

# Dangerous Space



I liked Lillie's Place. Black walls. Wood floor stripped by a thousand ammoniac swabbings. Frat boys clacking eight-ball in the back room, *Whoa, nice one*, while in front their older brothers drank beer with weekend-Goth girlfriends who were starting to suspect that office work wasn't as temporary as they'd thought; who wore their raccoon eyes like the men wore their college rings, that subtle blend of pride and desperation. And at the tables on the raised stage-left border of the dance floor, the currently-at-liberty bass players, the basement-studio indie producers, the DJs, the roadies. The music people. Lillie saved those tables for us because bands like playing to their own kind.

"Heya, Mars," she said, and set down two pints of Stella Artois. To the woman with me: "Sorry, hon, I thought you were someone else. Beer okay?"

"Whatever Mars drinks is great."

Lillie's face never moved, but I knew her well: I saw the smile under the skin. "Okay," she said.

I said, "This is..."

"Karen," Karen said after a moment.

“Karen is a big fan of Artie Z,” I said.

“Ah,” Lillie said, and gave Karen a closer look. “Would you like some chips and salsa?” Lillie always tries to be nice to the ones she thinks might end up with Artie, since he never is.

“Sure,” said Karen, bright with hope. She took a sip of beer and made a little face.

Lillie turned back to me. “So...seventeen states?”

“Fifteen,” I said. “I took a couple nights off.”

Lillie laughed and shook her head. Then added, as she saw Karen’s look—*Can I be in on the joke, can I be in*—“I like to keep track of the hearts Mars breaks on tour.”

Karen nodded and smiled with tight lips, and I felt for her. She didn’t want to hear about road sex games when she might be four hours from the lead guitarist’s hands sliding under her shirt.

“I’ll bring you some peanuts, too,” Lillie told her. Then she peered at me. “You here for Heroes?”

I gave a small nod. Lillie shook her head a different way, a *you know better* way.

I shrugged.

She said, “Noir’s opening. Ever hear them?”

I shook my head.

“Ah,” she said. She gave me a look. “I’ll be back with those snacks.”

“What was that about?” Karen asked when Lillie had gone.

“I have no idea,” I said, but I thought I did. And so I drank my beer while Karen chattered, and when the stage spots came up I sat forward.

Lillie’s low voice came over the PA. “Welcome to Lillie’s, boys and girls. Tonight, all the way from LA to

our very own stage, we're pleased to welcome Heroes for a special two-set night."

Cheers from the audience.

"But right now, give it up for Seattle's own Noir."

Polite applause as the band took the stage, and what flashed through me was *Oh hell, I thought she meant the music* as the singer stepped up to the mic and said, "Hello on a rainy Friday night, we're Noir" —and then it was the music too as the drummer brought down his sticks, the bass walked in, the guitar wailed an impossible chord, and the singer opened his mouth and took me apart and put me back together again and again and again.

Which is not how I ever talk about music. Not in the dreamtime after a late-night load-out, when people who are too tired to sleep speak in low voices of important things as the bus wheels *chunk kerchunk* us to the next arena; not to the still-flushed faces after the last *that was great* kiss, even the ones who have the wit to ask about the life rather than what the band is really like; not to Lucky, who's like my sister but would only slap my shoulder with her calloused hand and say *Jesus, Mars, go get laid*.

They think they know me. That I'm expert at what I do. That I walk both sides of the line, studio and live. That every venue knows my name. That I can drink a lot and still be polite at a 5 a.m. call. That I will help you find a drugstore in a strange city at midnight. That I'm willing if I must to break everything from your expectations to your bones. It's all true, but it's not the *who are you* of me. Some think I carry some old anger or great grief, but it's not the loss of something precious that drives me: it's the never having had. If I am anything, I am longing; and music is the one certain door into me. That's too private

to lay out for people as if it were no more than *Show me yours and I'll show you mine*.

But here mine was, on a rainy Friday night on Lillie's stage: all of me in a stranger's mouth, the mouth and the music so beautiful I didn't know which made my stomach tight.

Lillie set down baskets of chips and peanuts. "Another round?" she said. I'd felt her watching me from the bar since the first note, but I'm good at face.

"Can I have something different?" Karen asked, startling me. I'd forgotten she was there. After a moment, I said, "What do you want?"

"Cranberry mojito?"

"Sure," Lillie said, and I thought how sad that the sum of anyone's wanting should be a cranberry mojito and an anonymous fuck with a mean-spirited man of middling talent.

Lillie turned to me. "So?" she said.

"He's amazing," I said.

A pause, and that subterranean flash of smile. "I meant, another beer?"

"Sure," I said. It didn't matter what she saw. I do music, not musicians; it's too small a world to avoid each other if things go horribly wrong, which they always do. These are artists, after all, human silos of heat and darkness and two-year-old *mommy, love me!* ego. Wanting them to be other than they are is a fool's game.

I put my professional ears on for a song or two. It was as bad as I thought, so I sighed and rolled my shoulders, and let the music take me. People were up and dancing. The band was tight and focused, trading grins, having fun. Then, during a bridge, the singer knelt before a

young woman at the front of the stage. Held his mic aside and said something to her. Laughed at her response. And kissed her. The audience whooped, and the woman's eyes were shining when he lifted his mouth from hers. She glanced at a young man beside her and said something else to the singer.

He put the mic to her mouth. She said, "You're making my boyfriend jealous."

"We can't have that," the singer said, and leaned into the young man and thoroughly kissed him too. The man went red; the audience went wild; and the singer smiled and went back to his song. And when it was done, he said, "Heroes are up next. We're back at ten. Thank you very much," and the lights came up.

I blinked. I told Karen to save my seat. Then I threaded my way through the crowd around the console.

"You the sound guy?" I said.

"Busy," the sound guy said. She must have been older than she looked—Lillie had served her—but she worked the old PM5D like a child poking a strange bug with a stick to see if it was still alive.

I checked her settings. "Notch the vocals down a little in the mids, they need to come more forward."

"The fuck are you?" she said, without looking.

"I do some front of house," I said. I could see *Fuck off* build in her face, but she caught it and squashed it. Then looked at me for the first time and said, without much grace, "What do you suggest?"

*Good for you*, I thought. I approve of those who can suck it up when they need to: grace can be learned. "Center it here," I pointed, "and ride this range until you find that

raspy edge in his voice when he's gone right down to the heart of the song. Pin it there and leave it alone."

She looked at the display. "Okay," she said.

"Thank you," said a voice behind me.

I turned. "You're welcome," I said. "You desperately need a better mix." And then, to the infant sound guy, "No offense."

"You're Mars," he said. The infant's eyes widened the slightest bit. "Lillie told me you were in the house. I'm Duncan Black."

An elongated moment of looking at each other, taking measure, taking time. Thirty-something face. Thousand-fathom eyes, that music swimming deep within them.

"I'll do your second set," I said, which was not at all what I'd intended.

"Good," he said.



We settled it over beer after the set, while Heroes did their best to give the crowd headaches.

"What about Jenny?" he said, with an indecipherable look toward the bar, where the infant was doing her best not to cry into her beer.

"I'll show her how to do a decent monitor mix. We'll see how it goes."

The look turned to me. "Why?"

"Someone has to teach her."

"She went to school."

"Please," I said. "Are we doing this, or not?"

"We're absolutely doing it," he said.

"Then I'll see you tomorrow," I said, and shoved my way to the bar to raise one finger to Lillie. As she pulled

the tap on another beer, I said into Jenny's ear, "You want to be a real engineer someday?"

Sometime in the last minutes, she'd lost the crying fight. She bit her lip. Then wiped her swollen eyes and nodded.

"Okay," I said. "Welcome to boot camp. You're a woman, you have to work harder, deal with it. If you have to cry, keep stacking PA while you do it."

She took a breath. "Right," she said, and left her beer unfinished, and joined Noir's guitarist in carrying cases out the door. He gave her a raised eyebrow and an amp.

Lillie slid me my beer. "Did I see you with Duncan Black?" she said, as if she hadn't been paying fierce attention.

"Mmm," I said.

"They can't afford you."

"Oh, well," I said.

There was a pause as the sound of the music and the shove of the crowd swirled around us.

"I knew it," Lillie said, with the satisfied smile of someone who's finally got your number. "You're just another fucking romantic."



After Heroes wrapped, I took Karen to the green room. She was dry-mouthed and obviously wet at the other end, radiating pheromones and the excitement of a little girl who fears that any second now she'll wake up from the dream.

I nodded to Odi and Yazz as I passed. Odi ignored me, he always does, but Yazz put a sweaty hand on my arm and said, "Mars, let's find a corner and talk business."

I said, "I just climbed into bed with Noir. Maybe next year."



“Son of a bitch,” he said. “I’m gonna kill that fucking Duncan Black. How about I double your rate?”

“You’re a prince,” I said. “How about I hook you up with someone good that maybe even Odi will like?”

Yazz snorted. “Whatever,” he said. His face was still red from exertion, his hair wet, his t-shirt sticking to his barrel chest and ribs. He gave Karen an assessing look. “Who’s your friend?”

Karen swallowed. “Karen, this is Yazz. Yazz, this is Karen. I promised to introduce her to Artie.”

Yazz rolled his eyes. “Whatever,” he said.

Across the room, Artie heard his name, or maybe he just smelled her, the way predators do. He turned a shark’s eye toward us. Five minutes later, Karen was tucked like a round-eyed baby seal under his arm, and I was back out on the main floor. I gave Lillie a wave as I headed for the door.

“You deliver the package?” she asked.

“How’s that for romantic?” I said.



I ate burgers with the band the next day at a bar and grill overlooking Pike Place Market. Below us, professionally jovial fishmongers tossed whole salmon back and forth over laughing tourists. From up here, you could see the occasional bit of fish flesh drop onto an unsuspecting head.

They were already squeezed into a booth when I arrived, halfway down their drinks, and I pretended not to understand that they’d met early to talk me over. I leaned across the table to shake hands, and then took the seat Duncan had left open beside him. The heat of his body made a warm space that I slid into easily. *I really should*

*not do this*, I thought, and smiled at the waitress and ordered iced tea.

Small talk about the show. Road stories. When Con began to tap his fingers restlessly, I opened my bag and brought out the CDs Duncan had sent home with me.

I'd spent the second half of the night losing sleep; the first half I lost myself in Noir. So intimate, the 3 a.m. charcoal stillness of the world and their music in my headphones. Con carrying us between his drumbeats. Angel's bass the supple swaying spine of the song. Johnny, who has found rapture in his guitar and has the sense not to hold too tight. And Duncan passionate, smooth, rough, gentle, hard between my ears because through headphones music becomes conversation, relationship, sex, confession. Lifeline.

"This is what I hear," I said. "Your production is really clean."

Con started to grin, and I shook my head. "Too clean. Hard plastic." He lost the grin as I went on, "You sound like a bunch of twenty-year-old white boys."

He put his chin out.

"Did you produce?" I said. He didn't answer. "No offense," I said. "You've got amazing beats, and you're a clean drummer, which you need to be because these guys like to play dirty. So control the song, that's your job. But not the sound."

Con looked unconvinced. Johnny stared out the window. Angel looked anxious. And although I did not look at him, I could feel Duncan's interest and amusement and his willingness to sit there all afternoon if that's what it took.

"Your live bootlegs trade well online?"

"Sure," Angel said.

“Website hits spike after a show? Downloads?”

Johnny nodded without looking away from the world outside.

“But your backlist doesn’t move.”

Now Johnny looked at me.

“Why do you think that is?” I said.

Con frowned. Took a breath. Said, “Okay, what do you suggest?”

It was unmistakable. I said, “Is Jenny your sister?”

He stared at me, and then he made a small sound that might have been a laugh and gave me a *go on, dispense wisdom* wave of his hand.

“Record analog,” I said. Now I definitely had their attention. I grinned. “Have you ever?”

“No,” Angel said, as if *analog* meant *naked*.

“But—” Con began.

“I like to put my hands on the music,” I said. “You hear anyone say *Fix it in the mix*, run like hell. It’s bullshit. You guys make real music, why dumb it down?”

Johnny leaned back against the booth and said, “Why are you doing this?”

I felt Duncan shift beside me to better see my face.

Johnny went on, “You can work with anyone. You’re way out of our league.”

“You’re in the wrong league,” I said. “Maybe I can help with that.”

“Why?” Johnny said again.

I leaned forward. “You remember last night in the middle eight of, what’s it called, ‘Just Around The Corner,’ Duncan held the note way beyond...and you didn’t just roll the measure again like most people would. You stretched it so it built.” I pulled my hands apart as if the

music were taffy in them. “And when he fell off the note, you fell with him. Pretty amazing.”

His eyes narrowed.

“I like amazing,” I said. “And there’s nothing you can do with music that I can’t keep up with. I can make the audience *hear* you. I can put you so far inside them they’ll have to dig you out with a spoon.”

His raised eyebrow, my upturned hands: an entire conversation between us. “Look,” I told the four of them. “I care about music, and yours is brilliant. But I’ve long passed the point where I have to beg for it, so you decide. You want me or not?”

Johnny sat back. Angel grinned. Con said, “We don’t have to get this deep and shit all the time, do we?”

“Nope,” I said.

Duncan said, “Is someone going to answer the question?”

I turned to look him full in the face. “You answer it.”

“Oh, yes,” he said, “I want you.”



I learned fast that Duncan could say things like that—words knit in layers so that *You’re hired* was also *I’m thinking right now about getting you naked*, with both meanings plain—and then do nothing more except enjoy the heat it added to even the most everyday moments. It wasn’t his standard line in seduction: after shows, or in the clubs we frequented to hear other bands, he charmed in the facile rock-star way that made *sex with Duncan Black* a door prize, a luck that as a matter of course would be someone else’s tomorrow. But anyone who became a long-term part of his creative world would find themselves at odd mo-

ments under the spotlight of a sexual attention that was riveting in both its force and its lack of expectation. We might sit across a pub table talking about compression or slimming down the rig, and suddenly he'd say something or just get that look and I'd be back in that moment, *Oh yes I want you*, his eyes full of music and sex, the band watching with varying degrees of *there he goes again* while I was rooted to my seat for a hard pair of heartbeats. And as he had done then, Duncan would watch and wait. All I had to do was smile slow, or laugh and shake my head, or give it right back to him, *Do you kiss your mamma with that mouth?* He'd smile, and we'd move on. He just needed to check the connection.

It's a good game if you have the stomach for it, if you enjoy the simmer of a rhythm like slow and endless chess. But if you began to boil, if you began to push, if you caught him in a dark corner and offered the endgame, you'd get it—he was always up for it—but the rest would disappear. I saw too many people who thought they were different carry the glow of great sex for a few days until, in public, the first apologetic look as he passed them by, the first hint of *You should have known it would turn out this way*. You could stay, but why? The creative spark was gone, crushed under the weight of wanting more. Not a trade I was willing to make. So I enjoyed the touches, the wordplay, how his singing hollowed me out, the music in his eyes. I played the game well. How much I sometimes burned in private was just the price of life in the funhouse.

And it was fun—stupid silly fun, deadly serious fun, everything in between. I let Yazz persuade me into accepting so much money for the eighteen-city second leg of Heroes' tour that I could then afford a long stretch of time

in Seattle, taking a few studio gigs and giving the rest of my days and nights to Noir: two or three shows a month to learn their music live, and hours in my studio roughing it up as much as I could in remix, and persuading the band to re-record this and that. Analog. You would have thought I was asking them to kiss snakes.

I spent so much time inside the music that I began to feel it inside me: sliding under my skin, stretching in my muscles when I moved. Finding its way farther into me every time I put my hands on it. Knocking sometimes on my deepest doors. Startling, but not a problem: I haven't worked with music this long without learning to defend against it. Music is beautiful and cruel; it doesn't care what it makes you feel as long as it gets in. I put Noir so deep into audiences that I'm sure some went home unsettled by longing suddenly unlocked within them, some old dream let loose to burn or break again. What I do is not always a kindness: but it's my talent to hear the heart of a thing and make other people hear it too.

They did hear, more and more with every show. "Wow," Angel said one night in the green room, pouring beer down his throat so fast I don't think he tasted it, mopping sweat from his face with the one dry edge of the t-shirt he had just peeled off. "Wow. Look at them."

*Them* was a varied crowd of fans circling in slow currents through the backstage area; tattooed young men in motorcycle boots trading euphoric smiles with forty-year-old women in Manolos and Seven jeans. Wow, indeed. Duncan sat on a grungy sofa across the room; I caught his eye and tilted my head toward the scene. He grinned, nodded, and returned to charming the woman beside him,

brilliant blue eyes and a *let's find out* smile, into an early departure.

“Excuse me,” a voice said at my elbow. I turned. She was mid-twenties, combat-ready in layered shirts and cargo pants with enough pockets that she didn't need a purse. I made a private bet she had a toothbrush with her.

She looked at Johnny, who was busy being rumpled and poetic in a corner, and then at me. “Are you with the band?”

“Yes, I am,” I said. “Would you like a drink?”



In the dark of my bedroom, she propped herself on one elbow, her eyes glittering in refracted late-night city light.

“It must be amazing,” she said. When they say it like that, they always mean life with the band, as if it were some combination of endless after-show parties, rampant sex, and midnight sing-alongs on the bus. The three-nights-on-two-nights-off grinding schedule, the set-up and tear-down of tons of equipment, the endless stupidity of vendors, missed meals, drunken fans who want to touch the pretty buttons on the board, throwing up in a strange parking lot before boarding the bus for a four-hundred mile drive in the sour smell of people who have chosen to sleep rather than shower, is never what they mean.

“It has its attractions,” I told her, tracing the shadowed curve of her waist where it rose to her hip.

“Oh, sure. Sex, drugs, and rock and roll,” she said with a laugh, and rolled onto her back under the pressure of my hand. They never understand. *Oh sure*, they say, the knowing nod, the serious mouth. *Oh sure*. And in their

avid eyes I see them thinking it's the kind of dirty that always washes off, and they're dying for it.

She pulled me to her and wrapped one leg around me. She moved against me. She whispered in my ear, "So, what's Johnny really like?"



I agonized over the first album remix so much that Lucky, with whom I had dinner at least once a week, finally refused to feed me until I showed some fucking backbone. So I took the CD first to Con's small office in the pub he managed: he heard it through, shook his head, and said, "Well, fuck me." As the album played again, we talked about growing up in Iowa, the rhythm of train wheels that came across the fields into a young drummer's window at night. It made more sense of him for me; his steadiness, his preference for dealing with life at the ground level.

"Thanks for what you're doing for Jenny," he said as I left. "She likes you."

"Jenny's welcome," I said, and went to Angel next, at the earnestly Seattlesque credit union where he was a loan counselor.

"You look funny in a suit," I said.

"Blow me," he said cheerfully, making a multi-pierced teller snicker. He didn't have an office, so we sat in his car in the sun to listen, windows down, the music spreading its arms toward the high blue sky and very nearly reaching it. A bike messenger cutting through the parking lot slowed and then circled us round and round, listening.

"Well, fuck me," Angel said.

"Some great bass lines."



He grinned. “They’re not so bad.” And went back into the bank muttering *analog* and shaking his head.

And then to Johnny and Duncan at the apartment they shared; the top floor of an old lumber baron’s mansion in Capitol Hill, beautifully renovated with, blessedly for neighbors, attention to soundproofing. They sprawled on the sofa, Johnny still in his waiter’s apron from his lunch shift, Duncan on a day off from his erratic schedule of office temping and teaching piano. Duncan lay back with his head on Johnny’s thigh as the music rolled out of their very nice speakers.

“Fuck me,” Johnny said when it was done.

Duncan got that look and opened his mouth.

“Don’t start,” I said. “Do you guys know you talk like each other? I’m getting you all the t-shirt.”

Duncan grinned. “It’s fantastic, Mars, was what I was going to say.”

“Blow me,” I said. “Oh Christ, I’m doing it too.” Duncan laughed, and even Johnny grinned as he reached for the remote. “Let’s hear it again,” he said.



F-tech was just coming into use around that time in the pharmaceutical industry: feeling technology that allowed researchers a first-hand experience of reactions in subjects testing new drugs—nausea, fatigue, the specific location of headache, all available through an adaptation of augmented cognition technology that mapped limbic brain activity and physiological sensation. It took some bright spark from marketing who didn’t give a shit for the purity of science to realize the tech was a better product than any of the drugs it was helping to test. The company

began marketing to doctors: instead of relying on the patient to fumble his way through metaphor or vague pointing, just put on the funny wire hat and for those few moments, make his experience your own. Feel your appendix swell inside you; share Alzheimer's dementia; find out what PMS is really like.

It took maybe a second and a half for the adult entertainment industry to get in on the game, and have some fun with the name F-tech, with dramatic results: since it was real-time tech that only worked with real live people, porn was out and peep shows were in—and everyone was curious to find out how the other half lived. How does it feel to be hard inside someone, to be tight and wet around them? It no longer took eleven inches or double-D to be a star: it took the ability to have your own kind of great sex—tender, enthusiastic, rough, whatever turned you on—in front of real people, to shudder and strain and come as hard as you could so they would too. No more faking: only the endless possibilities of human sensation. One enterprising journalist sought out women who'd never had an orgasm as volunteers, arranged a show, and wrote about it. Heartbreaking that there were so many candidates; fascinating to read about someone's most intimate awakening, and consider that such a private thing could now be a gift like season tickets or a bottle of wine.

Lucky, always curious, went to a show and came to our weekly dinner with her customary unflappable response to the world exploded by plugging into a man having sex with a woman. "I had no idea," she kept saying around mouthfuls of spaghetti. "No fucking idea. No pun intended. It's so *different* for men."

"You think?" I said. "And did you do the woman too?"

I grinned when she shrugged. She made a face and said, “It’s fine for you, wander all over the playground if that’s your thing. Me....” An internal conversation, another shrug. “Call me conservative. I don’t do guys.” She grinned and drank some wine. “But it sure was interesting to be one for an hour.”

“Aren’t you curious about straight sex?”

She snorted. “Been there, don’t like it.”

“Okay, but do you wonder how it feels to a woman who does?”

She snorted again, but she looked thoughtful as she attacked her spaghetti.

Later, she said, “You maybe want to go sometime?”

I shook my head.

She gave me a searching look. “Why not?”



Because I don’t need to, is what I did not say. I know how the best sex feels. It feels like music.



It can be confusing when someone hands you something you’ve wanted fiercely. It’s easy to transfer the hunger for the thing to a hunger for the person who gives it to you. Being on the road, sundered from the usual anchors to daily life, just makes it more easy. So I was waiting when we took our first roll through California, an eight-day hit-and-run of buzz venues I’d put together through my network; and after the gig at the Troubadour, Jenny turned to me as we were loading the van in the buttery warmth of the LA night and said, “Mars, it is just so *fantastic*.” She was breathless and excited; the ‘Sound Guy’

button I'd given her pulled down the top of her shirt just enough; and she gave me an impulsive full-body hug and looked up at me for a breath, two, until I said in a neutral voice, "I'd love to kiss you, Jen, but I can't afford to lose my monitor guy."

She blinked. "Oh," she said, "I—"

I winked.

"Oh, you were joking," she said.

"Can you hand me that case?" I said. And by the time she did, we were past the tricky part: tricky for me, too, because she was certainly my type, and it was intoxicating to feel her soft against me, to have her sigh in the way that means *All this for you*. I set my mouth into a smile and didn't let her see that I hadn't really been joking at all. And I simmered.

Later, I stood in a corner with an old friend, an engineer with boundless passion for heavy metal, the best I knew at riding the line just before people's ears actually began to bleed. Duncan came by, his eyes still swimming with music; it always took time after a show for it to seep out of him, the slow receding of an adrenaline tide. Whenever music was loose in him, he was more essentially Duncan: more wild, more charming, more intense, more physical, more willing to walk whatever edge he might find himself on. On nights of music, it was inevitable that his voice against my ear would make *You want me to bring you a beer?* feel like *You want me to bring you off so good you see stars?* But tonight I was worried about edges blurring. I shook him off, a little abruptly.

He gave me a quizzical look.

"You're interrupting my important sound guy talk," I said.

He rolled his eyes. “You going to introduce me?” he said.

“Go away,” I said unconvincingly, and in the end it was I who went, pleading backache from loading the van, to stew alone in my hotel room about how fucking unfair it was that I had to keep saying no, no, no to the people I wanted most.



“You should have stayed for that beer,” Duncan said the next morning on the phone, in the voice he reserved for significant news.

It was our one day off. “You woke me up,” I said.

“Mmm,” he said, and even over the phone I knew it meant *Well, not yet, but it's on my list.*

“Shut up,” I said, my good humor at the game having apparently returned sometime during the little sleep I'd managed. “What did I miss?”

Con and I took a taxi to the restaurant. The others were waiting in the lobby, Johnny and Angel sharp-eyed and attentive as Duncan charmed the promoter.

“How are you, Jimmy?” I said.

“Mars, you look terrific,” Jimmy Washington said. He gave me a one-arm hug with every appearance of warmth. “How long has it been?”

“Couple of years. Great to see you,” I said, and Duncan quivered in silent amusement; on the phone, I'd said, *Oh Christ, watch your wallet and lock up your dog.* Still, Jimmy knew his job, and we can't all like each other.

“Great set last night,” Jimmy said as the hostess led us to a window table. “Just great. We have got to get you

out there.” He spread his arm at the window toward the Great Beyond.

Nods all around. They were doing their best to be blasé, but I could sense the deep current of excitement running through them. I felt it too: I’d spent the week before the trip emailing mp3s to every promoter I knew; and even if Jimmy had the personal appeal of a sea slug, he was one of the best.

“Some acts, the trick is making people give a shit about the music. Not a problem for you. I got a niece at KCRW, she’s gonna cream over your stuff and she knows everybody. We’ll build audience, get some new work out in about...six months? Can you lay something down by then?”

Everyone looked at me. “I can if you can,” I said to the band.

“Great,” Jimmy said. “Then we’ll slam a tour through the Top 20 markets about eight months from now. And I’m thinking a few opening gigs with an arena act in some of the mid-size markets.” I could practically see him rubbing his hands together. “Maybe Superstition, maybe Ruff...we’ll see whose schedule works out.”

He sat back. The four of them exchanged looks.

“Let’s do it,” Johnny said, and reached across the table to shake Jimmy’s hand.

“Great,” Jimmy said, “just great. Draft contract in email tomorrow for your review. Let’s get some champagne and talk strategy.”

And so we did. It was good champagne; we got more. Eventually the talk turned tactical.

“We handle everything with the venue,” Jimmy said. “We get you a contract tour manager who stays with you

the entire run. You show up, do interviews or whatever, make the magic, get laid, we'll all make some money."

"Crew," Johnny said. "We want Mars at front of house."

I made sure my game face was on straight and lifted my champagne glass.

"We usually put together our own crew out of LA," Jimmy said. "That's how we like to work."

"Non-negotiable," Con said.

Jimmy's face didn't show much; he wasn't surprised, but he didn't like it. For one thing, it meant no skimping on logistics: I had a reputation for being prickly about hotel quality and people getting fed. Still, he knew the first rule of the road: he sucked it up.

"No problem," he said, and turned to me. "What're these guys paying you?"

"Usual rates," I said, without missing a beat.

"What, someone here is independently wealthy?"

"That would be me," Duncan said, with the smile that said *Call me a liar*.

Jimmy's face pinched briefly, as if he had a lemon in his mouth. Then he put the pro smile back on and said to me, "Well, it's not like you're not worth it."

"I'll bring my own monitor guy," I said. Con smiled.

"Okay," Jimmy said.

I said, "You open to tour manager suggestions?"

"Sure he is," Johnny said.

"Sure I am," said Jimmy, with a sigh.



"Mars, you *rock*," Lucky said after she got the call from Jimmy's people; then she morphed into a small

whirlwind seemingly surgically attached to her cell phone, BlackBerry, fax machine, laptop, and bottomless quad latte. She was the best because she understood every job of every crew member on a tour, and because she was ruthlessly organized, endlessly inventive, and greeted every problem with the predatory cheer of an expert hunter who's just sighted something new to kill. She was at home with roadies and artists and promoters and VIPs; she simply made sure they all knew this was her tour, her artists, her crew. She ran a tight ship with a direct manner, an easy grin, an armful of spreadsheets, and an encyclopedic knowledge of the vagaries of venues from Seattle to Miami.

She knew the band, of course; anyone who became important in my life had to pass her inspection. She liked their music well enough, liked them. "Nice guys," she said early on, "but I don't really get the whole Duncan thing." Duncan, for his part, treated her with the detached courtesy he showed anyone who wasn't inside his creative or sexual space.

We all got together to talk tour. Lucky showed up at Duncan and Johnny's with an equipment rundown; a timetable to finalize the lighting design, rigging plan, and bus rental; a list of suggested clothes and personal items that would pack into a carry-on suitcase and cover almost every contingency; and a preliminary crew roster from Jimmy's office with personal comments on each candidate from someone Lucky trusted: "Except this guy," she said, "no one knows him, so I'm telling Jimmy tomorrow he's off the list." And she brought apple strudel.

"I love you," Angel said earnestly. "Please marry me and have my babies."



Lucky grinned. “I don’t need babies,” she said. “I have a band.”

When we’d finished business and had moved on to trading war stories, Duncan produced a takeout menu. “There must now be Thai food,” he said. He leaned over Lucky’s chair with his arms on either side of her and held the menu open for her, his face next to hers. “Anything you want,” he said.

She gave him a sideways look and said, “Okay, *tom kah* and a double order of ginger beef.” And later, in a low-voiced kitchen conversation, she said with a small frown, “Was he hitting on me?”

“No, Luck,” I said. “That’s the thing he does. It just means you’re in. If you don’t like it, tell him.”

“No, it’s okay,” she said. “It’s weird, but...” She shrugged. “Artists.” And that was it, as far as she was concerned. She started responding to him with variations of *Now, if you had a sister*, which seemed to delight him no end and was also a clear message. That was Lucky; very good with people.



Now that he could see the tour shaping up, the main chance on the horizon, Duncan began to work the new songs in earnest. That meant hours at the piano, or wandering around his apartment as if he might find lyrics in a corner, or being distracted at his current temp job by fragments of melody. “I can’t even file when I’m like this. I forget the alphabet,” he said one evening early in the process, when he was still talking to people.

I’ve seen plenty of artists at work. Music comes differently to them all. It’s water from a tap they turn on

and off at will; it's buried deep and they tear themselves bloody scratching it out; it's a box of tiny puzzle pieces they find at random over time and spend years fitting together. It's business as usual, it's agony, it's lust, it's crack, but it is never passive: only wannabes sit around waiting for songs to come in a box from UPS. I watched Duncan stalk and wrestle and seduce his music, I saw him struggle to give it voice, and I saw him for the first time truly volatile. I came to understand that music was a long passage to deep places that fascinated and compelled him, warm oceans of self that he could swim forever. Hard to leave. "He's got no end of songs in there," Johnny told me. "The trick is getting him to bring them back."

Duncan stopped seeing people. He barely answered email. Without warning, seemingly without regard, he disappeared into himself. The band was used to it. Lucky didn't care, as long as he surfaced briefly when decisions needed to be made. There was no steady lover to get prickly about being abandoned. And I became glad he was somewhere I couldn't really reach him, because it gave me time to deal with the fact that I missed him so much: that it wasn't just his music that was knocking at my door.

Lucky pried it out of me one night over a bottle of wine. "Jesus, Mars," she said in disgust. "Do not fall in love with a fucking musician."

"I knew you'd understand," I said.

"Jesus. Is this going to be a problem on the road?"

"It won't be a problem anywhere, Luck. He doesn't get horizontal with people he works with, and he doesn't fall in love with anyone. I'll get over it."

She gave me a look of absolute sympathy. Because it's all you can do: get over it. Let your tsunami of feeling

foam itself out. Let the electric rush die because it's not convenient or not mutual or not worth the consequences in the cold morning after.

"Come on," she said, and handed me my jacket. "Let's go to Lillie's and get you laid. Maybe it'll help."



*D back with songs*, Johnny's email said. *Will keep you posted*. I went to the kitchen and opened a bottle of Rioja, poured a glass, came back into the living room, and put Noir in my system. Let the wine and Duncan's voice warm me, and wondered where he wanted to take his music and whether the band would follow.

I've seen more groups fall apart over this in the long term than almost anything else, and small wonder: it's brutal. Someone drags up a bucket from the well that goes so deep in good artists and pours out the contents for other people to pick over, dissect, misunderstand, dismiss, or approve—and no matter what else, to change, even if only just by playing it enough to make it their own. Such a vulnerable thing; it takes skill and practice and a certain psychotic self-confidence to offer up handfuls of oneself again and again and again.

It also takes time to turn it into music—to work it through, play it out, fall in love with it, shape it to yourself. It's a band's most private process. So I was deeply surprised to get the phone call from Johnny two days later.

"Heya," he said. "If the studio's open any nights this week, we want to come in."

"Excuse me?" I said, and he laughed. "I know, it's insane. This stuff is amazing, Mars, you have to hear it. We

want to work it out with you so we can lay it down rough if we feel like it.”

“Okay,” I said. “Come in tomorrow night.” And I shook my head and started clearing my schedule.

It was good that I came in early to mic the space and fill the small refrigerator with the disgusting energy drinks that Con and Johnny lived on: because the band was early too. Angel, for whom lateness was a lifestyle choice, bounded in first with his bass and an enormous grin.

“So?” I said.

“Nope,” he said. “Nope, nope, not a word, you just wait and see.”

“Angel—”

“Nope.”

Con was in next. I looked at my watch. “Just want to check the kit before we get started,” he said.

“So?” I said.

He said, “Patience, grasshopper. We already talked about it, we don’t want to give you any preconceptions.”

“Hello,” I said, “I’m your sound guy. It would be helpful to know what the sound is.”

“Tonight you’re the audience,” he said. “Nobody else has heard this stuff, we want to make sure we’re not all on dope about it.”

I heard Johnny’s voice outside. “...sit on it for the first chorus, and then the next time around,” and he walked in with his head turned, “let it fucking go,” his arm shooting music into the air behind him, toward Duncan.

“Great,” Duncan said, and saw me, and grinned. He looked beautiful; tired and thin, but wearing the glow of hard work well done. He put his arm around my shoul-

ders, pulled me close, briefly nuzzled my neck. “Mmm,” he said, “you smell good,” and I thought, *Oh fuck*.

He let me go, and fished a CD out of his bag; turned it between two fingertips. “Got something for you,” he said.

“Promises, promises,” I said, which got me a smile as well as the CD. I put it in the player and brought the remote to the small listening area in the control room. Duncan curled up at one end of the couch like a cat. I could feel him intent on me. That was fine; one of the necessary skills to work with musicians is staying relaxed under the laser gaze of an artist who’s gauging to four decimal places your reaction to his work. I put on my sound guy face and settled in a chair in the listening pose, leaning back, head down, eyes unfocused.

It began: demo stuff, Duncan and the piano, the occasional drum loop. Two verses into the first track, the chorus came along and the song took a sudden, sexy turn; Duncan’s voice roughened, and I could imagine the build of the drums, the erotic bass line, the urgent guitar...I looked up, astonished. They all broke into grins. “Isn’t that the *shit*?” Angel said. “I was up half the night working out the bass.”

“Wow,” I said, and felt Duncan relax fractionally.

The rest were equally exciting. Songs about sex and love and separation. Stories of walking an edge and sometimes falling off. Roadmaps of perilous journeys into one’s own soul or other people’s arms. Simple songs about complicated things, by turns ferociously angry, desperately sad, fuck-me-now passionate, spiked with joy so sharp it almost hurt. They were raw, fractured, not yet whole; but the core of the music was there, waiting for the four of them to give it shape and make it Noir.

“Unbelievable,” I said when it was done. And *Brilliant* and *Audio crack* and *That one will be everyone’s breakup song*, and so on, because *great* is never good enough for the artists; they always want to know exactly what you mean and which nanosecond of the song you mean it about. Having answers is another of the skills.

“Let’s do some work,” Johnny said, and went into the recording room with Angel and Con to set up and tune.

Duncan stood and stretched and got himself a bottle of water. “I’ve been wondering what you’d think,” he said.

“I think they’re amazing,” I said. “You know I like amazing.”

He smiled; the artist’s private smile, the power and pride when the work is good. “You know what’s amazing?” he said. “I knew I couldn’t write these songs. I knew it. And then I wrote them anyway.”

I imagined him in the apartment finishing the last song, sitting still before it, drawing slow breath, smiling that smile.

“Now we find out if I can sing them,” he said, and went to join his band.



So many nights working out the music until someone was too tired to keep up. So many marathon weekends. Life became a blur, hours of music running together like paint into strange patterns. It fascinated me to watch the dynamics among the four of them, to see revealed the core of a relationship closer and more complex than many marriages. Creative collaboration demands that some of our most well-defended barriers go down; and so I saw different facets of all of them, new vulnerabilities.

Some songs came together quickly; some were stubborn. We laid down hours of fragments and rough takes. They liked having ideas they could hear side by side: they spent hours back and forth between versions, closing gaps in interpretation and style, hammering out tempo and focus. Occasionally they would draw me into a discussion of how to balance the sound or how I'd apply technology to a particular musical issue; otherwise I tried to stay invisible in the control room. I was conscious of being in a delicate space, witness to a process I could disrupt if I were not careful.

Anytime they reached an *okay, let's try it* consensus, no matter how grudging, they'd play it. Some of the most interesting discoveries were in these *fine, whatever* moments, when someone who had been hanging onto a notion with both hands suddenly heard what someone else was talking about; and the act of making music became the act of changing a mind. It always came down to the music: what was good, and what made it better.

But that didn't make it easy. They had some terrible arguments. Con was mule-stubborn and turned red when he was upset. Johnny became excruciatingly reasonable, as if he'd found himself in the middle of an academic discussion rather than an intensely personal conflict about what makes a song work. Angel was impatient and flip, most so when he most cared. And I discovered that Duncan had a mean streak, a coldness that came out when he had to defend some aspect of the music that was twined too closely with his own psyche. He couldn't always separate art from self.

"Fucking cotton candy," Johnny said one night about a particularly elusive song. "This melody line is straight

out of the eighties.” He used the reasonable voice, as if it would mitigate the deadliness of the insult.

“Fuck you,” Duncan said.

“We’re not getting anywhere,” Johnny said. That was certainly true; they’d been scratching their fingernails down this track for—I looked at the wall clock—four hours thirty-nine minutes this particular night, and it wasn’t the first time.

“The melody’s okay,” Con said. “Well, it would be if it wasn’t so slow. It’s a rock song, let it rock.”

“It’s no fucking rock song,” Angel said. “I don’t know what it is anymore.”

They had tried any number of approaches: ballad, full-out headbanger, most things in between. They had dragged the melody around the room until it was almost unrecognizable. They had kicked the stuffing out of the song.

Duncan looked furious and miserable when Angel said, “Maybe we should just let this one go, you know?”

*Damn*, I thought. There was something about the song that gave me shivers, even mutilated as it was now. I wanted them to make it work.

Johnny looked at me through the window. “What do you think, Mars?”

The others looked at me too, and I wondered if they were as surprised as I was. This wasn’t a sound question; it was a music question.

I checked Duncan; his face was closed in the way that meant he’d left the realm of discussion and was well into the land of come out swinging. Not a place I wanted to go with him. But this song...I said, “I think there’s something there, but that’s up to you.”

“You think it can work, tell us how,” Con said.



“I’m not a musician,” I said. “This is your turf.”

Angel said, “Mars, stop fucking around and just tell us what you think.”

Duncan said nothing.

“Give me a minute,” I said, and rubbed the back of my neck; and opened my memory to all the variations they’d tried. My talent, to hear the heart of a thing: but now I heard nothing, and I thought again, *Damn*. And remembered him saying *I knew I couldn’t do it and I did it anyway*. So I took a breath and tried to hear differently: I listened to my body’s memory of when the song had made me pay attention, when it had scratched at the door of my most private self.

*Oh*, I thought, *oh*.

Walking into the recording room, I was the most nervous I’ve been in years around musicians. I squatted by Duncan’s chair. He raised a cool eyebrow.

I said, “Can I see it?”

He regarded me for a moment and then handed me his working notebook, a sturdy composition book with a black and white checked cover. It was open to the song. I scanned the lyrics and then looked at Duncan. Gathered myself internally. “It’s two different songs at once, is the problem,” I said. “You walk right up to the real song and then back off.”

Without moving a muscle, he went from cool to glacial.

I bypassed all the sunny phrases about the lover who is the treasure, and circled one section with my finger. “My opinion, this is it,” I said. “You should start here and see where it goes.”

“Let me see,” Angel said, and took the notebook from my hands before I could turn it around to show Duncan. Con and Johnny crowded around Angel to read.

“Huh,” Con said.

“Maybe,” Angel said.

“Why?” Johnny asked me.

I said, “No matter what you do with the rest, this is the part I always hear.” I put my hands on my body to show I meant *what gets in*.

Johnny gave the notebook back to Duncan and picked up his guitar. Duncan looked at me. I pointed again:

*You shouldn't be in these private places  
Down in the cellar of me  
Where I am revealed  
Where I am laid bare  
Where my fears run like rats  
And my longing stands naked*

*But I find you there  
I keep finding you there*

*Better be careful  
It isn't safe here  
Not always what you expect it to be  
The water is deep here, the ground is uncertain  
It's dangerous space this far inside of me*

Duncan's face went still.

Johnny picked out the first phrase of an edgy melody line, a sound like the air feels when storm clouds gather on the horizon.

“Huh,” Con said. “Interesting.”

“What do you think?” Johnny said to Duncan, and Duncan closed the notebook, threw it hard across the room, got up, and left the studio. He slammed the door. It sounded especially loud in the silence of our surprise.

After a moment, Angel said, “Here we go with the drama. I hate this part.”

We waited. Duncan didn’t come back. Johnny sighed and went after him. Returned alone; said, “He’s walking home.” Angel and Con exchanged looks and started packing up their gear.

“Don’t worry about it,” Johnny told me as he retrieved the notebook. “No album is complete without a Duncan Black tantrum. He’ll get over it. He knows you’re right.”

“He said that?”

Con said, “He only ever gets this mad when someone’s right about something that he really doesn’t want them to be right about.”

“That’s pretty deep,” I said.

“Nah,” he said, “that’s just Duncan.”



I told myself to take their word for it, they knew him better than I did; but I was tense the next night, and it did nothing to relax me when Duncan turned up early and alone.

“Hey,” I said. I gave him a brief smile and found something else to look at. “There’s coffee if you want it,” I said over my shoulder.

He said, “Now who’s backing off?”

I turned. “Okay,” I said. “It’s not my place to tell you what your music should be. I’m sorry.”

He pulled a folded piece of paper from his pocket and handed it to me. Watched my face as I read. Saw the song go into me like a lover or a knife.

“So?” he said.

“This is it,” I said.

“Yes,” he said. “So don’t be sorry. Just be . . .”

I couldn’t read his look. “What?” I said: but Con came in, and Duncan shook his head and said, “Nothing.”

He gave the song to Con and said, “Read this.” Con did, and said *Holy shit*; and later so did Angel and Johnny. They found the music for it that night in a long, intense session. We laid down a rough cut; and when Duncan sang I thought that Lucky was right, it was a problem, and I was ten different kinds of fool.



No one could go straight home, so we ate midnight breakfast at Beth’s Café. Duncan sat by the wall, very quiet.

Angel pushed his plate to one side and said, “Anyone want to go downtown?” When he said it like that, *downtown* meant F-tech.

“Laura would kill me,” Con said, and turned his wedding ring unconsciously.

Angel said, “It’s girl-on-girl night at the Lusty Lady. That shit turns my brain inside out.”

“I’ll come,” Johnny said. Duncan gave him a bedroom smile. Johnny smiled back. “That, too,” he said.

“Have fun,” Con said. He put money on the table and went yawning out into the night.

Angel looked at us. “You guys go ahead,” I said. Duncan shook his head.

After they left, Duncan said, “So why don’t you go?”

“Why don’t you?”

His brief smile didn’t quite reach his eyes. “It would be very second-grade of me to say I asked you first.”

I shifted in my seat. Talk of sex had always been play between us, and now I didn’t know what to say. *Because F-tech doesn’t touch my soul. Because you go home and write a song that does. Because these nights of your music are better sex to me than anything those people do downtown.* True; and too private. But he was waiting.

The only way I could talk about it was by looking at my plate. “Because it isn’t real,” I said finally. “Well, okay, it is...but it’s a game. Put the wire on and someone gets you off. Even if you would never do whatever they’re doing, as long as they like it, you’ll get there with them. That’s fine, whatever works for people...but it’s not real to me.”

“And what is?” he said.

Having exhausted the possibilities of the plate, I began shredding my napkin.

“What’s real?” he said.

I shrugged. There are all kinds of real. It’s real to make someone explode out of their own body because you want to, because you can, because it turns you on too. That marvelous feedback is real, whether between strangers or friends. But that wasn’t the answer for this night. Not the real answer.

“Your song,” I said. His attention sharpened, and I felt the thrill of telling an important truth that sounds inconsequential, of riding the edge of self-revelation. “Letting someone that far in...that’s real.”

“Ever done it?”

I shook my head. Returned the question with a look.

He shook his head. “Dangerous,” he said.

“Like the song says.”

“Exactly,” he said: and then, “I have to go.” He stood and put his money down. Then he leaned into my side of the booth and slid a hand around the back of my neck and put his mouth to my ear and said *Thank you for the song*; and then straightened and said, “See you tomorrow,” and left: and I didn’t know why I was so certain he was going downtown.



The niece at KCRW, as Jimmy predicted, went gooey over the new album. Nic Harcourt showed it the love on *Morning Becomes Eclectic*, which sent Johnny over the moon. Buzz built. Jimmy set up dates. People bought tickets. The band fought like bears over the set list. The lighting designer got everyone excited simply by knowing his job. We found a rehearsal space and hammered the set into a show. And the week before we left Seattle, Noir played two sold-out nights at Lillie’s.

Jenny and I tested the PA and drank sparkling water while we waited for the band to turn up. “Wait’ll they see that,” I said, pointing outside. We grinned at each other, and when Con’s car pulled up we went to the window to watch.

The four of them were in the middle of a conversation as they climbed out of the car, so they didn’t immediately see the group of twenty or so waiting at the stage door. Con was the first to notice: the surprise stopped him in mid-sentence, and Duncan, walking behind, had to brace his arms on Con’s shoulders to keep from knocking him over. Jenny, standing next to me, snorted in delight. “I

wish I had a camera,” she said. It would have been a great picture; Con’s face was a study in *What the fuck?* followed by *Oh my god*, while Duncan had gone straight to some nascent version of *Holy shit, I’m a rock star*.

The fans enfolded them. Someone handed Johnny a CD to sign. A young man with auburn hair in a ponytail said something to Duncan that made him pause, smile differently, bend close to hear the rest. Angel and Con were cornered by two women in matching leather pants. “Are they *twins?*” I asked Jenny, and we stared, and they were. Jenny laughed so hard she had to sit down.

The house was packed, the energy so palpable that it seemed the air might spark. And the show was terrific; nothing like playing to an enraptured hometown crowd to make a band feel like they own the world.

After the show, Angel landed the twins and sat with them in what, when I passed close, turned out to be an intense discussion of the films of Cordero and Cuarón: *Good for you, girls*, I thought, *make him work for it*. Johnny and Con had their drinks bought for them all night. I lost track of Duncan.

Later, after things thinned out a bit, Lillie and I had a beer together at the bar. The house DJ was spinning slow trance music. There were still a few people on the dance floor, and as I drank I watched a couple sway together at arm’s length, talking quietly; then they drifted into the light and it was Duncan and the man from the pre-show crowd. The dancing didn’t surprise me; with pick-ups there was always conversation and social touching until the invitation was issued and accepted, but then they would leave. He’d always been private about those things. But now Duncan laughed; and cupped his hands around

the man's face, drew him close and kissed him, frankly sexual: eyes half-closed, mouth open, his body looser in the joints. It went through them both like a wave: you could practically see them getting hard.

"Those boys need to get a room," Lillie said, and smiled into her glass; and then saw me watching, and said, "Ah." A pause. "You want some pretzels with that beer?"

"I'm fine," I said. I couldn't help the edge in my voice; nor the clench of regret the next night when the man was back. His hair was loose this time, and there was no dancing: they left right after the show.



One reason for making sure we had good warm-ups in Seattle was that Jimmy decided to open the tour in LA at the House of Blues.

"That's a thousand people," Johnny said on the conference call when Jimmy presented the schedule.

"Don't worry about it," Jimmy said, with a laugh. "That fucker will be packed so tight the girls will have to pee standing up." He cackled, making the phone speaker fuzz with static.

"If you say so," Johnny said.

"I do," said Jimmy. "I know my business. I'm only putting you in places you can fill."

Johnny looked at me. I nodded.

Their nerves were showing before we were even off the interstate. By the time the bus parked in the lot at the Hyatt, across the street from the House of Blues, the four of them could do no more than sit silent and round-eyed like owls until Curtis, Lucky's tour assistant, chivvied them into the hotel.



“Aren’t they coming over?” Jenny asked as we crossed the street to the HOB parking lot.

“God, no,” the lighting designer, Lucky, and I all said in varying tones of horror. The LD said, “Always keep the artists as far away as possible from anything they can screw up or get ideas about. If it was up to me, I’d scoop them up from the hotel at 7:55 and just throw them on-stage.” He shrugged.

“Okay,” Lucky said as we approached the load-in door, “let’s see what kind of trouble we got today.”

But there was no trouble: the HOB crew knew their jobs, and one of their lighting guys was already a stone Noir fan. It’s always work, but this was smooth work, made fun by the banter of expert strangers who find a rhythm together.

Jenny goggled at the Heritage 2000 mixing console and came close to freaking when she met its friend, the XL250 monitor console. “I can’t run that,” she said. “It’s...big.”

“It’s the big time, little sister,” I said. “We’ll go over it this afternoon, you’ll be fine.”

She wasn’t the only one who was nervous: when the band showed up for sound check, sheepdogged by Curtis to keep them from wandering into corners and poking things they shouldn’t, Con’s first response to the room was, “It’s...big.”

“It’s genetic,” I said; and at his confused look added, “Never mind. You’ll be fine.”

Duncan was in next. He said, “It’s *huge* in here.”

“You’ll be fine,” I said.

“I feel sick,” he said. But when Noir came on stage and the packed room exploded into noise, he took the crowd

with his first clear-eyed *let me make you feel good* look, as if he'd had a thousand people scream for him a thousand times before. The band launched straight into "One Night Soon," and when at least a hundred people began to sing along with the sudden, passionate turn in the chorus, I felt Duncan's surprised laugh bubbling up; I caught it and made sure the audience heard his pleasure and delight. It was a love fest from then on. Angel and Con were mind-melded, Johnny was ecstatic, and Duncan was everyone's lover, everyone's confessor, everyone's voice. The audience danced, sang, and screamed for more; and I felt the music inside Duncan flex and stretch itself to meet them. I heard him at moments sing beyond himself. I saw it make him feel good. And for the first time I thought with utter certainty, *And so it begins.*



We didn't have to leave for San Diego until the following morning, so Jimmy arranged a kickoff party at a West Hollywood club he owned part interest in. I was pleased that many of the HOB crew turned up, and Jimmy filled the place with a nice blend of sincere music fans and gorgeous people with a clear interest in casual sex. And a couple of celebrities as well, to make us all feel shiny.

We had a table right next to the dance floor. People buzzed around us, *Fantastic show, Love the album, Oh my god that song makes me so hot.* Nice for the band: but right now was for us, so everyone was politely turned away while we drank and laughed and dissected the show.

I sat next to Con. Duncan was on his other side, still cranked on music: his eyes shone and his body wanted to

touch. I watched the crowd watching us, and said to Con, “So, is this how you imagined it when you were a kid?”

Con made the *huh* face, and then grinned. “The first band fantasy I ever had was that Tico Torres would get run over by the tour bus and I would be Bon Jovi’s new drummer.”

So unexpected, and so perfect: Duncan and I nearly fell out of our chairs laughing. Con went on, “Seriously. I loved those guys, I still do. And I could totally see myself in the really tight faded jeans and the hair—”

“Stop,” said Duncan, who was by now gasping for breath. A wonderful thing, to see him so abandoned to joy. He came out of his chair and straddled Con’s lap. “Please, mister rock star,” he said, “can I be your groupie tonight?”

“Get off,” Con laughed.

“Love to,” Duncan said, looking particularly wicked as he always did when he saw a chance to tweak Con, who was undoubtedly the straightest man on the planet.

“You’re a fucking pervert,” Con said with genuine love. “Get off me.” Duncan laughed and went back to his own chair.

“And what did you see yourself playing?” I said.

“Easy,” Con said, “Bad Medicine.”

“Oh, *god*,” I said, so surprised that I told the whole truth when they looked inquiringly at me. “I had sex for the first time because of that song.”

“And now you have to tell us all about it,” Duncan said.

There was no plate to look at, so I drained my drink instead. “Well,” I said, “I could never see myself in one of those high school couple things, you know? My best friends Gabriel and Tara... I was dying for them, but if I’d

hooked up with either one that would have been it—Mars is straight, Mars is gay, there's Mars in a box. I wanted it all.”

Duncan smiled.

“And I didn't have any idea what they wanted. We didn't know how to talk about it. So we just hung out a lot. Then there was a spring dance, and we decided we wouldn't get dates, we'd go together, no big deal.”

“Ah,” Duncan said. I could see him imagining me at sixteen.

“We danced all night. I thought it couldn't get any better. And then ‘Bad Medicine’ came on...”

And Tara gave a rebel yell, and Gabriel said *This song kicks ass*, and we were all three sweaty and loose and out of our minds on music; and although I'd had plenty of sex with myself and a thousand fantasies about them, it was the first time I was ever completely possessed by desire, so that I didn't care who saw or who knew. When we danced, I could see it was the same for them. The song let us say things with our bodies we couldn't say any other way, and we said them all.

“...and an hour later we were all three naked in Tara's basement,” I said. My body flared with the memory.

“Mmm,” Duncan said. He was watching me as if he could see it like a movie, me discovering myself on a dog-chewed rag rug with a beautiful girl and a beautiful boy.

“Your high school was a lot more interesting than mine,” Con said.

And I was suddenly sixteen again, reckless, standing on the edge of myself and burning to jump; so I took twenty dollars and my best smile up to the DJ.

I came back to the table. I took Lucky's hand and said, "Come on."

She looked at me and said, "Are you *dancing?*"

I smiled.

"Oh, yes," she said. Duncan looked a question at me, and it seemed to be a night for unplanned truths: I said, "I do music...and sometimes it does me."

The song began. Con dragged Jenny out to the dance floor, and then entered so fully into the moment that all he could do was jump up and down in place with an enormous grin while she laughed and clapped her hands. Angel gathered up a pair of women from the crowd and put himself in the middle. Johnny and Duncan stayed at the table: Johnny was cuddled up with the HOB lighting guy, a woman with luscious eyes and tattoos everywhere; and Duncan was watching, watching as I opened myself to the music.

*Oh, baby, you go,* Lucky said, and I turned it loose.

Danced. Surrendered my body to the music as completely as I would to a trusted lover, as I had at sixteen when music and sex and life were so raw, so exciting that I thought I would die of my own jackhammer heart. Tonight, as then, the music was lust and exuberance and joy in being alive, and it danced me down into the hot bright places of myself.

And then a hand on my shoulder; and I turned to find Duncan so close I could feel his heat through my own. It didn't matter that it was a bad idea: music opened my door and Duncan stepped inside, and we began to move with each other, for each other, close, close, never quite touching. We said things with our bodies we had never said before. We danced.

Then the song was done. The others leaned against each other laughing. Con said, "Now that's what I'm talking about!" And Duncan slid his hands around the back of my neck and tangled his fingers tight in my hair, brought his face close: in his eyes, clear hunger for me, and I was fiercely glad even as I thought *What have I done?* His body saying, *I want to make you move that way*, his hands hard on my head, his mouth nearly touching mine, as the end-game trembled between us.

He closed his eyes and took a rough breath. Another. Then looked at me and said in a low, harsh voice, "I can't lose my sound guy."

My turn to drag in a ragged breath; to feel desire twist in me like a brokeback snake. And in Duncan's eyes a flash of anger and pain so brief I wasn't sure I'd really seen it, as his face set, as he very deliberately took his hands off me and turned and walked away.

"Hey," Angel called after him, "where you going?"

Duncan said, in a flat voice, "To find someone to fuck."

Heat came up into my neck and face. I took a breath, folded my arms. Lucky's expression smoothed into marble. Johnny stopped kissing the lighting guy, shot a questioning look in Duncan's direction, and transferred it to me.

Across the room, a table of fans fluttered as Duncan approached. He knelt by a woman and spoke briefly into her ear, then gave her his most disarming smile. She grinned and shrugged in a way I understood very well.

I turned my back on all of it and headed for the bar.

Lucky caught up to me. "What was that?" she said.

"What?" I said, as flat as Duncan.

"No bullshit on my tour, Mars, not even from you," she said. "What was that?"

“That was me getting turned down in front of half of Los Angeles, so you can relax about the fucking tour.”

She sighed. “Well, as your tour manager, I’m relieved. As your friend...” She put a hand on my arm. “I’m so sorry.”

I nodded and went on alone to the bar, where the first thing I did was bump into someone and spill her drink.

I took a breath. “I’m sorry. Let me get you another.”

“No damage done,” she said, and laugh lines crinkled around her eyes. “Glenmorangie.”

“Nice,” I said. I made it clear I wasn’t only talking about the brand. When I brought our drinks back, she said, “Will you let me buy the next round?”

“That depends,” I said. “Are you affiliated with the music industry in any way?”

“Not at all,” she said. “Am I about to be disappointed?”

“Not at all is exactly the right answer,” I said. We talked and drank. I forgot her name immediately, but she had a nice laugh. I was glad to find later that she tasted like ten-year-old Scotch all over. I did my best to get drunk on her.



Johnny got me aside the next morning and said, “Are you okay?”

“Sure,” I said, in the way that means *Why wouldn’t I be?* He let it go, but he was watching. Everyone was. I knew the rules: I sucked it up, did my work, and stayed cheerful.

Duncan and I couldn’t avoid each other on a thirty-five foot bus. We were polite and superficial and careful not to touch for several days. Finally, on the road to Houston, I argued with the band about the live mix of “Kill Me Now” and Duncan said, “Okay, you’re the sound

guy, we'll do it your way," and ran his hand down my arm. He gave me time to see it coming, and I was ready: I smiled just like the old days. Everyone started to relax. And if I became thinner, if I padded up to the front of the bus most nights for quiet 2 a.m. conversations with Carlton the driver because I couldn't sleep, that was my business. Everyone pretended not to notice, the same way they didn't acknowledge that Duncan now sang the angry songs with more bite.

Touring became its own surreal rhythm. We moved from one place to another in a giant bubble of bus and music and the ecstasy of strangers—in the concerts as the band took them with song, in hotel rooms or the lounge at the back of the bus as Johnny or Duncan or Angel took them another way. Sometimes the bus reeked of sweat and sex. Sometimes it seemed to float down the road on a foam of music, whether from the entertainment system in the front lounge or from the band themselves: they liked to play, in all senses of the word, so we'd get everything from Little Richard to the Cure to wicked parodies of Heroes in roughly fifty-mile chunks. Sometimes the bus was a movable feast of conversation fueled by wine and wonder at the sudden turn the world had taken. Sometimes it was a pressure cooker, irritation between people building like steam. It made us harder, more wild, less fit for the regular world. Long days, arguments like squalls that rose suddenly and blew out fast, the fatigue that made people drop expensive equipment, the used needle in the bathroom one afternoon that sent Lucky ballistic; the bad food, the good food, the absolute bliss of a hot shower; the load-outs that seemed unending, the numbing fatigue of one more mile on the bus, the disorientation of waking



up someplace different yet again: these things became the stuff of everyday.

But the night. The music. The house heaves with people; the air is thick with their anticipation, their alcohol and musk, the human static of their colliding conversations. When the guitar tech tunes, when I set the mics, the people watch us with a frankness they would never show on the street, as if they could climb into our lives if they only stare hard enough. We're the foreplay; we walk the stage like runway models, racehorses, expert and arrogant and intent, and we stroke your anticipation with every move we make. And when you are ready, when you're panting for it, the band comes to you with hands of music and touches you with heat and hope and joy, with all they know of being human, and it's so big you can't contain it all: you sing and dance and scream it back to them. And then they give you more. Back and forth, back and forth. Ecstasy.

Touching the music was like flying; then came the hard landing of getting back on the bus. The music that scoured and seduced me came on board with Duncan; spun in his eyes, made him smell better, made him move like sex. Made him more elemental every night, so that it took him more effort to ground himself—with food, alcohol, touching everyone in sight, long conversations, dancing, sex—until finally his restless body would quiet and his eyes would be all his again.

Sex was never a problem; fans would have taken numbers and lined up naked in the snow if they thought it would get him naked too, or even just unzipped. But for the rest, he wanted people he trusted to bring him back safely to himself. It was just too fucking ironic that I turned

out to be the one who did it best. Johnny and Angel and Con had their own unwinding to do. Lucky wasn't that sympathetic. Jenny was too young to read the cues right; I'm not even sure she understood that the Duncan who came offstage wasn't entirely sane, and I began keeping her with me after shows until I could be fairly sure he was out of the building: when the music was in him, he was a little too ready to explore whatever caught his attention, whatever made him curious.

It started after the Atlanta show. The equipment truck was already on the road; the rest of us waited in the bus for Duncan. The doors were closed against the dozens of fans crowded outside, but we could hear their raised voices; their need crackled in the air, and every so often the bus rocked slightly under their pressure. *Where the fuck is he?* Lucky muttered every five minutes, looking at her watch.

Then the crowd turned almost as one, the way a flock flies, and there was Duncan wandering across the parking lot, his arm slung around a young man who looked moonstruck and walked a little sprung. The crowd enfolded them, begging for a touch, an autograph, a moment of connection: they looked at the young man as if they might chew him into small pieces just to suck the taste of Duncan off his skin.

Duncan pounded on the bus door. Carlton opened it and watched in fascination as Duncan smoothed the young man's hair out of his eyes, said *Bye now* and kissed him. From the crowd, *ohhhh*, and then renewed cries of *Duncan! Duncan!* as he climbed onto the bus. The young man never said a word, just stood wide-eyed as we pulled away and left him with the others in the dark.

“Can I talk to you?” Lucky called. Duncan came over to the small table where Lucky and I sat playing backgammon and stood behind my chair.

“You’re late,” Lucky said.

“I promise it was worth it,” he said in a playful voice.

“We wait for you because we have to,” Lucky said, “and it’s fucking rude to take advantage of it.”

Silence. Then Duncan slid his hands under the collar of my shirt and began absently to rub my neck. Lucky and I exchanged a look; hers said, *Are you going to make him stop?* But I didn’t; I could feel energy passing between us, as if he were hooking a rope into me and pulling himself up from someplace deep. And indeed, after a moment he said to Lucky, in a different tone, “I’m sorry, you’re right. I’ll do better.”

“Thank you,” Lucky said.

Duncan became aware of his hands on me, and stilled. I put one hand over his so he wouldn’t spook and fall back down the well. He smoothed his palms across my shoulders; stepped back and gave a little shake. Then he was able to sit, drink a bottle of water, kibitz on the game while the last of the music evaporated out of him. Every once in a while he would lean against me to get a better view, or put a hand on mine to help me shake the dice, and each time a small burst like static electricity shocked through me and then disappeared.

Eventually he stood and stretched, and took a deep breath. “Maybe I can actually get some sleep,” he said. He looked at me as if turning a question over in his mind; but all he said was, “Thank you, Mars.”

“You’re welcome,” I said, and shook the last small bit of his music out of my hands to show I understood.

After that, he found his way to me more and more often after shows. He seemed to simply need to put his hands on me, and I let him. “Because it helps him,” I said to Lucky one day as we sat on a platform in a club in St. Louis, sharing a meatball sub. “And because I’m pathetic.”

“I don’t get you two at all,” she said. “But you’re right, it does help. If you can keep it up...because he’s...”

I nodded. We both knew he was going deeper down into himself with nearly every show.

Lucky said, “Don’t get into trouble.”

I bit into my sandwich.

“I mean it, Mars. I’m not even worried about the tour right now. Fuck the tour and fuck Noir and fuck Duncan Black.” She licked sauce off her fingers. “Just be careful.”



Chicago, Indianapolis, Detroit. People blogged, word spread, and Jimmy began getting inquiries and adding more dates. Memphis, Little Rock. Boston, where Noir opened for Superstition and brought it home to fifteen thousand people.

I don’t care much for New York, but the Bowery Ballroom is one of my favorite venues: excellent PA, great sightlines, a perfect room for Noir’s brand of intimacy. On the strength of the out-of-town response, Jimmy had already added two more shows the following week, and flown in from the west coast. To oversee the publicity, he said: I figured he had a girlfriend in New York and saw a chance to get tax-deductibly laid.

He took us out for a very nice lunch. Business talk: future bookings, a possible new t-shirt design, media oppor-

tunities. Towards the end of the meal, he said to Duncan, “So, Mr. B, hoping you can do me a favor.”

“What’s up?” was all Duncan said, but he was amused; the corner of his mouth and the slightest narrowing of his eyes gave him away. I’m sure Jimmy had no idea, but it was clear to me. I thought *How do I know him so well?* and hoped someday it might feel like enough.

“Catalina Burnett,” Jimmy said, and nodded as if that were the whole conversation.

Duncan made a questioning face.

“Pop music,” Con said politely.

“Pop *tart*,” Angel said, less so.

“Great girl,” Jimmy said. “Just great. Working on a new album now, trying to make her move to something a little more...” He made a *you know* gesture. Everyone nodded. We did. Pop music these days, the audience loves you until you’re twenty-two, or they are. It’s very sad when people try to hang on longer than that.

Jimmy went on, “Her manager called me today. Catty loves your stuff, she’s coming to the show tonight, and she is hoping that you—” an eyebrow to Duncan “—will take her to dinner afterwards. On me, naturally,” he added.

“Oh, Jesus, Jimmy,” Duncan said. “Do I have to?”

“Is she one of the ones who runs around in no underwear?” Johnny said. “I’ll take her to dinner.”

“She wants our boy here,” Jimmy said. “Her guy thinks hanging out with the summer’s hottest indie rock singer will send the message that she’s serious about this new direction. And no, you don’t have to, but I’d really like this guy to owe me a favor. So maybe...”

Duncan made a strangled noise, but he knew what to say: Jimmy had done a lot for Noir. “Okay,” he said.

“Fine.” He looked at Lucky. “Will you make a mercy call at midnight and reel me in?”

“You have to be *really* nice to me,” she said.

He always loved it when she started a round of the game: I wondered if he knew it was one of the ways she managed him. “That’ll be fun,” he said, looking devilish. She smiled and waved him off.

“Great,” Jimmy said, and actually patted Duncan’s arm. “Great. I’ll get a car, I’ll get a reservation, I’ll arrange the tab. You get her there and back and make sure she has a nice time. Thanks, Duncan, really.” And off he went, on cell phone to his beleaguered assistant before he was halfway to the restaurant door.

“Oh, god,” Duncan said.

“When’s the last time you went on an actual date?”

I said.

“Oh, *god*,” he said.



Jimmy turned up at front of house at ten to eight with people in tow: two big guys in muscle t-shirts, and a medium-tall girl with big dark hair and big dark eyes, short skirt, and not an ounce of spare fat. She looked like a cold would kill her.

“Mars, this is Catalina Burnett,” Jimmy said. “Catty, Mars is the best front of house in the business.”

“Uh huh,” Catalina said in my general direction.

Jimmy said, “Catty doesn’t like the VIP room, she wants to watch the show down here.” And raised a pleading eyebrow.

“Sure,” I said, “come on in.” I lowered the security rope so she could step up onto the platform. Her guys gave me hard looks on principle and took up posts on the floor.

“Okay, great,” Jimmy said. “Catty, you go on back to the VIP room when the show’s over, Duncan will meet you there, okay?”

“Okay,” she said. Her attention was fixed on the stage, where Jenny was making final equipment checks. Jimmy left with a grateful look to me.

“Who’s she?” Catalina said in the direction of the stage. It took me a moment to work out that she was talking to me.

“That’s the monitor guy,” I said.

“She’s not a *guy*,” Catalina said.

“No,” I agreed.

“Is she Duncan’s girlfriend?” she said.

“Just a second, I’ll ask her,” I said. I clicked my headset. “Jen?”

On stage, Jenny tilted her head and clicked her belt pack. “Yeah?”

“Catalina Burnett would like to know if you’re Duncan’s girlfriend.”

Jenny burst out laughing, to the interest of the people on the floor.

“I think that’s a no,” I said to Catalina, and clicked off. Jenny was peering from the stage, trying to get a look at Catalina. Audience heads turned. Catalina stood up straighter; but she wasn’t much more than a curiosity to this crowd, although I guessed some of them were speculating about the underwear. I already knew she wasn’t wearing any.

Jenny finished her checks and went backstage, still chuckling. Two minutes later, my headset clicked, and Duncan said in my ear, “Tell me she didn’t really say that.”

“Mmm,” I said.

“Shit,” he said.

“And tell Johnny he called it,” I said.

It took him a few seconds to work it out. “Just kill me now,” he said, in such a world-weary tone that I couldn’t help laughing.

There was a pause on his end. “I like to make you do that,” he said, and clicked off.



Lucky took pity and called him fifteen minutes early, and we were all waiting in the bar when he got back.

“Someone please get me a fucking drink,” he said.

“You look a little rumpled there, hoss,” Angel said. “Did she take advantage of you?”

“She showed him her underwear,” Lucky said.

“She’s two years old,” Duncan said. “She’s about as interesting as a boiled egg. She doesn’t even write her own songs. She wants me to help her,” and here he did a lethal imitation, “write some totally *dirty* rock and roll, you know?” He shuddered. “Don’t even talk to me about her underwear, I was lucky to get out of the limo alive. I’d have to be seriously fucked up to go there.” His beer arrived and he drank half of it in one swallow.

“I want to be the singer for a while,” Angel said. “I don’t have your scruples about emotional intelligence.”

“Be my guest,” Duncan said. “Cause I gotta tell you, it’s getting a little unreal.”



Mae West spoke from Duncan's jacket pocket: *Come up and see me*. Duncan fished out his cell phone, checked the caller ID, and answered. "Jimmy, I am never doing that again, okay?" He winced and pulled the phone from his ear. I could hear Jimmy's excited voice from my seat across the table.

"The hotel bar," Duncan said. "Okay." He closed the phone. "Jimmy's coming over."

Jimmy zoomed in about ten minutes later, vibrating with news. "Okay, okay, check this out. I got a guy works for F-tech, let me know a while back they're in development on emotionally-centered tech. Feelings and shit?" He didn't notice the amused look from Johnny, or Lucky's eyes roll: Jimmy was jazzed. "So he brought his VP Marketing to the show tonight." He stopped, hands spread, eyebrows up, as if to say *There!*

"Okay..." Johnny said.

Jimmy raised a suffering look to heaven. "She loved it, she loves you guys, she loves the emotional connection you make with the crowd, e-mo-tional, are you with me now? F-tech wants to talk about Noir pilot-testing a concert rig." He ticked off points on the fingers of one hand: "Worldwide media exposure. More audience. Fame. Money. More money." He spread his hands again. "She wants to meet on Monday. I'll send a car at one, be ready, okay?"

Everyone was silent for a moment: Jimmy took that as his cue to stand.

Con said, "Hang on, Jimmy, give me a second to catch up. They want to put people in our heads?"

"They want the crowd to plug into you guys and know what it feels like to be a rock star on stage in front of a

bazillion people, which is where you'll be pretty damn quick if you can pull this off. Look, get some sleep, this broad will explain everything Monday, okay? I got someone waiting." And off he zoomed.

Silence at the table until Johnny said, "Wow." Duncan was blank-faced, clearly wandering some corner of his internal landscape. Angel and Con looked at each other, shrugged. "Guess we'll see," Angel said.



The next morning, Johnny made sure that ten copies of the *New York Post* were delivered to Duncan's room, all open to Page Six: *Pop Princess In Private Duet With Rock's Rising Star* under a photo of Duncan and Catalina getting into the limo.

They'd caught Duncan with his mouth open. He looked like a gaffed fish. The band came back from the F-tech meeting looking very much the same.

"So?" I said.

"It's insane," Johnny said, and told me how much F-tech were offering them to pilot the technology. "Small venue, our choice, any date in the next month, full set, plus we accommodate all reasonable media requests. And we get an option to continue repping the tech if everybody thinks it's a good idea."

"Free equipment," Angel said, and I wondered if he was thinking of other uses for it after the shows. Maybe it showed on my face: he shrugged, grinned as if to say *Why not?* It was a measure of the difference success had already made to him that he didn't look at all embarrassed.

"I don't know," Con said. "I don't want strangers in my head."

“It’s not like that,” Johnny said, as if he’d already said it five times in the last hour.

“What’s it like?” I said.

He shifted restlessly. “They say it’s like—okay, I come out for the start of the show, I put on the guitar.” He made a motion of settling the guitar against his body. “But I’m aware of the audience, they’re like this—” and here he turned his palms up, fingers spread wide, and I noticed, as I sometimes did, how sensual his hands were, even more than Duncan’s. Sometimes I wondered about Johnny’s hands. I felt Duncan’s attention: I raised my eyebrow a millimeter and he looked away.

“—this pressure,” Johnny was saying, pushing the air toward himself with those hands. “And at the same time I’m checking in with all these guys... it’s like I’m focused and wide open at the same time.” He spread his hands as if laying the moment on the table. “And when they’re plugged in to me, that’s what they’ll feel.”

“Wow,” I said. Then to Duncan, “What do you think?”

“I’m curious,” he said, and I knew he’d have to have it now, regardless of Con’s concerns. “But I don’t really know,” he went on. “We’ll find out tomorrow.”

Johnny said, “They want us to do a test run.”

Angel said, “We want you to come.”

“Okay...” I said, and I’m sure *What for?* was clear in my voice.

“So you can tell us what it’s really like,” Duncan said.

“Fine,” I said. “I’m curious too.”



Angel and Johnny brought their own instruments. F-tech had rented a basic backline package with a tech and

engineer for everything else. The engineer was territorial, or maybe he thought he was auditioning: either way, there was nothing for me to do but join Jimmy and the company brass and seventy-five or so F-tech employees on the warehouse floor, the largest space in the building.

It took about ten minutes to hook up the band. The rig was wireless so that Johnny and especially Duncan could prowl the stage as usual. They all seemed to settle into it easily, and apart from the glint of mesh through their hair, and the single lead under the left ear, there wasn't much to see.

A man came around with a box of receiver headgear and a smile; he had a lovely mouth, and I smiled back. And again felt Duncan's attention.

"Can I help you with that?" the man said.

"Absolutely," I said, and bent my head so he could fit the gear. He was meticulous. It took a while. His fingers felt good in my hair. Then he handed me the selector that allowed access to each band member, and gave me a thorough demonstration. It was nice to be intrigued by someone's touch.

"Are you a Noir fan?" I said.

"Absolutely," he said, and smiled to let me know he had matched my language on purpose. I've always liked smart.

"Would you like to be my guest at tomorrow's show?" I said.

"You have tickets?" he said.

"I have the best spot in the house," I said, and explained. He said he looked forward to it, and I found I did too; it felt both good and very, very sad, and when I looked again toward Duncan I found him watching me as if he knew that I was beginning to leave him.

“Let’s get started,” a stick-thin woman said in a voice that bounced in the echo chamber of the concrete warehouse. Every musically conscious person in the room winced, imagining the clatter to come. I felt for the engineer.

The woman nodded to the guy at the F-tech console, and he hit the switch that turned us all on. Duncan gave Johnny, Angel and Con a look that said *Here we go*; and turned to us and said, “Can you feel me now?”

And with the words came a rush of Duncan that may have been all in my brain but seemed to slide down my body, to stream under my skin; and as Johnny played the first chord of “Walk Me Home” I felt Duncan’s adrenaline and curiosity and a hum of excited tension; and then, as he reached for the first note, a blast of longing that was the essential story of the song. Many in the audience gasped; and I felt Duncan’s deep pleasure in the power to make us feel his music, to make us feel him.

I dialed through them all. Their making the music danced in and out of my hearing it, so that I could feel the musician woven into the song, and it wasn’t like being in them at all. They were in me: Johnny’s clear joy and the sensual connection between his hands and the guitar; Con’s astonishing architectural sense of the beat that made each song something he built around him; Angel’s strength of will, and the equal strength of his hands on four strings with which he could open the way to any kind of music. Duncan in me in a way I never dreamed, his music so powerful now that it planted itself in front of my internal door and banged with heavy fists, *Let me in, let me in.*

They played three songs, an emotional range from yearning to anger to a nuanced dissection of love, and

when they were done the small audience erupted in big noise and clustered around them, excited, fizzing, wanting nothing more than to maintain the connection. All in the middle of the day in a cavernous room under nasty fluorescent lights. “Fuck me,” Jimmy said, “this is gonna be huge.”

On the platform, Duncan shook yet another person’s hand, turned, and stumbled. Angel caught him. By the time Jimmy and I got there, Duncan was sitting on the edge of the platform with the stick woman peering at him, while Diego of the interesting mouth demonstrated his smarts again by fetching a bottle of water and a damp paper towel.

I knelt by Duncan. “Are you okay?”

He put his hands on my shoulders and touched his forehead to mine, like an exhausted runner leaning on a wall after the end of a race. Only three songs, but the music poured into me: I’d felt how quickly the channel opened in him, how wide. He did a brief internal check and nodded. “I think so. I just got dizzy.” He took the towel from Diego and wiped his face.

Stick Woman said, “Diego, please ask Dr. Nuccio to come down.”

Duncan said, “I don’t need a doctor. I’m fine.”

“I have to insist,” Stick said. “That’s an unusual reaction. We need to make sure you’re okay.”

“I’m fucking fine,” Duncan said; the music talking.

Diego did his best not to smile; Stick didn’t blink. “I’m sure you are,” she said, “but—”

I touched her shoulder. “Can I speak to you for a moment?”

She didn't like it, but she let me lead her a few steps away. "Send a doctor over tomorrow if you really need to," I said. "If you push it now, you'll lose him."

Stick pursed her mouth. Considered. "Fine," she said: then, to Jimmy, "Call me."

Behind her, Diego mouthed to me *See you tomorrow*.



"That marketing woman is such a bitch," Duncan said back in the hotel bar, a propos of nothing. We all looked at him. He moved restlessly beside me in the booth. His hand had been glued to my arm for twenty minutes; it didn't seem to be helping.

"You liked her fine yesterday," Johnny said.

"Whatever," Duncan said. When it became clear he wasn't going to say more, the conversation turned in another direction. I said quietly, "Are you okay?"

"Fine," he said shortly. "I just..." He moved restlessly again. "Who's the guy at F-tech?"

"Diego," I said. "He's coming to the show tomorrow."

Without warning, Duncan took his hand off my arm and put it under the back of my shirt. He pressed his fingertips into my skin. Bruises tomorrow, I thought, and said, "Take it easy."

The pressure eased: then he leaned close and said, his expression cool and interested, "So you have plans for the delicious Diego?"

"Maybe," I said.

A pause: then he said, "Could you feel me today?"

I'd already told them what it was like. Now I said only, "The technology works."

"Did you like having me inside you?" he said.

A different kind of bruise. I didn't know what to say.

His hand climbed a little higher and dug in again.

"Did you like it?"

"Yes," I said. "Now get your fucking hand off me."

"I wanted to feel it too," he said, and ran his finger down my back as he slid his hand from under my shirt.

"Let me out," I said to Johnny on my other side. I think everyone assumed I was on my way to the bathroom; we hadn't even had our food yet. In the safety of my room, I sat on the bed and wondered what the hell was going on. Then I called F-tech and invited Diego to dinner that night.

The Gramercy Tavern has a lovely wine list. Diego rolled the elegant Priorat in his elegant mouth, said *Mmm*, and then asked how Duncan was doing.

"He's actually been a little odd," I said. "Maybe your boss should get that doctor around tomorrow."

He looked concerned. "I hope there's no problem," he said. "Today was a great success. Everyone's excited. I liked their music before, but now it feels..." He couldn't find the words; he put a hand to his heart instead. "I wasn't sure it would work," he went on. "Did you know we had a couple other bands in before Noir?"

I shook my head, drank more wine.

"Very disappointing," he said. "With F-tech, you can tell when people are just going through the motions. One of those bands is really big right now, but they didn't... convince us. But your guys..." He smiled. "Not scared of putting it out there. Very engaged with the music. Very passionate."

"You like passionate?" I asked.

"Very much," he said, and we looked at each other a long moment; then smiled and lifted our glasses again, the



evening's course settled between us. Anticipation would be the spice of the next few hours.

Diego said, "I think I should tell you that Duncan Black called me about an hour after you did and asked me to dinner."

"Did he?" I said, as if it were the most common thing in the world, as if my radar were not suddenly on red. "Well, I'm very glad you're having dinner with me."

"I am too," he said, and we moved on to other topics; and then to the rooftop bar at the Delancey; and then to his small apartment, where he was indeed very passionate. A nice person who took his time, who enjoyed himself and me equally: as I rode back to the hotel in the early morning sun, I thought it was real enough. But even as I still smelled Diego on my skin, I also felt Duncan's finger down my spine: *Did you like having me inside you?*

I do better on no sleep than too little, so I showered and changed clothes and went to breakfast. I read the *Post* over my eggs and bacon, and found Duncan's picture again on Page Six, kissing a woman outside a club. *Noir's Duncan Black and friend at Arlene's Grocery. Is the Catalina out of the bag?*

"At least it's a better picture," Johnny said as he took a seat at my table.

"Maybe it'll get her off his back," I said. "The way he is right now, honestly, he shouldn't be let out around the young and deeply stupid."

Johnny nodded. "He's in a place." He studied the menu and said, a little too casually, "Any ideas about why?"

"No," I said.

Johnny looked at me. "Really," I said, "I don't know. Except I think it got a little worse yesterday." But I didn't

tell him that Duncan had left marks on my back, or that he had tried to put himself between me and Diego.

The waiter came over with coffee. Johnny ordered a Belgian waffle.

“God,” I said, “aren’t you a little old to be living on sugar and caffeine?” He smiled and drank his coffee; then put down the cup and said, “Do you think we should cancel the F-tech show?”

“Jimmy would have a fit,” I said.

“I’m not asking Jimmy, I’m asking you. Do you think he can handle it?”

I drank my own coffee. I finally said, “I don’t know.”



I’d invited Diego to show up early if he was interested in how things worked behind the scenes. I gave him the full tour. The house was filling up already—the first show had received orgasmic reviews—and when we walked the stage, Diego stopped in front of Duncan’s mic and looked out at the crowd for a long moment. “It must be a hell of a feeling,” he said.

We ran into Johnny and Duncan talking in the hall outside the green room. “You guys remember Diego from F-tech,” I said.

“Heya,” Johnny said, and Duncan gave Diego a *target acquired* smile and said, “I hope you had a good night?”

“Thank you, we did,” Diego said, and touched my arm. It was fun to see him score the point, but I wished he hadn’t done it, especially when Duncan looked at me in a way I’d never seen before: as if I were a problem to be solved.



It was a strange show; Duncan brought a storm of music to the stage and battered the audience with it again and again. The songs were edgy, violent, wickedly exciting. The music rode him like a loa and he gave himself up to it completely. The audience was frantic with wanting him, wanting the music, wanting more. I wasn't sure for a while that they would let it end.

Lucky stopped by the console after the show. I had just introduced her to Diego when Jenny came from backstage. When I saw Jenny's face, I said to Diego, "Will you please excuse us for a few minutes?"

"I'll be in the bar," he said. He gave Jenny a concerned look as he left.

"What is it?" Lucky said gently.

Jenny looked at the floor for a time. Then she wiped her eyes, took a deep breath and said, "I went to pack up the earpieces like I always do, and Duncan was there..."

"Go on," Lucky said after a moment, her voice a little less gentle.

"I've always had this huge crush on him," Jenny said.

Lucky's face was like a statue. I said, "Tell us what happened."

Jenny crossed her arms and hugged herself. "We were in that little alcove with the gear, and he was being so nice, saying Mars raves about you, and...he kissed me." She regained enough poise to look at us with a wry face. "He's *really* good at it. I just dissolved. And the next thing I knew, I was up on one of the cases and..." Her face was red. "It wasn't exactly private. At least one person came

in...I said let's go somewhere else and he said too late, and did I want him to stop? But I...I didn't." She bit her lip.

Lucky and I exchanged a look. I said, "And then?"

"I don't know, he just...he said tell Mars it's my fault you got held up. And kissed me again and said he'd see me later."

Lucky put her hand on Jenny's shoulder. "Did he make you do anything?"

Jenny surprised us both by saying, "He made me come so hard I nearly screamed. No, he didn't, whatever, force me. I wanted to. I just feel so *stupid*." She shook her head. "Right in front of everyone like that. I can't even hardly look at people. And how am I going to be on the bus with him? Jesus."

Lucky produced a tissue from one of her pockets. I said, "Will you be okay?"

Jenny nodded. "This is life on the road, I get that. It's just...it was *Duncan*." She might have been six years old, saying *Christmas*.

"Duncan's an *asshole*," Lucky said.



Duncan opened his hotel room door and smiled when he saw me. Not the nicest smile. Music churned in his eyes, and the strange, edgy energy he'd had on stage curled off him like smoke, but I had built up too much steam of my own to care: I pushed past him into the small hallway of his room and wheeled on him as he closed the door.

"What is your fucking problem?" I said.

He relaxed against the wall next to me and waited, looking interested.

I said, as evenly as I could manage, “I do not have time in the middle of a tour to train someone new. I’m going to have to nurse her through however long it takes her to get over it, and hope to Christ she does.”

He said, “Oh, come on, she loved it. She couldn’t get her panties off fast enough.” He smiled as if replaying a particularly vivid memory.

I said, “She’s Con’s *sister*, you son of a bitch. She’s been crazy about you since she was fifteen, and as soon as her head stops spinning she’s going to realize you treated her like a washcloth. You think she’s going to love it then? Get real.”

He laughed, a brief sound with no warmth; and I said, “I don’t even know you anymore.”

He looked at me in silence with eyes of wild music; then said, “We can’t have that. We need to get to know each other again.”

It sounded so reasonable for a moment, until he said, “I know. Let’s dance.” He said *dance* in a deliberate, freighted way that put us right back in that night in LA; and when he saw that I understood, he put his hands on my head to hold me in place and closed the distance between us slowly, slowly. Gave me time to see it coming. Endgame. Time to hear again Jenny say *He’s really good at it* and imagine what I was about to feel; to realize that even after everything, I didn’t want to leave; to find myself flooded with wanting as he pressed his body against me, slowly, as he slowly put his mouth on mine.

We never closed our eyes. All through the hungry searching kiss I stared into the music, and it stared into me. When Duncan put his hands on my body, when I put my hands on his, I felt the music roiling through his skin

into mine. Slow music. Seismic. Lost myself in it as his hands wandered *adagio* here and there; until one hand slipped into my jeans, and he smiled slowly as the hand found what it wanted, as I drew sharp breath.

He whispered, "Say please."

I stared at him. He bit my jaw lightly and whispered, "Say it."

I shook my head *no*.

"Oh, right, you don't beg," he said, and moved his hand slowly in just the right way, and I made a sound. He laughed. I found enough voice to whisper, "Fuck you."

He smiled a lazy smile, a nothing-but-time smile. "That's the plan," he said, "as soon as you say please. Don't you want to play?" He moved his hand again. "It feels like you do."

Some small part of me that wasn't swamped in sensation was screaming *Pay attention!* My talent, to hear the heart of the matter.

*Oh*, I thought, *oh*.

Duncan kept his hand stroking slowly, and put his teeth to my neck, and began marking me. It was so erotic that the room went dim for me for a long moment; and then I took a ragged breath and pulled his head away from my neck, held him where I could see him. Thought, *Mars, if you have any courage, find it now*. And said, "Duncan, this isn't a game to me. This is *real*." I put my mouth on his and said it again, *real*: and kissed him with the word, kissed him slow, kissed him and his beautiful cruel music, and it was like kissing my self in someone else's body. Everything stood still. No breath, no heartbeat, only the *real* of me against him.

His breath caught. His heart pounded against my chest. He stared deep into me. And began to move his hand differently, playing me now like music, lingering, learning me as I shook against him; and I said, *God, Duncan*, and threw the door inside myself wide open. I let him see that in my most private places he would always find himself. I gave him my pride and my talent and my daily joys. I gave him his touch on me that was music, and my touch on his music that was sex. I gave him all my vast longing. All the things that make me Mars. And in his eyes the music receded, and instead there was something like discovery, like recognition: I felt him shake with it, he said *Mars*, and then his mouth fierce on my mouth, my hands on his hips pulling him close, and someone knocked on the door.

It made us both start, and then sag against each other, gasping. I willed whoever it was to drop dead.

They knocked again, harder.

Duncan turned his head toward the door and said aloud, in the roughest voice I'd ever heard him use, "Go the fuck away."

Silence from outside. Then, "Duncan? It's Catalina." A murmur of voices, and she went on, "I've got my songs. And a present."

Duncan looked at me; and with no warning, the connection between us snapped like a bone under too much stress, and his eyes were once again full of mad music. He said, "Aren't you just dying to hear her dirty rock and roll songs?" with such light, ironic loathing that I flinched. A breath. Two. Then he called to the door, "Give me a minute." He said it cold. And pulled his hand carelessly out of

my jeans and began working open his fly as his other hand went to the back of my head.

For a moment I didn't believe it was happening; and then I thought *No, not like this, after what I just gave you!* and inside me everything slammed closed. I shoved him hard. He fell back against the opposite wall, swore viciously, and began to straighten his clothes as I went for the door.

Catalina and a young man stood in the hallway. The young man held a shopping bag with several bottles of champagne. He was beautiful, nervous, excited. Catalina wore a low-cut top and had, bright eyes. "I hope you weren't busy," she said to Duncan in what she probably thought was a sexy voice; then whatever she saw in my face made her step out of my way.

I heard Duncan say, his voice utterly smooth now, "Kitty-Catalina, you look good enough to eat."

"That's totally part of the present," Catalina said.

"Mmm," Duncan said. "Who's your friend?"

"This is Tyler," Catalina said. "He's the other part."

And I couldn't help it; I turned. Duncan regarded me as remotely as if he were an image beamed from light-years away. Then he let the beautiful girl and the beautiful boy into his room and closed the door.



I don't remember going back to the club. I don't remember what I said to Diego. I don't remember finishing my work. I ended up in some bar with Johnny, his guitar tech, and one of the riggers. About three hours after I left Duncan, my cell phone rang. I turned it off without looking at the caller ID. Ten seconds later, Johnny's cell phone



played Audioslave. He answered. Listened. Then said to the table, "Anybody here seen Mars?"

I shook my head.

"Nope," Johnny said into the phone, and "Sure," and ended the call and looked a question at me. "He sounded strange," he said.

"Did he," I said.

"Everything okay?"

The guitar tech was watching with great interest. The rigger grinned. "This round's on me," I said, and went up to the bar.

It was almost okay as long as I kept drinking; but eventually I had to go to the bathroom, and on my way back some drunk asshole tripped over his own feet and spilled his beer on me, and I called him a drunk asshole. He said *Fuck you* and shoved past me and was clearly surprised when I drove my elbow into his gut. He dropped the rest of his beer with a wheeze. Some things happened: then Johnny took me to Emergency and sat with me in the treatment room while the doctor F-teched me and found the problem with my ribs. He taped them. He stitched up my split eyebrow and temple and the gash over my collarbone, and F-teched me again. "I think that's all," he said. "But alcohol masks certain kinds of pain." Then he argued with me about making an appointment to get the stitches out.

"I don't even know what state I'll be in," I said. "I'll just take them out myself. It won't be the first time."

"You could make it worse," he said, and shook his head in disapproval when I laughed bitterly. Johnny looked sad and worried.

We traveled in silence back toward the hotel. The taxi spun its way through the wet streets and raindrops ran like tears down the windows. “We have to talk about it,” Johnny finally said. “I have to ask. You and Duncan...”

“Were interrupted,” I finally said.

He said, “Jesus, Mars—”

“It was him,” I said.

His frustration changed to wariness. “What do you mean?”

“I mean I didn’t start it. One minute we were arguing, and the next minute he had me up against the wall, and he was very serious. Very.” I waved my hand to show I wasn’t going there now.

Silence.

“Shit,” Johnny said. “Then what happened?”

“Catalina Burnett turned up with a rent boy and a gallon of champagne. And Duncan...did something that made me not want to be there anymore.”

“He fucked Catalina Burnett?” Johnny said, as if I’d said something impossible. “What’s going on?”

“There’s more.” I took a breath. “He got to Jenny.”

Johnny gave me a disbelieving look. I nodded. “After the show. He was waiting for her. I think he knew it would get me to his room.”

“*Shit*,” he said, and was quiet for another three blocks. He finally said, “I’ve played music with him nearly half our lives. I’ve never seen him like this.” He rubbed his eyes as if it would make things more clear. “Why would he...he’s worked so hard to keep you.”

I didn’t know what he meant. I didn’t really care.

“You don’t get it, do you?” he said. “He never turns down people he likes. Never. We lost our first bassist be-

cause Duncan wouldn't say no. But you he says no to. So why, except he doesn't want you to go away?"

"He's got a hell of a way of showing it," I said, and then the fight went out of me and all I could do was lean against the window and say, "Something's wrong with him. You guys need to do something." I felt again Duncan's hands on me the way I'd so long wanted, I saw the music in his eyes, and that other thing that might have been recognition, that might almost have been joy until I saw it break inside him, I saw it break; and I said, "Johnny, he needs help," and my voice broke, too.

He said, "What about you? Are you okay?"

I didn't answer.

"Jesus," Johnny said, "please be okay. Please don't leave us, Mars."

Leave. Step away from Duncan and the music. Or stay, with the meaning of this night between us.

"Please," Johnny said.

I shook my head *I don't know, I don't know*, and I didn't speak again; not even when Lucky dashed out of the hotel bar as we walked into the lobby and saw my face and said, "Did that son of a bitch do that?" in a voice I wished weren't quite so loud. She reached for me and I brushed by, and when she would have reached again, Johnny caught her in his arms and said, "It was a bar fight, Luck, it's okay, come on, it's okay," and persuaded her away as the elevator doors closed on me. It was his greatest kindness of the night.



I spent the morning in my room and took Jenny with me to the club in the afternoon. We put new connectors on

every audio cable in the truck. Jenny gnawed her lip and hovered until I said, “Jen, lighten up, I didn’t get this defending your honor. It’s not your fault.” But I didn’t blame her for worrying: I looked like a film student’s makeup practicum, what with the stitches and the really spectacular bruise across my right cheek. At one point, a roadie called Cheese Grits stopped by with a look that made it clear they’d all heard the story; but he only handed me a twist of paper and said, “Vicodin.” I was tempted: my face was sore and my ribs ached, although I tried not to let it show, especially later when Catalina sauntered towards the VIP room in a loose-hipped way that told me more than I wanted to know about how she’d spent her evening. There was a fresh bruise on her throat. I had one just like it. I was astonished how much it all hurt.

I knew the schedule, and I looked at my watch every five minutes, and I thought I was braced; but it was a shock to feel him walk into the room, to know so well the particular weight on my skin of sharing space with him that I could recognize it with my back turned. At least it gave me a moment to put my face in neutral before I looked around.

He was walking toward me, looking wary. Everyone ignored him completely until he passed, then turned to watch him approach me. I don’t know if they expected us to kill each other or fuck right there on the floor. I don’t even know what I expected. He was so beautiful that it brought right back into me the feeling of his hands, his mouth, his music moving through us. It gutted me. And I don’t know whether it was that, or the damage to my face, that washed his careful expression away and left naked re-

gret in its place, so that my heart slammed and I thought *Is he back, is Duncan back?*

He was twenty feet away when Con and Johnny and Angel appeared from somewhere and stopped him. He tried to push past them; Angel shook his head, and Johnny said something in a low voice.

“I need to talk to Mars,” Duncan said.

“Later,” Con said, in a voice like flint, and took Duncan by the arm. Beside me, Jenny whispered “Oh, shit.” Her cheeks were dull red.

Duncan looked at Con in surprise; then at me. “Mars?” he said.

Behind Duncan, Johnny caught my eye and shook his head. And so I said to Jenny, “Let’s get back to work,” and turned away as the band walked Duncan off the floor.



“Mind if I sit down?” Con said. We were in the area where food was set up for the crew. Con carried two cups of coffee; he pushed one over to me as he sat.

“Thanks for sticking up for her,” he said.

I nodded.

“That son of a bitch,” he said, and then Duncan stepped in and we turned toward him automatically, as if he were the sun.

I said, “Jesus, what did you guys do to him?” He looked terrible; face drawn and pale, the beginnings of dark circles under his eyes.

Con gave an unhappy shrug and sipped his coffee, never taking his eyes from Duncan. Most of the room was watching him. Duncan didn’t seem to notice: he fixed on Jenny, alone at a table in the corner, determinedly

hunched over a book and an uneaten roast beef sandwich. She didn't see him until he had nearly reached her: she put her book down with a start and almost spilled her iced tea, and looked up at him with big eyes.

He went down on both knees next to her chair. Her eyes got bigger.

He kept his hands in his lap while he talked in a low voice, and his gaze never left hers. In a minute, her eyes filled with tears.

Con pushed his chair back.

I said, "Let her handle it." After a moment, he nodded.

Jenny's tears spilled over as Duncan continued to speak. And then she leaned into him and cried in his arms while he stroked her back gently, gently; then he buried his face in her shoulder and just hung on.

After a minute, she pushed back and wiped her eyes and said something that made him bite his lip before he nodded. He kissed her cheek. Then he stood and headed for me.

As he neared the table, I said, "If you go down on your knees to me, I'll break your fucking nose." He stopped and didn't seem to know what to do. I shook my head and said, "Go away, Duncan."

"I need to talk to you," he said. "I need us to be okay."

And I could see it as clearly as if it had already happened: the earnest conversation, the apologies, the careful rebuilding, and it all starting over again, and again, and again. *God*, I thought, *one of us has to stop it*. Somewhere deep inside me, a small voice behind a large door might have been saying *No, no*: but I made myself into ice, and his eyes widened even before I said, "Duncan, I don't give a fuck what you need anymore."

Then I got up and left the room.



Jenny found me an hour later sitting in the dark in the back of the equipment truck. I blinked when she opened the door and let the light in. Her face was grave.

“I’m sorry... But Lucky’s trying to find you, can you maybe turn your radio on and talk to her? She needs to do pre-show checks. And Duncan’s crying in the green room,” she said, and then took a closer look at me. “Are you crying too?” she said, with a concern that touched me. Sweet kid.

“No,” I said, and wiped my eyes. “I’ll call Lucky in a minute. We need to talk, Jen. I’ve got some specs for you to go over on the bus, and you and I will put in some serious time on the Midas in Hartford. I’ll make Jimmy rent you one for the rest of the tour and provide a tech for it. I’ll give you all the presets on a card. All you have to do is plug it in and run it.”

“Oh, no,” she said. “No, Mars.”

“You can do it.” I gave her the best smile I could manage. “You’re a real engineer. Handling things on the fly is part of the job.”

“You can’t just *leave*,” she said.

“I have to,” I said.

“No, you fucking don’t!” she said. “What did you teach me about the first fucking rule of the road?” Her voice trembled. “You just suck it up, Mars,” she said. “You come inside and do the pre-checks and mix the fucking show and then get on the bus and finish the tour.”

“I can’t do it,” I said.

“You *have* to,” she said. She was near tears. “Everyone’s in there holding their breath. We’re all counting on you. Because if you go...it all falls apart. Everyone knows that. Why do you think Duncan’s crying?”

“I *can’t* do it,” I said, and my voice shook, and for the first time Jenny looked truly frightened. I opened my mouth to say *I’m sorry* or *Fuck off* or anything else that would make her go away: and, just as clear as if he were standing next to me, I heard Duncan say in my memory, *I knew I couldn’t write these songs. I knew it. And then I wrote them anyway.*

I put my head in my hands for a while. Then I climbed out of the truck. Jenny backed off, pale and silent.

I turned on my radio. “Lucky, come in.”

“Heya, Mars,” she said. “Can I get some pre-show checks from you?” Her voice was completely controlled, as if she hadn’t been at all concerned.

“Yes, you can,” I said. “I need about ten minutes, I’ll get back to you.”

“Thank you,” she said. “Curtis? Give the artists the hour call, please.”

“Roger, Luck,” I heard Curtis say as I turned down the volume. Jenny was waiting by the loading door. I looked up into the evening sky; I heard the buzz of the audience inside, laughter in the parking lot, car horns, someone’s radio; the air smelled like gasoline fumes and garbage from the nearby dumpster, and I longed for something clean. I tried to imagine a life where I would ever be happy again. Then I went inside and did the show.





And there we were again on the bus, in quarters too close for me to maintain the space I needed between us. So I talked politely when I had to: my distance was internal, as if I rested in a safe warm place deep inside while some other uncaring Mars lived life on my behalf. I was glass: everyone slid off me. I watched with remote concern as Duncan struggled more and more with the music that was eating him from the inside out: I understood now that his channel was wide open, and sometimes demons found their way through. I watched Johnny and Angel and Con close ranks around him and do their best to keep him safe and sane. All I could do was be true to the music at every show.

It was a blessing that there were only a half-dozen shows after New York: it was time to get back to Seattle and get ready for the F-tech gig. They'd chosen to go through with it because they had a contract, but even more because Duncan became nearly violent at the idea of canceling. And they'd decided to go home, to Lillie's: I thought that was the only good part of a generally bad idea.

"But you'll do it," Con said.

"Sure," I said, and didn't tell them it would be the last one.



Johnny caught me one night as we were walking to the bus. I stopped and folded my arms.

He took a breath. "Thank you...for not leaving," he said. "It means a lot to us that you were willing to keep the band together."

"What are you talking about?" I said.

“Didn’t anyone tell you?” When I raised an eyebrow, he got a very odd look on his face. “In New York . . . we told him if you left, none of us would ever work with him again.”

“*What?*” I said. I was surprised to find myself furious: it had been a while since I’d felt anything at all. “What the fuck is wrong with you? You don’t break up a band because your sound guy moves on. Jesus.”

“You’re part of us now,” he said, and I shook my head. *No.* “You *are*,” he said: he didn’t understand that I meant *No, don’t, I can’t take this now.*

“Then why did you stay?” he said. He searched my face. “Oh,” he said finally.

I said from behind my glass, “It doesn’t matter,” and turned and walked toward the bus.

Behind me, Johnny said, as if I’d hurt him, “Mars, it always matters.”



“Just one broken heart this time out,” I told Lillie. She guessed the rest. “Oh, baby,” she said, and gave me a hug and a hamburger with fries.

She had to hire emergency security the day of the gig: fans had camped out overnight in the parking lot, and media people wanted to come inside and get in everyone’s way while we were setting up. Things were strained until the F-tech people brought in a portable toilet and set up a free coffee stand, which went a fair way towards reducing tensions.

Diego hadn’t made the trip. I wasn’t even disappointed. It was best for him: I was leaving Duncan, but I was no longer interested in going toward someone new. Maybe I’d talk my way into the next Heroes tour. Something safe.

And then it was time. Stick Woman came onstage to thank the crowd for being part of “this historic event. Now let’s go over the gear...” I tuned her out.

Beside me, Jenny adjusted the wire net on her head. “Are you going to?” she said, indicating the small pile on the console table beside me.

I shrugged. And then I thought, *Suck it up, Mars*. If it was the last time I would touch the music, I wanted it all.

The house lights came down. Lillie’s low voice came over the PA. “Welcome to Lillie’s, boys and girls. Tonight is a very special night for all of us. I hope you’re ready to feel the music of Noir.”

I touched them as they took the stage. Con, settling into the drums with absolute confidence. Angel, standing strong, part cocky and part wide-eyed kid. Johnny, even more sinuous than usual, touching his guitar like a lover with those marvelous hands. And Duncan, already full to the brim with music; and I thought that no one in the crowd would sense, as I did, the preternatural strength of will he was exercising to keep it from blowing him apart. I loved him so much at that moment; for fighting as hard as he could, and for everything I knew about him because of the battles he’d already won and lost. *Whatever else, I thought, I’ll always have this. I’ll always know it was real.*

And Con’s foot came down, Angel’s bass throbbed, Johnny’s guitar soared, and Duncan opened himself and began to sing “One Night Soon,” and when the audience joined in, I felt how much he loved that they sang his song back to him. The music loved it too: it flung itself into every body and soul in the room. When the song was pain, we cried; when the song was sex, the smell in the room sharpened and people’s hands found their way onto each

other; when the song was joy, we all flew with Duncan. I loved him for that too, for finding joy even in his most terrible hour.

Noir played. Expert, ecstatic, bound together by love and trust and music. It was legendary to be them on that night.

Nearly done. All of us covered in sweat, all of us feeling the adrenaline buzz that was the only thing keeping the band's exhaustion at bay. We all knew they had given us nearly everything they could. Duncan pushed back his hair and wiped his forehead, and opened his mouth to speak.

And stopped. His expression became totally internal, and I could feel some galvanic struggle within him that I didn't understand. The audience stilled: and where in other situations there might have been snickers or catcalls, here there was only attention and concern; as if we were all willing him to win, whatever that might mean.

Johnny took a step forward; Duncan waved him off. He took a harsh breath and said, with some difficulty, "This next song was hard to write, and I've never sung it the way it deserves. But I will tonight." He stopped again, swallowed, and something in him wrenched, and he said again, "*I will.*"

He gave a small wave in Con's direction. The band began the intro.

Duncan looked at me. When his eyes met mine, the jolt of fear that went through him made everyone in the room flinch, and brought me to my feet. All heads turned to follow his gaze; all eyes came to me. I froze.

"You terrify me," Duncan said. Behind him, Johnny's eyes widened; he nodded to Con and Angel, and they kept the introduction going around.

“You just walk right into me whenever you want,” Duncan said. His voice shook. “You’re so far inside me that you’re even in my music. And I’ve been angry about that, and I have been confused, and I haven’t known up from down for a while now; and I’ve hurt you, and I have hurt myself, and I don’t know if you can ever forgive me.”

Such grief; then he recovered and said, “I wrote this for you without knowing. You had to point it out to me. That pretty much says it all.” He took a breath. “This is ‘Dangerous Space.’”

And then he gave me himself with his song. He gave me everything, even as he sang how hard that was for him. He let me see how I made him vulnerable and how that made him angry. How much he wanted me, and how much his music wanted me too. How frightened he was that I would run from his demons and his fears, and leave him with neither love nor music. He opened his private places; and I was there.

And the song ended. There was a moment of absolute silence. And he said, “I love you, Mars.”

I felt the truth of it, and his joy that he’d said it; and then I felt something huge and wild rush up in him like a freight train; and he swayed and went down in a boneless heap onto the stage.

I ripped off my headset and scrambled across the console to the stage. People got out of my way. Johnny, Angel, and Con knelt around him saying “Duncan! Dunc—” and I knew Jenny had killed the board. Someone boosted me up, and I went to my knees by him. His eyes were closed. He was pale, still, except for his eyes moving under his eyelids, as if he were dreaming.

“Green room,” I said. Angel picked Duncan up as easily as a kitten and carried him backstage.

The green room couch was too short: Angel laid him gently on the rug, and I knelt by him again. Con and Johnny crowded around; Lucky, Jenny, the rest of the crew. I heard Lillie’s voice on the P.A. asking people to be calm; a minute later, she was there too.

“Do we need an ambulance?” she said. And everyone looked at me.

“I don’t—” I began to say, and Duncan opened his eyes. “It won’t let go,” he said, urgent, harsh. “Make it let me go.” And he sat up with a shudder, put a hand behind my head and pulled me to him hard, kissed me deep and ravenous, shaking, every muscle tight. His music surged through us, so strong, a riptide, and he kissed me as if I were his only lifeline. I broke from him just long enough to say to the others, “Get out,” and then his mouth was on mine again and he was tearing at my clothes, my shirt halfway off, his hands on me, and I gave Johnny a desperate wave, *Go, go!* Johnny’s jaw set, and he pushed everyone out of the room as Duncan and his hungry music fell on me like a tidal wave.

The struggle to stay afloat in music that only wanted to be out, be free, and didn’t care who it drowned. I could feel Duncan trying to hang on, trying not to be lost. He kissed me again and again. He stripped off my shirt and his own, and then I helped and the rest of our clothes were gone and I pulled him to me as the music battered through us. I didn’t need F-tech to feel him in me, me in him: the music pulled us back and forth into each other. Duncan clung to me; and it was as if I became the rope he climbed out of himself. I could *feel* him dragging himself up on the part

of me inside him, and as he did, the music between us began to spiral, to wail, to pulse: the music on every part of his skin and mine, the music along every nerve in my body and his, and then he was back, Duncan was back and the music wrapped us up, took our breath, made us gasp and shudder and come in each other's arms.

He raised his head and looked at me. Music swelled in his eyes: but he was Duncan again.

"I love you too," I said, and he began to cry.



We lay together for a while, just breathing each other in. Then he raised himself onto one elbow and said, "I finally get you naked, and I don't remember most of it. That's just not right."

"I'll put my clothes back on, you can take it from the top," I said.

"Oh, no," he said. "I'm not taking any chances." He smiled; and then his face changed, he whispered *Mars* and I whispered *Duncan* and we reached for each other. His hands, my hands, everywhere. And when we were shaking from each other's hands, his mouth followed for a long slow while, and he laughed warm and wicked against my skin every time he made pleasure ripple through me, until I pushed him down and showed him how it felt. He laughed then too. And we put our bodies together, we opened all the doors, we found each other inside; and we said *please* so many times I lost count, *please, please*, as the music ran like a river between us.



Noir shows are always packed. F-tech nights are special, but every show is a thrill. When Duncan steps to the

front and smiles to the house, I feel the excitement simmer under my skin. Then he smiles to me. Some in the audience turn to see; the word is out that we are lovers, and people are curious. They wonder what it's like between us. They have no idea it begins right here, right now, as surely as if we were naked in each other's arms. When Duncan sings. When I put my hands on his music.



# Biography

Kelley Eskridge is a fiction writer, essayist, and screenwriter. Her short stories have been finalists for the Nebula and Tiptree awards, won the Astraea Writer's Award, been collected in *The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror*, and been adapted for television. Her novel *Solitaire* was a *New York Times* Notable Book, a Border Books Original Voices selection, and a finalist for the Nebula, Endeavour, and Spectrum awards. A movie based on *Solitaire* is currently in development.

She lives in Seattle with her partner, novelist Nicola Griffith.

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