CHAPTER ONE

Liz Hanlon wanted to toss confetti from rooftops and buy a round for the entire world. It was going to be a great night. She took the turn onto Melrose Boulevard a little faster than usual and hit the brakes. Traffic was at a standstill.

“Crap,” she grumbled. “Two blocks away there’s a party in my honor and I can’t get there!”

“Relax. We’re not late.” Liz’s drummer, Frankie Langstrom, rode in the suicide seat. She was a tall, trendy blonde who managed to keep a distance in relationships by talking in short sentences. “With this traffic, the rest of the band isn’t there either.”

“Ten years in L.A. dives, I *finally* get a recording contract--well, sort of--I’m on the radio all over the country, every big-wig in the business will be here tonight, and I can’t get to the damn party!”

“Hey, we’ve played Germaine’s four nights a week for months. Think of tonight as just another gig.”

“Are you crazy?” Liz glanced at Frankie, fingertips drumming the steering wheel. “Germaine’s West is the hottest club in town. Just because we’re the house band doesn’t mean tonight won’t have major ramifications.”

“Oh, ram this,” Frankie shot back. “You’ve already got the record deal--”

“It’s just for distribution. The company’s releasing it tonight under their name, but I already recorded the CD—with my own money.”

“But you got a deal. Something you didn’t have a month ago, right?”

“Sure, but if sales aren’t good, this is as far as it’ll ever go."

“But you *got* it. Wasn’t that the hard part?”

The Frank had a point. Even though Liz was thirty-three and still paying her dues, she was living her dream. And with Ardor Records’ distribution deal, her CD sales should jump. How high no one could predict, but the exposure was something she’d been unable to create by Internet sales alone. If her luck stretched a little further, she just might land a *real* recording contract.

Tonight’s lavish CD release party was hosted by Ardor Records, a turn of events for which she felt enormous gratitude. Every top-level executive in the business would be there, and to ensure a sell-out crowd, Ardor had been running a songwriting contest in all the trade magazines for weeks. The winning songwriter would be here tonight, and Liz’s band would perform the song live.

It would be a spectacular night! If only the idiot drivers clogging the streets would clear out of the way, she could get to Germaine’s West and start enjoying it. She gestured toward Frankie’s open window. “You mind raising that a little? Took me hours to get my hair like this.”

Frankie put the window up halfway. “Looks good. Chestnut-colored curls everywhere. How’d you get ’em up in those combs?” She didn’t wait for an answer. “You look ten pounds thinner in that dress. How much did it set you back?”

Frankie’s habit of asking how much things cost bugged her. The woman had no tact, but oddly, she was a sensitive drummer. “It was on sale.”

“Anyway, you look great. Good thing ‘cause the media will be all over you tonight.”

It was true. Record execs would be sipping champagne, their pinkies hooked just so as they judged whether her voice, music, style, and sound added up to one essential ingredient for a recording career: presence. Did she have the stage presence to draw—and hold—a solid following?

She rolled forward and hit the brakes as two girls in short black skirts, jackets and lip liner sauntered between the cars.

“Halloween in Hollywood,” she cracked. “Black clothes, tattoos, chains, flat hair. Whatever happened to individuality?”

A few drivers made illegal U-turns across lanes. Liz leaned out the window and saw brake lights all the way to the club. Then she spotted her name on the marquee and a gratifying thrill shot through her. “Ha! Look at that!”

“I can’t believe this crowd,” Frankie said. “You think they're all here to see us?”

“Get real. There’s probably a free strip show around the corner.” Then it hit her. “The songwriting contest!”

“Oh, right. Nationwide. I forget—which song’s the winner?”

“*Where Hearts May Lead*. Geez, Frank, how could you forget that?”

“I’m a drummer. We know rhythmic things, not song titles, and especially not that musical code you guys talk in.”

“What code?”

“Ninth chords, eleventh cords, a three-six-two-five. The other day I heard you describe the menu at a restaurant as ‘standard two five fare’. What the hell is that?”

“In harmony, a two five is the simplest chord pattern, so I was saying the menu was plain. You know, basic. White bread.”

Frankie sighed. “Why don’t you just say that?”

Liz squeezed past two cars moving so slowly she was sure they were parked. Near the club, pedestrians filled the intersection. She made a risky left and pulled into Germaine’s back lot.

A teenage attendant approached her. “Back door’s closed tonight so no one gets in without a ticket. Well, maybe you,” he smiled, “but Sonnie wants you to park in front. We got a spot for you.” She followed him as he directed them down a narrow lane close to the building and rolled to a stop in front.

Two young valets opened their doors. Frankie stepped out and smoothed her skin-tight blouse over chocolate brown leather pants. Liz’s dark red silk gown shimmered in the glow of neon lights.

“Whoa, you look great,” the valet said, hopping in front of them. “’Scuse us!” He cleared a path through the noisy crowd. “Coupla hotties comin’ through.”

Near the front door, the crowd closed in. Frankie moved with the flow in another direction. Liz spotted Jonathan, the night manager, standing guard at the front door. Two hundred sixty-five pounds and a booming voice that rivaled the bass frequencies of any low-rider’s sub-woofer.

“That’s her!” a voice called out.

Jonathan saw Liz, wedged himself in the doorway, grabbed her wrist, and propelled her through the tight quarters. He jumped in behind her, letting the door slam.

“What a zoo,” she cried. “I can’t believe this many people care about one CD. Of course half of them are hoping to win that contest.”

“That means the other half’s here to see you. There must be a hundred people in the lounge, and you saw that waiting line outside.”

She noticed his kind eyes and smiled her appreciation.

The front door pushed open. Jonathan’s commanding voice stopped a couple from entering. “Sorry folks, first show’s sold out.” He ushered them through the door and followed them outside.

Alone in the foyer, she heard Frankie fine-tuning her snare drum on the stage. Elliot’s bass case had been stuffed in the tiny alcove behind the stage and he was warming up. Even from here she could tell the house was packed. She went to the arched entrance of the lounge and stopped, drinking in the view, the sounds of clinking glasses and excited chatter. A cut from her CD was playing softly overhead. The night couldn’t get any more exciting.

Not much had changed since the first time she’d played this room, the same tiny lights under the liquor bottles on the bar straight ahead, the same twinkling bulbs around the dance floor that brightened the center like a night-lit swimming pool. Miles, her keyboardist, nodded to her from the stage, dimmed the lights and depressed a wall button. The curtains closed. Directly across the room, the bar lined the length of the lounge. Booths and tables, filled to capacity, made a semi-circle around the dance floor. Liz entered, greeted friends, and thanked them for coming, feeling the night’s magic.

“Liz! Over here!” Owner Sonnie Tucks waved from behind the bar. She pushed through the crowd of well-wishers around the bar to join him.

Sonnie’s whole demeanor shouted anxiety. “Where the hell have you been?” he pounced, his green eyes sliding down her form. “Ooh, lady in red. Lookin’ like that it’s okay to be late.”

She showed him her watch. “I’m not late, and there’s the little matter of that gridlock out there.”

“Your manager what’s-his-name called,” he said, hurrying into his office behind the bar.

“Grant.” She followed him into the cramped room.

“Yeah. Said he’d be here around nine.” Sonnie began rooting through a pile of papers, dropped them, hurried back to the doorway, and looked into the crowded lounge.

“Sonnie, relax.” She gave him a light punch. “The cash register’s ringing, the music’ll be swinging. It’s going to be a great night.”

His fingers traced through his hair again. “It better be. My finances, they’ve been rough. You parked in front, right? Give me your keys. I need your car.”

“You’re leaving? We’re packed out there.”

“Yeah, and my bonehead supplier didn’t deliver any Courvoisier. My car’s socked against the back wall.” He nodded toward a small, private door behind his desk that opened onto the back parking lot. “I got my key. I’ll come in that way,” he said, making a “gimme” gesture with his fingers.

“How come the back entrance is closed tonight?”

“You saw that line in front. Words gets out the back door’s open, half that crowd sneaks in without a ticket. And by the way,” he motioned again toward the private door, “that door doubles as a second exit. You know, if there’s ever a fire or anything.”

“As long as I’ve been playing here, I don’t think I ever noticed that door from outside.”

“There’s no doorknob on the outside so no one can get in without a key. Lots of businesses have them. Ensures privacy, and gives us an extra way out in a pinch.” He repeated the “gimme” gesture. “C’mon. Keys.”

“I left them with the valet.”

He shook his head. “When there’s a full house we gotta keep our keys with us. I’ll drop yours on the bar when I get back.” He started to leave, then hopped back into the bar.

Liz followed, confused. “What are you doing?”

He opened the refrigerator door beneath the counter. “Making sure we got enough beer. You know what lushes you musicians are. Okay, we’re cool. I’m outta here.”

“You’ll be lucky if I don’t change the locks while you’re gone.”

“Keep in mind I’m driving your car.” He gave her a quick kiss on her cheek. “I trust you can start the show without me?”

Liz reached for a coffee mug and filled it. “I trust you can drive my car a couple of blocks without getting into a wreck?”

“Wise guy.” He snapped his fingers. “Almost forgot. There’s some famous composer here . . . Ferrini, Ferrelli?”

“Mikhail Fattani? He’s here already?” She turned and searched the room.

“Table five. He ordered the Courvoisier.” He double-timed it through the door.

Her manager, Grant, had mentioned that Fattani was considering Liz for his next recording, but she figured that was just cocktail talk.

Fattani and his wife, Nicolette, were seated at a front center table just off the dance floor. He wore a crisp cream-colored suit with dark blue silk shirt. His jet-black hair was slicked back, enhancing his European features. Liz had only met him once before but was struck again by his air of serenity, as if everything in the world was as it should be. Even the three large rings he wore did not seem out of place. She smiled, feeling the energy of success.

“You can’t go—!” Jonathan bellowed from outside the front door, but his voice was drowned in noisy shouts and scuffling noises.

Some irate customer trying to bully his way past Jonathan. Good luck, buddy.

Liz folded her evening purse under her arm, topped off her coffee and stepped out from the bar as two teenage girls in total black burst into the lounge, shoving people out of their way. They wore wigs and outlandish make-up layered thick enough to distort their features. The taller girl had a rifle on one shoulder that was right out of a Terminator movie. She took the lead and marched to the center of the dance floor.

The shorter girl wore white plastic gloves and a stiff yellow wig with porcupine hair. The butt of a pistol was visible in her waistband as she gripped a large green trash bag in her hands.

“Who the hell are these two?” Liz muttered, backing up and sliding her purse on a shelf inside the bar. Were they actors?

The leader wore a high, dark brown, beehive wig that made her seem taller than her six-foot height, and gave her automatic authority. Beehive strode to the video camera in the corner and knocked it off its tripod. It crashed to the floor. From the scattered pieces she plucked out the disc and dropped it into her jacket pocket.

A customer from the back called out, “Hey, Liz, can your show top this?”

But this was no show. Ardor Records was too high-class to stage a scene like this. Furious, Liz set her coffee mug on the bar and started toward the leader. “What the hell is this,” she growled, “some kind of YouTube video? Tonight’s private. Invitation only. Trust me, you’re not invited.”

Beehive hooked the muzzle of her AK-47 under Liz’s chin. “Clam up, bitch, you ever wanna sing again.”

A chill slithered through Liz. How could this girl know she was tonight’s singer? She stared past the layers of makeup into stony eyes. Beehive lowered the rifle, cradling it in heavily tattooed arms. Liz searched her face for a trace of familiarity, but found none.

Beehive snorted, swung away and took her combative demeanor to the middle of the room. She aimed at a camera mounted above the bar and fired a round into it. Glass and plastic rained to the floor. Conversation at the back of the lounge ceased. The room settled into a tense hush.

“Now listen up, folks!” Beehive called out. “I know you all carry cell phones, so dig’em out and hold ’em up!” She whirled, pointing the barrel first at one person, then another.

Outside, the excited chatter of guests waiting for the second show dwindled to silence. Jonathan’s low voice cut through as he calmed the crowd.

Inside, reluctant customers were slowly raising their cell phones into view.

Liz thought of her own cell, wishing she hadn’t hidden it beneath the bar.

“Let’s go! Keep ‘em up. I gotta see ‘em,” Beehive shouted. More phones went up. She zeroed in as if memorizing each face. Nodding to her accomplice, she called out, “Alright, here’s the drill. The bag gets to your table, you drop your phone inside. Then add your valuables like wallets. Let’s not forget that jewelry. Rings especially. And ladies, I don’t wanna hear about your water retention. You can’t get it off, we’ll take the finger.”

Patrons gasped. But as the accomplice in the yellow wig moved from table to table, valuables fell into the bag. Beehive remained on the dance floor where each face was visible, her finger on the rifle’s trigger guard.

Liz leaned onto a stool at the end of the bar and made eye contact with the patrons close by. Their expressions were as fearful as she felt.

From a corner table across the room, a young woman let out a high-pitched shriek. She jumped up, knocking her chair to the floor, and ran toward the front door. “I’m not staying here! This is crazy . . . You’re all crazy!” She called to the guests at the closest table, “Help me get this door open!” She worked the doorknob and pounded on the locked door. Her husband caught up to her as she collapsed in tears of frustration.

“*Shut her up or I will*,” Beehive ordered, holding the rifle to her shoulder. As the man helped his sobbing wife back to their table, Beehive sneered, “*Doors ’re locked, fools!*”

A nervous quiet settled over the room. The accomplice continued collecting valuables. Beehive stood guard, glaring deeply into each face with contempt.

Liz observed dozens of cell phones raised above each table. Most patrons were following Beehive’s orders, but one man was slowly lowering his phone each time the robbers diverted their eyes. With nearly imperceptible movements, the man dropped the cell in his lap and swapped it for a money clip thick with bills. Slowly, his arm went up, the money clip now substituting for his phone.

Relieved to know that at least one victim had a phone, Liz wondered how the shooter would react at the sight of the money clip. She tried to imagine a way to distract both girls while the man called for help, but whatever idea she came up with, she’d better hurry. They would both be within Beehive’s view in a few seconds.

Her heart raced as she pushed herself to *think*. But before any plan came to her, the familiar pinch of a muscle spasm gripped her stomach and she doubled over. She’d had similar spasms recently, a “stress reaction” her doctor had called it. She’d dismissed his theory at the time. After all, who doesn’t have stress in their life, she’d wondered. Now she realized the doc had a point. All she could do was take deep breaths and wait for the cramps to ebb.

One by one, reluctant customers gave up their phones and valuables. Liz honed in on Beehive, concentrating on her features and movements, hoping to identify her later for the police. As she watched, she tried to formulate an escape plan, but Beehive turned abruptly in her direction and caught her off guard.

“You staring at me, bitch?” She stopped in front of Liz. When Liz didn’t respond, Beehive squeezed her shoulder hard, pushed her to her knees, and used the butt of the rifle to pin her between two barstools.

Liz’s shoulder throbbed. She groped for the leg of a stool, managing to free herself from the rifle, but when she looked up, she was staring into the contemptuous face of a demented thief.

The crowd stirred; murmurs of rebellion grew. Beehive cut it down by marching toward the man who had swapped his phone for a money clip.

“Where is it?”

He pretended bewilderment, and turned his wrist to emphasize the wad of bills he offered.

Unimpressed, Beehive snatched the clip, dropped it into her pocket, and reached into his lap for the phone. She waved it overhead. When she was certain all eyes were on her, she smashed it on the dance floor, pulled her accomplice’s pistol from the waistband of the girl’s pants, and used it to fire a round into the phone. Plastic and metal pieces blew across the floor.

“Now. In case there’s any doubt—yes, we’re *all* armed. The next person who doubts that *will die*!” Gruffly, she stuffed the pistol back into Yellow Hair’s waistband and the robbery went on.

Liz pulled herself onto the barstool again. Seconds ticked by while cell phones, wallets, and jewelry dropped into the bag. Beehive was on high alert. Earlier, Liz had wondered if these girls would actually kill for a few valuables, but now it was clear they would.

She couldn’t stop thinking about her own cell phone tucked inside the purse she’d hidden behind the bar when the burglars entered. Right now, she was sitting only inches from it, yet any movement on her part would certainly alert Beehive. Still, she slid forward and braced one foot on the floor, readying herself in case an opportunity appeared.

Her mind churned. The words “we’re all armed” reverberated in her mind. How many others accomplices were outside? Could others be hiding out within the crowd, waiting for the right time to emerge? Did they plan to kill them all?

She remembered the .38 Sonnie kept in the bottom of his filing cabinet “just in case.” She knew making a dash for it was impossible, but the thought of Sonnie sent an alarm screeching across her mind: He’d be back any minute. Even if he made it through the parking lot, his keys would rattle in the lock, and he’d call out to her on his way to the lounge, surprising these maniacs. They’d order him to submit, he’d refuse, and Beehive would open fire on him. Maybe the whole room.

*Something* had to be done.

By closely watching Beehive, Liz had estimated the number of seconds it took her to make a sweep of the entire room before returning to face her direction. Perhaps there was a way to reach the phone if she moved quickly enough.

She eased the stool back and stood erect feeling her heart thumping, but Beehive didn’t’ notice.

Yellow Hair raided another table. Liz waited, one foot poised to step backward, allowing her to reach back through the opening. On Beehive’s next turn, she made her move. Reaching around, beneath the bar, she touched the purse, pulled it closer, and got the phone. She eased it closer to the edge of the shelf and unlocked the screen.

With Beehive focused across the room, Liz positioned the phone in one hand, ready to type 9-1-1 into the search bar. Instead, it beeped! The maddening, unmistakable beep of a cell phone coming to life, and clearly heard by all. Beehive whirled and looked right at her.

Desperate, Liz typed 9-1-1 and hit the Send button over and over in a frantic attempt to call for help. Even without the ability to call, the phone’s tracking device might alert the police of trouble, and their location. But her message was never sent. Instead, the screen flashed a message informing her that 911 Emergency service was not available by text in the Los Angeles area.

Dammit! She’d blown it. They were doomed.