

Chapter 1

While Mitzi put on some tea, Johanna flopped face-first into the manure.

February was too early in the season to be fertilizing, but Johanna wanted to contribute to this year's harvest while she still could. These days, that amounted to little more than curling up in a chaise lounge and croaking out hushed commands to Mitzi. This time last year, Johanna would have been the one loading the wheelbarrow with gusto, shoveling out its contents and raking evenly around the base of the vines. But then, this time last year, she hadn't been tossing back ten milligrams of morphine every few hours. Cancer and chemo were sucking away at her like a strawberry milkshake, racing to see who could get to the bottom first.

Seeing Johanna prostrate and motionless at the edge of the vineyard, Mitzi dropped the tray of herbal tea and ran headlong to her side. She turned her over gently and dusted off the powdery manure.

"Couldn't you wait five minutes? I was on my way with the tea," Mitzi admonished.

Johanna murmured through cracked lips, "It—it was just so lumpy." She gestured weakly to the rake leaning against the trellis.

"Look, I know you're the gardener, but they are *literally* piles of crap. Stop being such a control freak." Mitzi used a dishtowel to swipe away the remaining brown residue.

This was the first time Johanna had been out of the house in days. Having kept her muesli down since lunch, she was determined to see the sun again. In its descent behind the Swiss horizon, it hovered just above Lake Constance and turned the water a shimmering orange. Johanna had not adapted well to hospice care. Rather than let death creep over her day by day, she preferred the kicking-and-screaming approach. A homeopathic nurse for nearly 40 years, Mitzi encouraged it with all her

patients; if you couldn't beat death, you could at least knee it in the balls on the way out.

"Let's not fight," Johanna smiled, "not today." She closed her eyes and shuddered, the fleece nightgown doing little to shield her from the late winter chill. Mitzi felt her forehead—clammy. Johanna appeared to be losing color by the minute, her cheeks going ashen as her bare head prickled with gooseflesh. They had both been preparing for this day, but Mitzi froze with denial. Another twitch from Johanna shook her back into action. She grabbed the blanket from the chaise. It was a good hundred meters back to the house; while Mitzi was a fireplug of a woman, the wheelbarrow just made more sense.

Johanna barely acknowledged the jostling ride, her head lolling back and forth with every bump. Mitzi kept her gaze fixed on the kitchen door as it grew blurry through a film of tears. So this is the payoff, she thought. Thirty-odd years together, four more of "registered" partnership--and for what?

She hoisted Johanna's delicate frame from the wheelbarrow and laid her in their bed. Still smiling, Johanna groped for the edge of the quilt. Mitzi tugged it up under her chin and gave her a tender kiss. She rolled an IV stand closer and connected a tube to Johanna's central line. In case her wooziness was pain-induced, Mitzi thought the drugs might bring her around. Though she still swore by her homeopathic remedies, even she had to admit that, as a pain reliever, poison ivy extract couldn't hold a candle to morphine.

Johanna's eyes fluttered open and she looked dreamily into the distance. Mitzi sat on the edge of the bed and stroked Johanna's scalp, her platinum hair reduced to patchy wisps. It was once so lush and lustrous that Johanna had been among a handful of authorized sources for Dolly Parton's wigs, anointed by the country legend herself after being summoned backstage at a Munich concert in the seventies.

Before the cancer, Mitzi and Johanna would make a yearly journey into neighboring Meersburg, Germany, enjoy a lovely lunch at an open-air café that served wine from their vineyard, then end the afternoon in a beauty salon. On the return trip home, with her hair securely wrapped and boxed, Johanna would comment on Mitzi's charming manicure. Mitzi reciprocated by marveling how Johanna's new pixie cut made them look like twins, although Mitzi's hair was a severe man's style and black as a liter of *schwarzbier*. Dolly paid top Deutsche Mark, too--or euro these days. Definitely helped float the vineyard through some harsh droughts.

Ironically, it was now Johanna who needed a wig.

"What can I get you, darling?" Mitzi whispered, trying desperately to

keep her voice from quavering.

“Nothing. Nothing now. You’re all I ever needed.” Johanna’s eyes were closed, but she turned away from Mitzi and pressed her lips together. Just then, a large face filled the window, a dark glove cupped on one side of it. A look of panic crossed the face and its mouth dropped open.

Seconds later, Brock, a circus bear of a man, came barreling through the door, shattering the mood, the tenderness and anything else in his oafish way.

“Is she all right?” he panted.

“Dying, but otherwise, not bad,” Mitzi replied.

He glowered at her. “You’re not funny, Mitzi—you never have been.” He laid aside an immense antique axe he carried with him, as well as a blunt, short-handled weapon, both part of his costume. When he dropped to his knees and took Johanna’s hand, he stretched her IV cord taut. She winced. “Sorry,” he fumbled, taking the other hand instead.

“Don’t worry about me, Brock—you’ll be late to work,” Johanna murmured. He was dressed in his night watchman’s full regalia, ready to patrol the cobblestone streets of Meersburg, his warning horn dangling from a leather rope around his neck. The job was part tourist attraction, part mall-caliber security.

He scoffed. “What is work, but something else that keeps me from your side.” Forty years later, the man refused to let go. Mitzi felt embarrassed for him.

“Brock,” she prodded, “Johanna had just asked for some tea. Would you mind? The kettle’s on the stove.” She was banking that Johanna was either too weak or disoriented to protest.

As if placing a bookmark, he gave her hand a soft squeeze and stood up. “Absolutely. With extra honey.”

“Actually, we’re using blue agave nectar these days,” Mitzi said. “It’s on the counter.”

She closed the door behind Brock and pulled a plastic box from under the bed. With a practiced efficiency, she knotted a length of rubber tubing around Johanna’s free arm, swabbed a patch of skin with alcohol and inserted a needle. She drew four vials of blood, her heart pounding in her ears awaiting Brock’s reappearance. Johanna pried her eyes open briefly, but submitted without question. It had been part of their routine for months now—Mitzi had the blood tested so she could tweak Johanna’s treatment accordingly. When she removed the needle, the hole didn’t even bother to bleed. She marked the vials with a date, stored them upright in a small refrigerator next to the bed, tossed the syringe and packed the plastic box away just as she heard the kettle whistle in the

next room.

“Mitzi,” Johanna slurred. “Can I see the book?”

Silently, Mitzi pulled a green, cracked leather album from a shelf and laid it on Johanna’s lap. Johanna spread her hands across the cover.

“Promise me,” she began, then faltered.

“Anything,” said Mitzi, leaning closer.

“Promise me you won’t find him.”

“Who?”

Johanna slid her eyes down to the book and patted it slowly.

“Oh, him,” Mitzi said dismissively. “Why would I?”

“I know you feel cheated.”

“It was a long time ago, Johanna. What’s past is past,” she lied. If it weren’t for him, thought Mitzi, I would still have you.

“Promise me, then.”

“I promise.”

A trace of a smile remained on Johanna’s face as her hands slipped off the book and fell limp on the sheets. Her head drooped, as if she had just fallen asleep. Mitzi laced her fingers with Johanna’s and whispered the last few lines of their favorite song, Patsy Cline’s “Crazy.”

Brock elbowed the door open, balancing three cups of tea on a cutting board.

Mitzi sighed, a single tear trapped in one of her crow’s feet. “As usual, Brock, your timing leaves something to be desired.”

His face screwed inward and he dropped the tea. “No!”

Second pot today, Mitzi thought. Time to switch to coffee.

If she weren’t already dead, Johanna would likely have been crushed as Brock lay across her, sobbing and stroking her cheek. His weight yanked her IV tube loose and it twirled impotently, dripping morphine onto the pine floor.

Mitzi grabbed the corner of the book and tugged it from between Brock and Johanna. She ran her finger up and down its spine and walked slowly toward the door. She hoped Brock interpreted it as respect for his privacy. In truth, she couldn’t stomach any more of his bawling.

I’ve shared her whole life with him, thought Mitzi.

At least I had her death to myself.

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Two thousand miles away, Dorsey Duquesne rubbed the purple Fender guitar pick—acquired through his father from electric guitar inventor Les Paul—and held it aloft, waiting for the stage lights. He bowed and shook his head, loosening the pomade’s grip on his sandy, wannabe pompadour.

The drummer took his cue from the lights, and Dorsey took his cue from the drummer. At moments like this, the 40-year-old was infinitely appreciative of his Gibson ES-175, both for its full, rich tone and for the way it shielded his pelvis. Had he used a smaller body guitar, a Flying V for example, there was a very good chance of someone spotting his incongruous erection.

Still, he couldn't spend the entire night hiding behind his axe; for good measure, he'd worn three sets of briefs, all one size too small—not unlike a boner girdle. If every man had a taste of what Dorsey felt when he stepped on a stage, there'd be no need for Viagra.

They opened with “Jump, Jive and Wail,” always a good rouser. Though to be fair, if most of the audience wasn't propelled to its feet by the driving rhythm and honking sax, it was hardly the band's fault. Consigned to wheelchairs, some of them hadn't been on their feet in years. Another good thing about playing for seniors—it was nearly impossible to be too loud.

Dorsey scanned the crowd for his parents, who would be easy to spot amidst the octogenarians. They had promised to stop by if their plane landed on time. It was a big day for the Duquesne family: Dorsey's father in Manhattan, accepting an award from the American Federation of Musicians for his 5,000th recording session and Dorsey's band headlining the grand opening of New Lumina Pavilion in Wrightsville Beach, North Carolina. Scoring the gig had never really been in question—Dorsey had pretty much footed the bill for the pavilion's construction, right down to the roadside marquee now bearing his band's name: Black Slacks.

The original Lumina had been built in 1905 and torn down in 1973; in its heyday, it was a “must play” venue for the big bands of the 30s and 40s. A few months after 9/11, in need of a comfort project, Dorsey had tracked down the blueprints for the legendary dance hall and, with a local developer and the enthusiastic support of the town council, spearheaded its resurrection. Actually playing New Lumina himself had been icing on the cake, although he knew that some saw the whole effort as a monument to vanity.

From the back of the second floor dance hall, one could easily envision the original Lumina ballroom, circa 1943. There was certainly enough retro apparel, from two-tone shoes to bobby socks and poodle skirts. But instead of dinner jackets and bow ties, the band was decked out in electric blue bowling shirts and, naturally, black slacks. American flags and patriotic bunting hung from the heart pine rafters of the forty-foot ceiling, much as they had at the height of World War II, when swing kings like Cab Calloway and Stan Kenton held the crowds in their thrall.

While not quite in that league, Dorsey was good. Not half the musician his father was, whose tenor sax had shared mikes with Miles, Basie, Brubeck and a slew of others, but definitely the best guitarist between Virginia Beach and Myrtle. He had yet to land a recording contract, but he chalked that up to the genre he plied; in 2005, Black Slacks had missed the late 90s swing revival by nearly a decade, but Dorsey's heart and soul refused to compromise.

As a result, he had a sizable local following, roughly half who clung to swing's recent resurgence and half who jitterbugged to it the first time around. It made for a diverse crowd.

Between sets, Stick, his drummer and attorney, urged him to play one of his own compositions.

"Come on, Dors, the mood is right—would Benny Goodman have put up with playing covers all night?"

"Actually, those guys used to play each other's stuff all the time," Dorsey observed, wiping his sleeve across his brow and taking a swig of sport drink. "Aside from their signature songs—"

"Not my point. We've all played these tunes a million times—they've all heard them a million times. Let's mix it up with something new."

Dorsey mentally thumbed through his anemic list of originals. "Anybody But You?" he offered with a shrug.

For the briefest of moments, Stick's face remained blank, then lit up with enthusiasm. "Friggin' A--let's do it." He huddled with the rest of the band and filled them in on the set list change. Dorsey thought he caught a couple of suppressed eye-rolls. Maybe my songs aren't 18 karat, he thought, but I don't see anyone else stepping up.

As a singer, Dorsey compared himself to Fred Astaire, Gene Kelly and Chet Baker. In other words, cats known for being better at other things. Still, it was his band and this was his song.

After the house lights went down, Dorsey grabbed the mike.

"Evening, all you hipsters. Thanks again for joining us here to welcome the Lumina back to Wrightsville Beach." Several cheers, sporadic clapping. "We've got a song of our own we're going to play now, so I want to see all you Charlies and wallflowers out on the planks and kicking up some dust." The revivalists perked up and bolted from the shadows, nimbly dodging the back braces and corrective shoes.

*I wanna sing with anybody but you
I wanna sing with anybody but you
I wanna sing with anybody
But you could rattle Pavarotti*

I wanna sing with anybody but you

Dorsey gave it all he had, but had he strolled to the center of the dance floor, squatted down and deposited a steaming turd, he could not have driven the dancers to the sidelines more quickly. It was the longest three and a half minutes of his life, and the blood that now flushed his face had been drained directly from his groin.

He mumbled a “thank you” in response to the tepid applause and launched right into Louis Prima’s arrangement of “Pennies from Heaven.” His father was right—when it came to songwriting, you either had it or you didn’t, and no amount of practice would summon a “Talent Fairy” to sprinkle you with melody dust. After countless hours agonizing over the hook, the chord changes and the lyrics, Dorsey had written yet another flatfooted b-side.

Despite his cataclysmic debut, his fans clamored for an encore, restoring both Dorsey’s faith in the band’s appeal and his hard-on.

As the crowds were filing out, an elderly lady beckoned Dorsey with a crooked finger. When he crouched over her wheelchair, she looked just past his ear, as if unsure where he was.

“You know, this is the first time I’ve ever listened to bluegrass music,” she said.

Dorsey nodded and smiled. “How’d you like it?” he finally asked.

“Very nice!” she exclaimed with toothless delight.

Whatever, he thought--a fan’s a fan. He thanked her for the compliment and joined the rest of the band to help with the tear-down.

The sax player threw him a smug look. “‘All you Charlies?’ ‘Out on the planks?’” The rest of the band snickered at his expense.

“Come on, guys, you know me: I get caught up in the moment. The moment just happens to be 60 years ago.” His tendency to slip into swing slang during gigs was alternately admired and scorned.

He threw his gear into the trunk of his glossy red Tucker Torpedo and made the five-minute drive over the Intracoastal Waterway to his oceanfront home.

“Gyp the Cat!” he said to no one, his words whipped away by the cool, salty night air. The car stereo lit up in response and began playing the aforementioned song by Bobby Darin, a self-penned “sequel” of sorts to his seminal hit, “Mack the Knife.” Like Dorsey’s own efforts, it was underappreciated in its time. He sang along all the way into his garage.

Fifteen minutes later, three pairs of briefs lay in a heap beside his bed, underneath his black silk pants and bowling shirt.

“Your feet are cold,” Yvonne teased, hovering over him, her breathing still heavy from their lovemaking.

“Speaking of frozen feet, you should have seen the response to my new song. Bombsville, baby.”

“Oh, Dorsey, I’m sorry. I really like it, and Hayley can’t stop singing it.”

“Well, I guess when it’s on iTunes, I can count on exactly two downloads.” He knew his wife was being sincere, and he leaned up and kissed her forehead. Her auburn hair dangled in his face, tickling his upper lip. Even in the pale moonlight, he could make out the dusting of freckles across the bridge of her nose.

She flopped back on the pillow with a sigh. “I’m sorry your parents didn’t show. But you’ll play there again,” she offered. “And if there’s ever a matinee, Hayley and I can come, too.” Hayley, their eight-year-old daughter, was a devout fan of her father’s but had a strict 9 p.m. bedtime.

As if on cue, the phone rang, the caller I.D. display reading “Duquesne, Roy.”

Dorsey rolled over into the pillow. “Let it go,” he yawned. “It’s probably just Mom, saying they got in okay.”

The answering machine clicked to life. As predicted, it was his mother, but the news seemed far less mundane than their safe arrival.

“Dorsey, if you’re there, please pick up,” she said between hitching sobs. “It’s...it’s about your father.”

So much for the afterglow. Despite Dorsey’s victorious christening of the New Lumina Pavilion, Roy Duquesne, with his impeccable timing, had once again stolen the spotlight and managed to upstage his son.

It would, however, be the last time.

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Cherry Duquesne set her cosmopolitan on the plaque her late husband had received in New York.

“Five thousand sessions,” she read. “Lifetime achievement, they called it. Little did they know.” She curled her lip, as if the American Federation of Musicians had somehow orchestrated Roy’s pulmonary embolism. Her eyes were red-rimmed and bloodshot, but Dorsey hadn’t seen her shed Tear One, either in the church or at the mausoleum. In his own hand, he clutched a soggy pub towel to swipe his cheeks every few minutes.

Dorsey had retreated to his father’s home studio, where he could mourn without an audience. Yvonne had joined him shortly thereafter, followed by his mother. The three of them now stood around, aware of the palpable absence in the room. On the other side of the French doors, well-wishers busied themselves with hors d’oeuvres and the open bar.

With or without the plaque, Roy Duquesne's studio was a shrine to a lifetime spent in music, from the autographed LP covers to the framed snapshots of him with his arm slung around jazz legends like Ornette Coleman and McCoy Tyner. Roy was what they called a "musician's musician," known for his reliable, melodic solos, but never a prima donna--always deferring to the artist whose name was on the record. His talent and attitude, in that order, had resulted in a very comfortable lifestyle, enabling him to indulge in the occasional auction.

Over the mantle hung a Grafton sax once owned by Charlie Parker. There was no proof he had ever played the thing, but the fact that it had been in his possession lent it intrinsic value. Dorsey had narrowly saved it from spending eternity in his father's urn; his mother, wishing to cremate her husband with the instrument that brought him so much joy, had selected the Grafton based on its appearance.

"It's hideous," she said. "It doesn't match a thing in the room."

With its white plastic body and brass neck and keys, it was hard to take the instrument seriously, despite its apocryphal association with one of the saxophone's masters. If the legend were true, the Bird had ended up playing it only because he had hocked his regular sax to buy heroin just minutes before a concert. While Dorsey's mother was discussing interment packages with the funeral director, he substituted his own shabby junior high sax and returned the Grafton to its rightful place of worship.

He pulled it down and ran his fingers lightly over the keys. The action was terrible; even his father said he didn't know why the damn thing was so revered. Dorsey raised it to his mouth and attempted the first few bars of "Misty." A split reed, dry lips and twenty years away from the instrument treated the room to a spot-on impression of a congested goat.

"For God's sake, Dorsey, put that thing down. Your father must be rolling in his grave, or whatever people do after they're burned into little crumbs." She exhaled heavily and drained her glass.

Yvonne chimed in, eager to lighten the tension. "I think I'll go check on Hayley. Does anyone need anything?" Dorsey raised a cynical eyebrow in response. Yvonne had been solid and supportive since Dorsey's world had collapsed, keeping the edges of their daily life from fraying. She had lost her own father a few years ago, so when she said, "I know what you're going through," she was one of the few who actually did.

Well, almost—Yvonne was adopted. To Dorsey, her loss couldn't possibly have been as deep, though he knew better than to express this opinion aloud.

“I need another drink before I face all those people again,” his mother said, heading toward the door. “How about you?”

“Another riesling?” he mumbled, not bothering to point out that she would be forced to wade through a small mob just to get to the bar.

“Coming right up. And Dorsey, use a coaster.” He glanced at his near-empty glass, resting on the lacquered lid of the baby grand. He mopped the ring with his sleeve and moved the glass to a tattered issue of *Downbeat*.

In the next room, he saw his daughter twirling around and singing for a small circle of people. With little encouragement, she had taken to performing naturally. Her ear was on par with Dorsey’s; he had relative pitch, but he could swear hers was damn near perfect. She excelled at piano and had just started the flute. Every weekend, when the family got together for Sunday dinner, Hayley would proudly demonstrate the progress since her last lesson. Her Pop-Pop would beam and applaud and then pick up his sax for an impromptu duet. Minus the duet, Dorsey supposed his mother could inherit that role, feigning interest through a half-lidded Xanax haze.

If Dorsey still had a lot to learn from his father, what his daughter was going to miss out on was unimaginable. It wasn’t as if he could mentor her with any authority—how many singers have turned to the canon of Frank Sinatra, Jr. for inspiration or technique? No, the king was dead, and the prince wasn’t worthy of the crown.

His mother returned with two drinks and a plate of sandwiches. “Yvonne told me you hadn’t eaten all day, so I fixed you something.” He sat down on the piano bench and bit into a quarter of a crustless peanut butter and bacon bit sandwich, his childhood favorite. The bread was stiff, the peanut butter musty with age. But then, in the last few days, food and drink held all the appeal of cardboard and dishwater.

She ran her fingers through his hair and cupped his cheek. He fussed with his hair to conceal the burgeoning bald spot she had exposed.

“What am I going to do, Mom?”

Dorsey thought he saw an irritated look cross his mother’s face.

“I wish I had some words of wisdom for you, sweetheart, but you’re a big boy. You knew this day was coming.”

“Some day, yeah, but why so soon? Why now? He had so much more left to teach me. How am I ever going to write a decent song now?”

His mother stiffened. “Is that what’s bothering you?”

“I may have his genes, but damn it, it’s not enough. It just doesn’t flow through me that way. He promised we could work on my stuff now that he wasn’t going to be traveling so much.”

Indeed, Roy Duquesne had recently told his son that they could take

some time and diagnose what was turning all of Dorsey's songwriting efforts into lead balloons. Roy offered to record some demos and contribute some sax solos to nudge the songs along. Building Dorsey's songs was going to take the place of all the birdhouses, treehouses and soapbox derby cars they never built together. He might end up with a few solid tunes, but even better, it was a do-over on his childhood.

As if starting their first session, Dorsey picked up a Hofner and plucked out the bass intro for "Anybody But You," the dog he had trotted out at Lumina Pavilion.

"Whoops," his mother said softly.

"Whoops, what?" he asked.

"Didn't you make a mistake?"

"No. It's supposed to sound like that."

"Ah, well. I see."

Dorsey put the bass back on its stand.

His mother sat next to him on the bench, pushing him over with her hip. Her familiar scent of Chanel, Revlon and alcohol drifted his way. She took his hand and clamped down hard, avoiding his eyes.

"Dorsey, your father wasn't the man you thought he was."

He searched her face for emotion, but her gaze remained on their clasped hands.

Dorsey pulled his hand back. "I know he wasn't perfect, but you don't have to trash his legacy."

"Get off your high horse, honey. I'm not about to 'trash' anything. It's time you knew the truth about some things."

"The truth?" Dorsey stood up, his voice shaky. He held up his index finger, preparing to tick off a list. "Here's some truth for you. Fact: my father was a devoted family man who never strayed and raised me with solid values and integrity."

His mother looked at him placidly, her lips pressed together.

"Fact," he continued, extending another finger, "my father was a generous, upstanding moral person who didn't smoke, drink to excess or say any swear words you couldn't hear on TV."

Cherry Duquesne let out a small sigh, enduring her son's tirade.

"And fact," he concluded, "my father was one of the greatest sax players to ever walk the planet. Do you dispute any of that?"

"As a matter of fact, I do."

"Which part?"

"The part about him being your father."