



jukebox

a love story

gina noelle daggett

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by
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Dedication

Jukebox is dedicated to Nana—my No.1 fan and soul sister—and my generous, devoted parents, Bill and Jennifer. Thank you for supporting me every step of the way, for passing on fierce determination and for setting the bar so high in life and in love.

And to all the young Graces and Harpers out there...
May you find the strength to stand
in the truth of who you are, no
matter the cost.
This one's for you.

Acknowledgments

Jukebox has been a decade-long journey that includes seven drafts, five states, four countries, one marathon, three hard drive meltdowns, nineteen pairs of running shoes, one writing program, five moves, two writing retreats, four laptops, a small forest, a handful of all-nighters, three iPods, innumerable sticks of Nag Champa, a trail of dead babies, (beloved words/scenes) tears, laughter, frosty pints of Hefeweizen, a deskful of black Uni-ball Vision pens, drums of candle wax, hundreds of sunrises, bottles of wine, weeks of music, vats of coffees, and enough sushi to fill a Japanese fishing boat.

At a young age, I learned the importance of surrounding myself with good people—those who are loyal, reliable, sincere, funny, inspiring, and, when possible, those who are wiser than myself. If this is the measure of success, I've done pretty well in life and as it relates to the evolution of this novel.

Two women in particular who fit this bill: my literary agent, Holly Bemiss, and Bella Books' Contributing Editor, Katherine V. Forrest. These two gems (both of whom, I believe, I manifested into my life) gave much of themselves to *Jukebox*, ensuring that it not only ended up in your hands, but also, now that it is, that you won't put it down.

Holly: Thank you for your leap of faith, for working hard, for taking such good care and for your repeated, insightful feedback. You were just what I needed, right when I needed it. And continue to be. I deeply appreciate you and our alliance.

Katherine: No one has gotten closer to Grace and Harper than you and no one has taught me as much about the craft. Stuff you can't learn in school. That pencil you hold is golden, as is your prolific career as an award-winning author. Thank you for your time and for everything you gave.

Thank you POWER UP and Stacy Codikow/Lisa Thrasher/Chris Thrasher for my 2004 Filmmakers Fund grant, which *Jukebox* received as a work-in-progress. I've since adapted the novel into a screenplay and plan on going into pre-production on the film in 2011. You can follow its progress here: chateautertainment.com.

Thank you Linda Hill at Bella Books for publishing this little love story and for allowing me to design the cover. Also, thank you Belgian photographer Derek Brouwers for your stellar jukebox cover photos, both of which were taken at a bar in Barcelona, Spain. (A link to his work can be found at jukeboxnovel.com.)

Beyond those generous souls, there are other fingerprints all over this novel—so many who've contributed to *Jukebox* or supported me in my career along the way.

Kelly Staley, thank you for the music and for your enduring friendship.

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To any I may've forgotten—please forgive me.

If you'd like to buy the songs which are the melodic bones of this story, visit: jukeboxnovel.com. While you're there, sign up for the mailing list and I'll keep you apprised of all-things-*Jukebox* and let you know when I'm in your neighborhood for a reading.

I hope you enjoy this story. It's a paradigm of persistence and determination and, truly, a labor of love.

Cheers,

Gina Noelle Daggett

PLAYLIST

We've Only Just Begun
Wisbin' And Hopin'
You Are My Lady
If Only For One Night
Hello Again
I Kissed A Girl
Let's Get It On
Secret Lovers
The Lady In Red
Private Eyes
My Boyfriend's Back
Pressure
The Carnival Is Over
Fire
Hold On
Gone Too Soon
Alone
I Shall Believe
Hangin' By A Thread
Love Bites
Somewhere In My Broken Heart
Missing You
Again

The Carpenters
Dusty Springfield
Freddie Jackson
Luther Vandross
Neil Diamond
Jill Sobule
Marvin Gaye
Atlantic Starr
Chris De Burgh
Daryl Hall & John Oates
The Angels
Billy Joel
Dead Can Dance
The Pointer Sisters
Sarah McLachlan
Babyface
Heart
Sheryl Crow
Jann Arden
Def Leppard
Billy Dean
John Waite
Janet Jackson

Thinkin' About You
Reunited
Why
You Still Move Me
Against All Odds
Guilty

I Just Fall In Love Again
We're All Alone
Look What You've Done To Me
The Old Songs
Late For The Sky
Hallelujah
Love Is Everything
You Had Time
The Glory Of Love

Trisha Yearwood
Peaches & Herb
Annie Lennox
Dan Seals
Phil Collins
Barbra Streisand &
Barry Gibb
Anne Murray
Crystal Gayle
Boz Scaggs
Barry Manilow
Jackson Browne
Jeff Buckley
k.d. lang
Ani DiFranco
Bette Midler

As Harper Alessi walked the dark stairs, crimson blood dotted each step. The rag, wrapped tightly around her hand, was saturated.

Howling gusts rattled the old windowpanes as she entered the bathroom. The lights flickered. At the pedestal sink, she cleaned the cut and used a tourniquet on her finger, which hadn't stopped bleeding since she sliced it open. Her wavy chestnut hair, twisted into a clip, was a mess, halfway fallen, and she couldn't have cared less.

Before leaving the safe confines of the washroom, Harper turned off the light. Alone, she stood in the dark and let herself cry. And it wasn't about the wound. Slouched over against the linen cabinet, she couldn't hold it any longer; the ripping and tearing in her chest made it difficult to breathe.

She took one final breath before entering her bedroom again, knowing the attic door was still wide open. So was her hope chest inside. And all the secrets it held.

Sprinkled like blue confetti, broken glass littered the rough floor panels of the low-ceiling attic. Woolly insulation, folded like heaps of cotton candy, still partially encircled the chest even though it had been pushed aside by the intruder, who'd clearly known what they were after.

Amidst the debris, items from Harper's past were strewn about, in piles here and there—a teetering stack of 45s was covered in bits of torn photos like fallen cherry blossoms.

A solitary utility light swung as a beacon above as she approached the trunk, careful where she stepped. The ornamental cedar chest had been in her family for three generations. It was her grandmother's and had crossed the Pond by boat in 1952, when she arrived from Italy.

Tentatively, Harper knelt down beside it.

As she surveyed what was left behind, her grief slowly galvanized into anger.

A strand of pearls, given to Harper the night of her debutante ball, was curved like a millipede on the floor. Beside it were several worn cassette tapes with handwritten song titles. Letters Harper collected that European summer, partially bound in string, were picked apart.

All that was left of the antique pickling jar from Uncle Alvaro was the rusted handle and mouth. The rest was scattered like a booby trap now, shards misted with blood.

For Harper, the most alarming discovery was under one of her sorority sweatshirts, open and face down. The stained and ragged journal from her night of revelation on the mountain.

She closed her eyes and took in its familiar scent. The smell—her body's most acute sense—gently opened up cavities in Harper's soul, ones better left sealed.

She hadn't touched it in twelve years. Hadn't wanted to. Hadn't been ready.

There were thousands of places Grace Dunlop would've rather been than in Jack Stowe's office. There was one in particular and it had her on the edge of a panic attack.

Even before Stowe began reading her great grandfather's will, Grace was already staring at the ceiling, worlds away from his downtown Phoenix law office.

Grace's mom, Cilla, sat to her left. They were the spitting image of each other, she and Grace—the same flushed apple cheeks, loose blond curls and a delicately feminine body despite the hours spent at the gym.

Other Dunlop heirs were seated around the expansive

conference room table, which had a silver bowl of Granny Smith apples at its center. Stowe was at the head. Grace's foot tapped steadily as Stowe, the decrepit lawyer who'd been the executor of James Warden Dunlop's will since he died, cleared his throat.

"All right, let's get started," Stowe said, adjusting his western belt buckle. He nodded to one of his assistants, who fiddled with a tape recorder before he began.

Grace had never met her great-grandfather, JW, as he was known to his inner circle, but he was a man whom Grace had been—along with the rest of the family—living her life for since she was eighteen, the age each heir was brought into the abundant Dunlop Trust.

Grace never looked at Stowe when he read the will, which happened every August. Per JW's wishes, each year they'd gathered as a family, put their hands on a King James Bible and sworn their lives away.

Stowe started reading: "This is the last will and testament of me, James Warden Dunlop, of sound mind"—Grace let out a caustic laugh—"and body." Cilla shot her a look, as she always did. It was like clockwork.

Stowe sped up when he got to the next section, since they'd all heard it so many times.

"I hereby revoke all wills and testamentary dispositions of every nature and kind whatsoever by me hereto before made..."

Rubbing her temples, Grace tried to tune out Stowe, a man she'd hated her entire adult life. The only man she loathed more than JW. They were cut from the same cloth, Stowe and her great-granddaddy.

JW had unabashedly controlled every member of the Dunlop clan since the day he made his first million. The hundreds of millions that followed only dug the claws deeper.

"I give, devise and bequeath annual installments to all heirs, beginning at their eighteenth birthday, the dividends and interest accrued in the established trust split equally among able beneficiaries who meet these set forth conditions." Stowe pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and coughed out a lung into it.

Grace cringed. She hated this part the most, the list. She took a deep breath, fighting back tears, as Stowe continued.

“All heirs to retain family name, regardless of sex. All heirs to marry white-skinned persons of European descent,” Stowe said. “All heirs to be circumcised at birth.”

Sitting in the leather swivel chair, Grace closed her eyes and shut out the rest of the list; she couldn’t hear the most painful parts again. Instead, she floated off to her favorite place—the Italian countryside, where she chased fireflies through a maze of grapevines. Distant laughter. Booming beats of thunder. The night sky veined with lightning.

“Grace?” Stowe barked.

Despite being startled, Grace slowly opened her eyes.

“Do you comply?” Stowe asked.

Hesitating, Grace took a long hard look at Cilla before answering.

Grace’s glare moved to Stowe as she put her hand on the Bible.

*We hope you enjoyed this
Bella Appetizer.*

