest of the afternoon in the Metropolitan Museum of Art. I had a great deal of work to do. Construction would begin that week on the waterfront project, but I couldn't concentrate. As I wandered through the museum, I tried to examine the works of the Greeks, Egyptians, Assyrians and Macedonians. I wanted to soothe myself with the mystique of ancient artifacts. I was worried about the general.

But strangely, as I peered into a glass case containing Mycenaean armor and another case displaying Egyptian pottery, I found myself thinking about an incident from long ago when my mother suddenly, but quite earnestly, played a rhythm and blues classic on the piano.

I think it may have been a holiday. My mother was home from her flower shop. It was late afternoon, the light was already fading in the music room, and she was playing a piece by Bach with her usual precision and grace. Billy and I had come downstairs to compose a few songs and practice our harmonies. For a while we listened quietly to my mother as she played—she was quite a wonderful pianist—and then we asked her, during a break in her practice, if we might use the music room for an hour or two.

"Of course," she said. As she rose from her piano stool, Billy commented on her playing. "Mrs. Jameson, you're really great, but don't you ever play anything besides classical music?"

She shrugged. "You mean the rock and roll?"

Billy and I smiled at each other. "Yeah, Mom," I said. "Like the rock 'n' roll."

She glanced at us, somewhat bemused. Then she sat down. She

struck a few chords. Within moments, we heard Bayou Revival's simple but pleasing arrangement of "Meet You at the Corner." My mother sang. Her clear, lovely voice surprised me. I had never heard her sing before. But soon Billy and I gasped with helpless laughter. My mother sang the Bayou classic with a strong Polish accent, an instant recipe for guffaws.

"Meet you at the corner, bring your tambourine,
We all gonna make some music, it'll be a rockin' scene."

Giggling, Billy and I joined my mother in the last chorus, right through the last stanza when the speaker of the song enjoins the audience to "dance, dance, dance, down-home people."

Flushed with laughter, I sat down next to my mother and impulsively kissed her cheek. "You're really funny, Mom," I said. "How do you even know Bayou?"

I remember that her body went rigid then, her face lost all its color. With a stricken look, she quickly touched my hand then rose from the bench. "I must do some weeding," she said. On her way out, I noticed that her eyes were filled with tears. It was the first time—the only time—that I had ever seen my mother close to crying.

I wandered through the museum for the remainder of the afternoon. I thought about Aaron Gilaad's unhesitating sacrifice to save his son. I thought about my mother's spirit rising from the pit, her soul seared in the Angel of Death's embrace. Then I thought about my mother sitting at the piano, her hands floating over the keys as she played the simple, happy chords that inspired me that day—and only one day—to kiss her cheek and call her "funny." I thought about those hands as they raised the familiar gun to her head and fired that one shot.

I stood before a beautiful white sculpture of Diana, the huntress, and wept.



I drove to my sister's house. I got lost along the way. Instead of taking the New Jersey Turnpike, I turned onto the Garden State Parkway, and eventually found myself, after a distracted hour or so, unaccountably headed in the direction of our childhood home. I had been so caught up in my thoughts that I had not paid attention to the exit signs.

By the time I reached her home, it was quite late. I had forgotten to call her.

I parked my car in the garage, next to her Lexus. As I got out of my car, I noticed a long, gleaming scratch across the Lexus' passenger door. I wondered how that had happened.

I walked up the granite steps bathed in soft yellow light. The air was quite cool and smelled of the dark ferns and bushes winding toward the entrance to the house. I rang the bell. I was at the front door, standing in a sort of bright ribbon of green and gold color.

Penny opened the door.

"Back so soon? I just saw you a week ago." She looked at her watch, then at me. "It's two o'clock in the morning," she said. "Last I heard, I was the brilliant one with the drinking problem."

She seemed surprised but pleased to see me. She was only a little tipsy. She spoke all her words clearly and distinctly.

"I've had some interesting experiences over the last few days," I said to her. "I wanted to tell you about them."

We passed through the black-and-white-tiled foyer, through the living room, the primitive, yet sophisticated folk art collected from around the world hanging on the stucco-like, painted walls. Then through the large, white, gleaming kitchen with its stainless steel refrigerator and the four-burner stove, placed island-like in the center of the room, and the small television set up on the counter, right next to the espresso machine. Then outside, down more granite steps, through more flowers and greenery, and then a lovely, kidney-shaped pool, still full despite the lateness of the season. The pool's interior lights carved out a mysterious green and glowing lagoon in the dark. Finally, we came to the lounge table and chairs, slender, white, curving.

Penny huddled in her jacket; we sat near the shallow end of the pool. "Want a drink?" she asked me.

I looked at her. "All right."

She poured me a glass of red wine. We drank in companionable silence for a while. Then I began to talk. After a few minutes she put her wine glass down on the table. She listened to my story about David Krausse tearfully challenging me in the lobby of my apartment building, and then about the baby, Zinni, supposedly lost in Poland, miraculously found in Central Park, New York. She listened as I told her about the general's latest battle, his final one. Then we were silent again.

Suddenly Penny laughed.

"What's so funny?" I asked.

"Do you remember the time," she giggled, "when you told Mom that you should only have to run half as much because you were only half Jewish?"

I laughed.

"What were you, about ten?" Penny said. "Man, you told Leah Dansky to step off your grill, and you lived. How many people can say that?"

Penny and I shared many such reminiscences, most of them studded with gallows humor. At several memorial tributes, we had simply to exchange a glance and would have to force ourselves not to break up laughing. If anyone had heard our private jokes about Leah Dansky, they would have considered us sick, twisted ingrates with no appreciation for the sacrifices of our heroic parent.

Penny picked up her glass and swished a little of the wine around.

"Why don't you ever play anymore?" she suddenly asked.

The question surprised me, coming so unexpectedly. My singer-songwriter days seemed so long ago that I sometimes forgot that I still collected royalties on songs playing all over the world.

"You and your band were great," Penny said. "Don't you know how good you were?"

"Yes," I said. I told her about the tape of us performing at the Garden Arena; I told her about Billy's offer to come out to California and record a few new songs with him.

"So play," she said. "You could at least play."

I looked at her. "Why? What would be the point?"

"The enjoyment of doing something lovely. Isn't that enough?"

"It would be like dressing up in snakeskin pants. I'd feel ridiculous."

Penny smiled at me. "Who said anything about snakeskin pants? I just wondered why you don't play or sing anymore."

I stared into the green pool.

"Singing and playing won't make you any less responsible," Penny said.

"What's gotten into you?" I asked.

"Nothing," Penny replied. She smiled at me, a very fond smile, and then took a tiny sip of her wine. "I heard 'Oh, Laurie!' on the radio today. It's such a great song. I love telling people that my little brother wrote it."

"Yes, you've told me so before. And I wrote it a long time ago."

Penny glanced at me and then took another small sip of her wine. She looked at the pool and smiled. "Celiac Disease. Also Fibromyalgia."

"What?"

"In medicine they're called 'imitators,'" she said. "They manifest a variety of symptoms that can be easily misdiagnosed."

I waited.

"Your career choices after Mom died. Your isolation. Your need to outsmart the world. They all seem like one thing, but they're really something else."

"Okay, and ...?"

"You have imagination," she said. "The upside is that it allowed you to write music. The downside is that it took you to a whole different place after Mom committed suicide. You couldn't integrate being a rock'n'roll entertainer with the sort of world you were learning about. So you just reinvented yourself, as only someone with your creativity could do."

She took another swallow of wine.

"You never gave up creating, Pete. You just went someplace else

while you figured a way to come back.”

“Penny, I haven’t been pretending to be someone else while plotting a return as a rock star. I am the person who has done the things I’ve done.”

“I know. The symptoms are real enough, they just don’t necessarily indicate the root cause.” Penny shrugged. “Medicine is not an exact science.”

I smiled. “What’s the bill going to be for this diagnosis?”

“Would you play that song for me now?” Penny asked. She had put her wine down again.

I stared at her. “I’m not Elvis, you know. I don’t travel everywhere with my guitar.”

“I’ve got one of your old acoustic ones in the basement,” she informed me.

She stood up and walked toward the house. I called after her, “Can’t we just sit here and enjoy the evening air with three or four bottles of expensive Cabernet?”

A few minutes later she came back with my old Gibson. I sat for a moment with the instrument, cradling it against my body. Then I tuned the guitar, or at least tried to, given the age of its strings.

“This song was not meant to be played ‘unplugged,’ I said, glancing up at Penny.

“Hey, Hendrix, do you see a concert crowd around here?” Penny retorted.

“Shut up,” I said.

“No you shut up,” she grinned.

I concentrated on the old guitar. My fingers searched the frets, pressing a note here and there, gauging the action. I played a few

chords, a couple of gentle riffs. Inside me, I heard the connection, what I would always hear when I played the guitar, my body's insistent, wandering grace wedded to melody, to ceaseless, joyous rhythm.

I sang. My voice was rough now, no longer a boy's voice with its high, effortless clarity. I changed keys. I let my voice carry its way down the old worn breaks. I sang, and there it was, the power of the old song, my voice full, a little husky, even ragged ... but happy, still happy.

While I sang, I thought about the girl coming home late in the roadster, her little sister laughing beside her. I thought about Royce Hart, my true friend and a great drummer. I thought about my father and how he once nursed my mother back to health. I thought about my sister Penny, and all her good work and private suffering. I thought about The Master Planets and how, a long time ago, we dreamed of ourselves at the Jersey shore. Then I thought about Genevieve, my Genevieve. I thought about the man she fell in love with, the man all these things happened to, and the man she hoped I might become

I played for a long time by the pool. Penny and I drank more wine. Penny tried to harmonize, and she sang so miserably and off-key that together we sounded like a couple of baying seals.

Sometime during the night, Penny and I decided to call Zinni and ask him if we might all go to the memorial tribute together. There by the pool, we also discussed a trip to Brazil. We could visit Zinni and his wife and their four sons. I could bring my guitar with me, and I could play the happy Brazilian family my songs.

About the author



Donald Gallinger holds a BA and MA in English from Connecticut College and Rowan University respectively, and a Doctorate in Education from Rutgers University. Actor Miles Chapin optioned Donald's novel, *Ain't No Sin to Rock and Roll*, for film. *The Master Planets* is his third novel.

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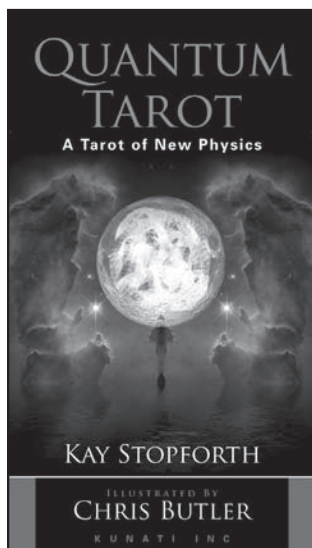
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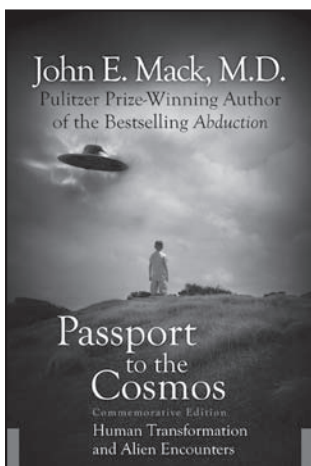
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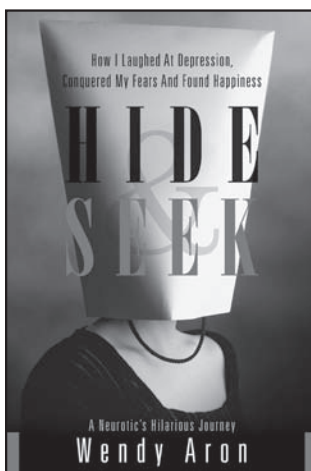
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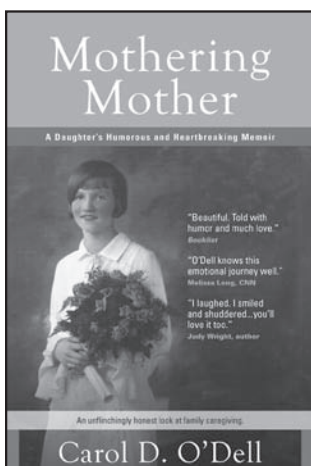
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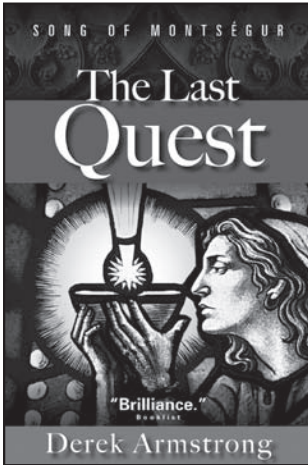
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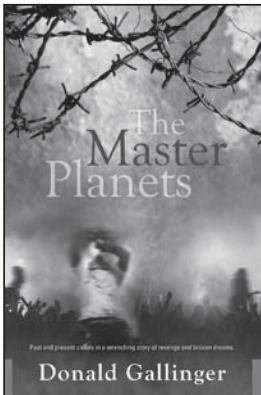
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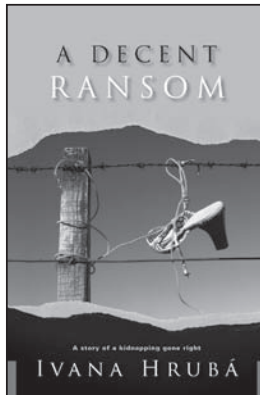
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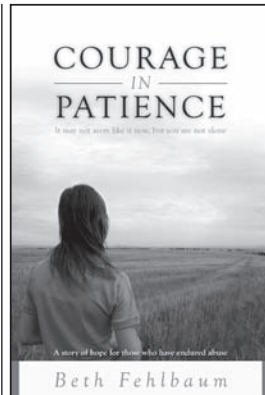
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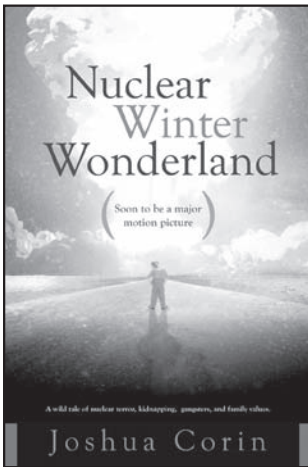
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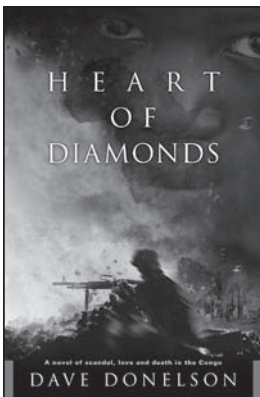
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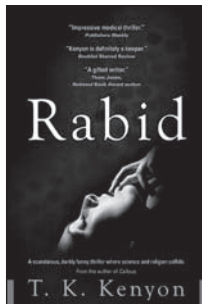
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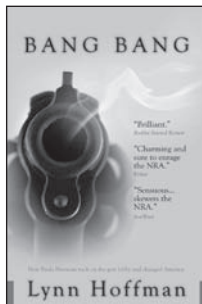
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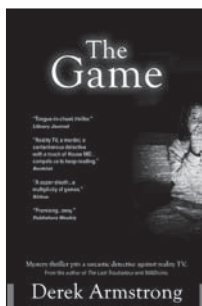
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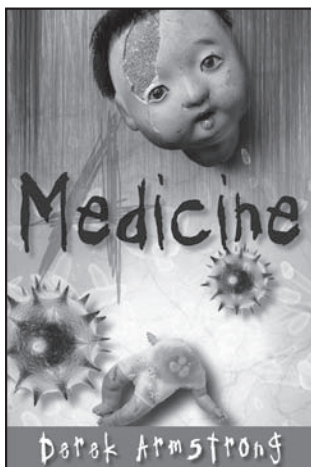
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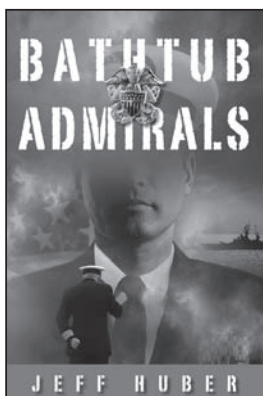
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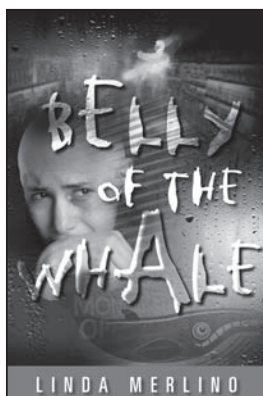
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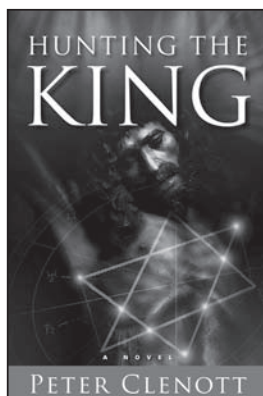
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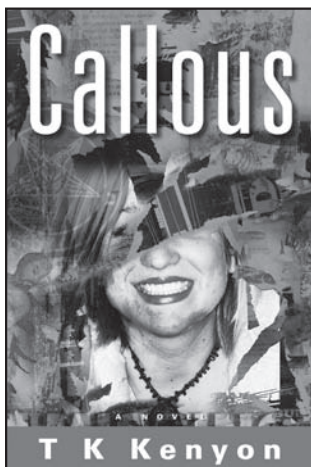
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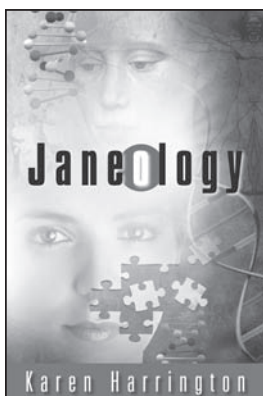
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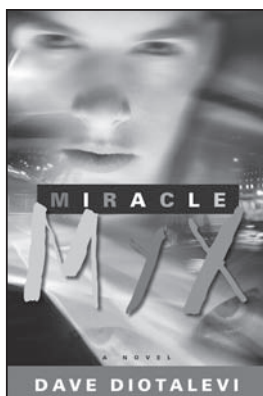
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For an unblinking forty-two hours, Myx's synesthetic brain probes a lot of dirty secrets in Miracle before arriving at the truth.

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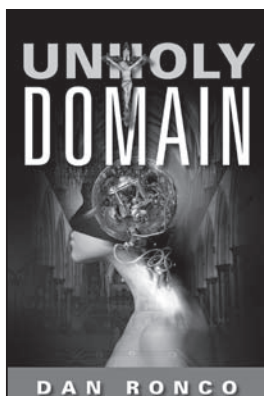
■ "What a treat to be in the mind of Myx Amens, the clever, capable, twice-dead protagonist who is full of surprises."—Robert Fate, Academy Award winner

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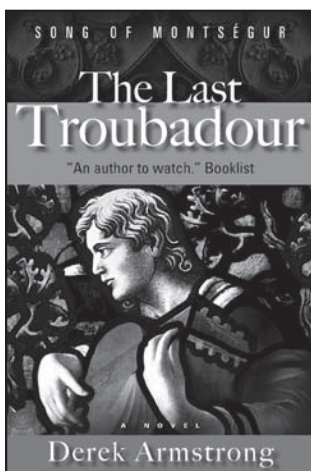
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The Last Troubadour

Historical fiction by Derek Armstrong

Against the flames of a rising medieval Inquisition, a heretic, an atheist and a pagan are the last hope to save the holiest Christian relic from a sainted king and crusading pope. Based on true events.

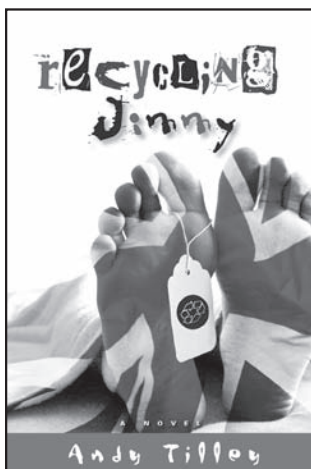
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■ "Energetic, imaginative, relentlessly and unabashedly vulgar." —*Booklist*

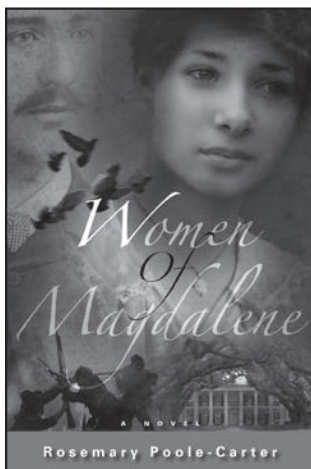
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An idealistic young doctor in the post-Civil War South exposes the greed and cruelty at the heart of the Magdalene Ladies' Asylum in this elegant, richly detailed and moving story of love and sacrifice.

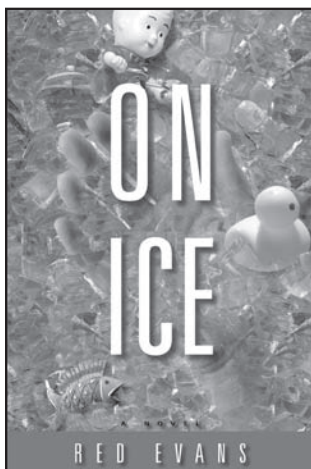
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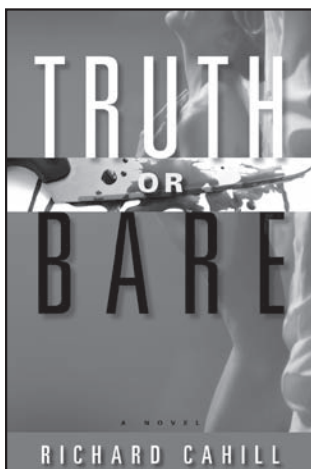
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The characters throb with vitality, the prose sizzles in this darkly comic page-turner set in the sleazy world of murderous sex workers, the justice system, and the rich who will stop at nothing to get what they want.

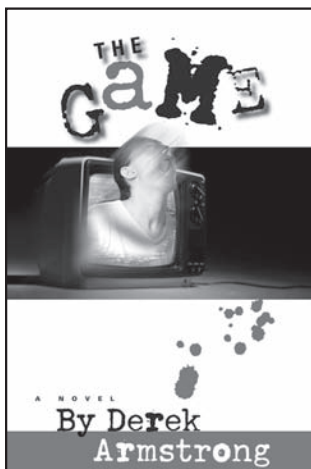
■ "Cahill has introduced an enticing character ... Let's hope this debut novel isn't the last we hear from him." —*Booklist*

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—STARRED REVIEW, *Booklist*

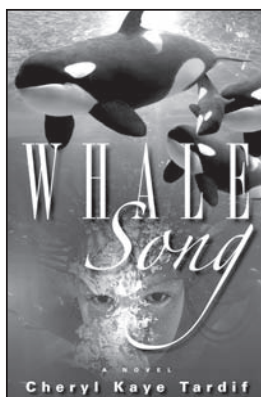
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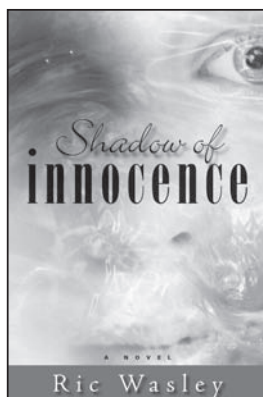
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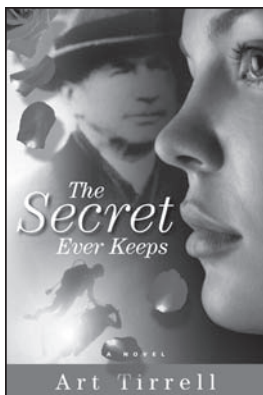
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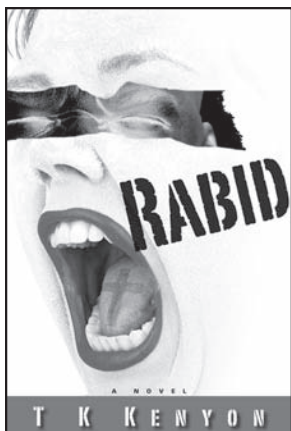
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Donald Gallinger holds a BA and MA in English from Connecticut College and Rowan University respectively, and a Doctorate in Education from Rutgers University. Actor Miles Chapin optioned Donald's novel, *Ain't No Sin to Rock and Roll*, for film. *The Master Planets* is his third novel.

Fiction

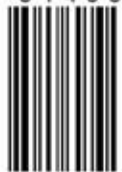
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