Jessie Durango is about to get everything she wants. Almost...
Her school day finally over, Jessie Durango trudged home, reluctant to go inside and start her schoolwork. Normally, she had to do her homework as soon as she got home, and once she finished her assignments and left them on the kitchen table for her mother to review, Jessie was supposed to start her chores. Every Monday through Friday homework then chores filled the time between school and dinner, and Jessie always followed the ritual. But today, the first nice day in a long string of lousy ones, the sun beckoned her to stay outside and play with her friends, though she knew that she wouldn’t. Facing her mother’s disappointment and anger was far worse than missing out on rare pleasant weather, so she dallied as much as possible, extending her enjoyment of the outdoors.

A block from home, though, she spotted her Papa Nestor’s truck parked in front of her house. As usual, her abuelo had filled the bed of his truck, but since he had put a tarp over the lumpy contents, she couldn’t tell what treasures he had found. Forgetting about the sun and the warm, gentle breeze playing with her hair, Jessie ran the rest of the way home.
She burst through the front door of her house, dropped her backpack on the floor and ran to the kitchen. Her grandfather sat at the table reading the newspaper. He had, as was his habit, turned on the radio, and the spacious and pristine kitchen was warmed by the sounds of jazz mingled with her Papa Nestor’s soft, harmonic humming. Nestor Durango inhabited a world filled with music, and even the most mundane aspects of his life took on a fantastic appeal thanks to the addition of his own soundtrack. Like him, Jessie eagerly explored the harmonic world around her. Recognizing a kindred spirit, Papa Nestor had impressed upon Jessie the importance of Latin musical influences, but they had also explored classical music, the blues, gospel, country and, with the help of her tía, some rock and roll. Though he preferred Coltrane and Count Basie to The Clash or The Cure, Papa Nestor indulged his youngest grandchild and musical ally to develop her burgeoning interest in his great passion.

“Papa!” Jessie squealed as she leapt into his lap and threw her arms around his neck, inhaling the faint aromas of pipe tobacco, leather and Old Spice, the smells of her abuelo. “What are you doing here?”

“I came to see you,” he said and groaned a little as he set her back on the floor. “I brought you something.”

“A present? Can I have it now?”

“Jessie!” her mother, home from her job as a high school Spanish teacher, called from the front door that Jessie had left wide open. “I’ve told you about leaving your things all over the floor. Come pick up your bag and start your homework.”

Jessie crossed her eyes and offered a comically pained expression, to her Papa’s amusement, but before her mother had to call her again, Jessie obeyed. “Sorry, Mom,” she offered as she reached for the bag, dreading the math worksheets it contained. “I just got so excited when I saw Papa that I forgot.”

“Your Papa is here?” Her mother’s bewildered expression sent Jessie’s thoughts back to Papa Nestor’s surprise visit to deliver a surprise present and save her, at least temporarily, from homework and chores.
“Buenos tardes, Silvia,” Nestor’s velvety voice sounded from the doorway. “I brought Jessie an early birthday present, but I don’t want to distract her from her studies.”

“Not a difficult task, Nestor, believe me.”

“Please Mom?” Jessie grabbed her mother’s arm. “I promise I’ll do all of my homework and my chores right after. Please can I have it now?” Her tenth birthday was still three weeks away, but as usual her abuelo had started the celebration early. Jessie knew she’d never be able to concentrate on her homework until she found out what Papa Nestor had gotten her.

Silvia Durango smiled at her youngest child and nodded. “I expect you to finish your homework before dinner, mija.”

“I promise,” Jessie swore, hand on heart.

Nestor took a long, slender, newspaper-wrapped packet from behind his back and handed it to his granddaughter. “The rest is in my truck,” he told her, smiling at the quizzical expression on her face as she held her first pair of drumsticks in her soft, small hands. He laughed gently as he caught Silvia’s wide-eyed reaction to his gift.

Together Jessie and her abuelo walked to Papa Nestor’s pickup truck. He pulled the tarp from the mysterious lump in the bed of the truck, and Jessie squealed again and climbed up to inspect her gift more closely. Before her sat a used but well-loved four-piece drum kit. She ran her hand over the finish—a pearly light blue, now her favorite color—and gently tapped the snare with the sticks her abuelo had given her. More than anything she wanted to sit down, start playing and not stop until she had mastered this instrument, but she saw her mother watching from the front door of the house and knew she would have to wait.

“You love music with your soul, like I do, Jessie. We’ve always shared that, and we always will, even when I’m not with you, mija. Remember that.”

“Gracias, Papa,” Jessie said and hugged her grandfather tightly as he lifted her from the truck. They held hands as they headed back inside for Jessie to keep her promise to her mother.

She forgot her Papa’s words as she worked on her assignments and tended to her household chores, but a month later, when
her parents broke the news of her beloved grandfather’s death to her and her brother, she remembered what he said. After that, whenever she practiced, she felt close to him, and she felt that she could keep him alive just by making music.

* * *

The thick air in the hallway closed in on Zoey, its overpowering stench of beef and onions gagging her. Still, that wasn’t why she found it so hard to breathe. Looking past her best friend rather than at her, Zoey focused on the sweating window beyond Angela’s wildly wavy brown hair. Outside the rain blew almost horizontally in the brutal wind, but there in the hall outside the Tuckers’ apartment the still air grew even more stifling. Angela’s accusation hung between them, oppressive in its weight.

“You don’t think he’s good enough for you.” She folded her arms across her still flat chest and set her jaw, daring Zoey to deny the truth of this statement. In four years of friendship Zoey had seen that look only a few times, but it was enough to know things never went well for the person on the receiving end.

“No, Ange, that’s not it.”

She’d been best friends with Angela since the fifth grade when the Tuckers had moved into the apartment below Zoey’s family. Zoey’d spent so much time in their home that they’d become a second family to her, with Angie’s older brother, Ian, filling that void in her own life. Even now that he was a senior and she was a lowly freshman, he always talked to her at school. He’d even helped her make it onto the cross-country team, running with her and offering friendly advice after his own varsity training finished for the day. A standout athlete, he knew what would help her and didn’t hesitate to suggest improvements. He was a sweet, wonderful guy, and she loved him. Just not that way.

She searched for the words to explain, but Angela’s stern expression short-circuited Zoey’s brain. “Ian’s a great guy,” she offered apologetically.
“Just not great enough for perfect Zoey Carmichael,” Angela sneered.

“That’s not why I said no.”

Again focusing on the harsh weather, Zoey recalled with anguish Jake Morris, the other cross-country star and the reason she’d started running to begin with. Jake Morris, the boy she loved with all her heart, Jake Morris, the junior that every girl, including seniors, wanted to be with and whom she had been with for two beautiful months. She remembered his brutality, and still she loved him. She saw herself confessing her feelings and heard him agreeing, “Me too,” in that soft, low voice before she gave herself to him entirely. He’d been her first, and a week later he’d dumped her for Julie Mott, a faster runner on the junior varsity team.

She’d skipped practice that day—not caring what fresh torment Coach would have for her—and had run all the way home, straight to Angela’s bedroom where she poured out her soul and sorrow to the only sympathetic ear she needed. She’d cried for hours, wailing so fervently that Ian, finally home from practice, took one look at Zoey and, rather than giving her a hard time, just smiled sympathetically and walked away.

She thought Angela should remember the hurt, would understand why, even after all these weeks, she just couldn’t go out with Ian. Disappointed, hurting, she voiced her concerns. “After the thing with Jake, I don’t want to date anybody. I don’t want to hurt like that again.” She risked a glance at her friend and saw that Angela’s expression had softened. She did understand. Zoey grabbed her best friend’s hands and, squeezing them, said, “Besides Ian’s like a brother to me. It would be weird, I think, and then if things didn’t work out, I might lose your friendship. I couldn’t bear to lose you, Ange. You mean more to me than having a boyfriend.”

Angela’s face hardened again, and she pulled her hands from Zoey’s hastily. “Ian is my brother, and that’s way more important than any friendship.” Angela turned toward her apartment door, her hand reaching for the knob.
“Wait.” Zoey grabbed Angela’s arm, keeping her in the hall. “Angela please.” She choked on her tears. “Please, Ange, I’m sorry. What can I do?”

Turning slightly to face her pathetic friend, Angela told her, “You can’t do anything, Zoey. You really hurt Ian, and he doesn’t want to see you around here anymore.” Wheeling back to the entryway, Angela said to the door, “Neither do I.”

Just like that she walked away from their four-year friendship. Zoey thought she’d heard uncertainty in Angela’s last comment, and hoping that wasn’t just wishful thinking, she tried repeatedly to make amends. Angela rebuffed her at every turn. By the time Angela’s family moved to Park Ridge at the end of the year, any ties they’d had to each other were completely severed. Outside of her family, Zoey felt woefully alone.
Seventeen years after her grandfather’s death, Jessie felt certain he would be proud of her and the passion for all things musical that he had cultivated in her. Over the years, his final gift to her—music—had flourished so that now, Jessie made her love of it an integral part of her existence, earning a respectable following but a small income as the drummer for Nuclear Boots. As would be expected of the determined granddaughter of a never-resting immigrant, she worked tirelessly at her craft, practicing every day whether her bandmates were up for it or not. However, since they all shared an intense dedication to the band, as well as a place in Pilsen, she usually found them as ready to rehearse as she.

The neighborhood’s status as a hub of Hispanics and artists on Chicago’s not quite fashionable Near West Side meant Jessie and her bandmates could easily afford to rent out a three-story house. The bottom two floors belonged, for the most part, to the guys, but as the first floor held their living room and rehearsal space—which the boys had thoughtfully decorated
with taxidermic artifacts and beer paraphernalia and in which the musty scent of stale beer and old sweat socks always lingered—Jessie found herself spending a fair amount of time there. The second floor, where the guys each had a bedroom, was a disaster area Jessie passed through as quickly as possible to get to the third floor, a mother-in-law’s apartment that she claimed for herself. For two months, Sean (forgetting or ignoring the fact that Jessie paid more rent) had griped at every opportunity that Jessie was acting like the queen of the band, living in her “palatial suite” while the rest of them shared cramped quarters below her. His complaining stopped when Neal threatened to buy him a pacifier.

Jessie ignored Sean’s surliness unless it affected the music. She wanted no part of his drama (even though he tried to hang it on her), and the benefits of their living arrangement far outweighed Sean’s attitude. Sharing a house—not a grungy apartment—with her band made almost every aspect of their collaboration easier. On top of that, having her own home within a home provided Jessie with a private living space that her house and bandmates only entered with her permission. She suspected that, at least in Sean’s case, this was more out of fear of her overprotective ex-Marine brother (who had made his menacing presence felt the day they all moved in together) than respect for her privacy, but as long as none of them touched her bathroom or kitchen, she didn’t care.

Despite, or perhaps due to, her role as the only female in the band, Jessie refused to play the girl card and be thought of as weaker or less valuable than the guys. The band was just as much her baby as theirs, and because of this, whenever they had a show, she always made sure she was involved in every aspect of preparations, from packing up gear and loading it into her truck to setting up at the venue. The harder she worked on their shared dream, the more invaluable she felt, so she was not angered when, almost finished arranging their equipment in the truck, she spotted Neal Murphy, Nuclear Boots’s singer and lyricist, strolling up the block with his love interest of the moment. Though he’d been seeing Zoey Carmichael for over
four months, this was the first time he’d brought her around the band. He’d confided in Jessie, with an endearing shyness she was surprised to see in anyone as sure of himself as Neal, that though he’d initially seen Zoey, like all the others, as a body, he’d grown to respect and admire her.

“She’s smart, Jess, so smart.” He’d beamed as if he was somehow responsible for his girlfriend’s intelligence. “She’s an English professor. She’s got a freakin’ Ph.D.” Quite a turnaround from his usual appreciation for women. Most of his conquests couldn’t string three sentences together.

“If she’s so special, why haven’t I met her?”

“You will. Soon I hope. I don’t want to rush things.”

“Excuse me? You’re like the cheetah of the dating world. You go through women like Paul goes through guitar strings. Since when do you do anything but rush things?”

“Since Zoey,” he’d replied so sweetly she didn’t know whether to hug him or vomit on his perfectly scuffed shoes. “There’s something, I don’t know, different this time. I can’t figure it out, but—” He stopped midsentence, his eyes getting a dreamy, faraway look. He stirred himself from his reverie and spoke, almost shyly, “You’ll meet her soon. I promise.” Still it had been nearly a month since their conversation, and this was the first she’d seen of Zoey.

Beyond curious, Jessie stopped what she was doing and assessed the pair that approached her through the waning sunlight of the early spring afternoon. He strode with the same confidence he exuded onstage, completely self-assured and at ease in his lanky, six-foot frame. His comfortably worn, dirty-looking jeans, old green T-shirt, gas station attendant’s jacket and biker boots were his compromise between personal style and the rock and roll uniform, and though he kept his shaggy brown hair looking greasy and unclean in the grungy style currently favored by local musicians, Jessie knew it was an act. Neal meticulously groomed himself to look like a slob.

At his side, Zoey—busty and pretty like all the rest—was startlingly tall. No mere doll for Neal’s amusement, Zoey had to be five foot ten at least. Jessie eyed her height with the
halfhearted disdain she usually reserved for tall girls. (At five foot three, Jessie was the tallest woman in her family but otherwise unenviably short in most groupings.) She wore faded jeans that seemed to fit her slender form perfectly, accentuating strong thighs and a slight curve of hip. Jessie noticed with a mixture of relief at her good sense and further irritation at her height that this girl chose not to mix high heels with jeans, a fashion error that Jessie found unforgivable. Instead, battered Chuck Taylors emerged from beneath the frayed hem of Zoey’s pants. Further separating her from all the other cute blondes in their too clingy, immobilizing blouses, this one had donned a soft, pale blue V-neck sweater, highlighting her full breasts and trim waist. Unlike her many predecessors, Zoey walked next to Neal without draping herself all over him. In fact, aside from holding his hand, she showed no outward signs of infatuation. Watching their approach, an uneasiness settled in Jessie’s stomach.

“How long do you think this one will last?” Sean Black, tall, wiry and very tattooed, lifted his bass into the truck and gestured toward Neal and Zoey with the barest motion of his shaved head.

“She’s hot,” Paul Davidson answered as he scrutinized the pair walking toward them. Paul, closer to Jessie’s height than Neal and Sean, bore a slight resemblance to Kurt Cobain, a similarity which thankfully ended with their shared love of music, Paul’s one true addiction. “Maybe too hot for him. I give it another month before she dumps him.”

Jessie cringed and kept her mouth shut about Neal’s true feelings for Zoey, understanding that he would be embarrassed if Sean and Paul suspected. None of them had ever known Neal to experience any emotion beyond lust for any woman he’d been with before, and though Jessie was far from experienced, her heart had been trampled before. She remembered the incident bitterly and worried about Neal. She couldn’t shake the thought that this, his first adult foray into love, would not end well for him.

Eager to meet Zoey, the better to assess her worthiness, Jessie settled herself on the truck’s open gate as the lovebirds covered the remaining distance between them. She drew her
knees to her chest and brushed dust from her pants. Jessie wore what she considered her cute punk rock girl outfit: soft gray Dickies, boots, and a girly but not-too-tight dark blouse, with her thick, sable hair curling playfully onto her shoulders from childish pigtails. Though striking with her caramel skin and fine Aztec features, she did not see herself as the type who drove men wild. Not like the woman striding her way.

“Sorry I’m late, guys,” Neal said as he eased himself onto the gate next to Jessie. Still holding Zoey’s hand, he pulled her closer to himself and the band and introduced her to Sean, Paul and Jessie, pointing at each individual in turn.

Sean nodded and muttered a noncommittal “Hey,” while Paul leaned back against the truck and raised the right corner of his mouth. Not quite a smile, but it was about the limit of his investment in Neal’s flings. He’d probably already forgotten her name. Jessie, however, smiled and said, “It’s nice to meet you,” for which Neal sent her a small but grateful grin.

Zoey responded with an easy smile and finally spoke. “I’ve heard so much about all of you. It’s nice to finally put faces to the names.” Sean and Paul exchanged raised eyebrows at the thought of Neal spending any time with this woman talking about anything, especially them. Zoey didn’t notice but kept speaking. “Really, I’m the one who should be apologizing.” Her voice was sultry, warm and inviting, not the high and soft baby voice of Neal’s typical woman. “It’s my fault that we’re late.”

“What did you do? Mess up his hair?” Jessie smiled more fully as Neal rolled his eyes and unconsciously fingered a few strands on his forehead.

Zoey laughed along with the band and then spoke. “I wish. Actually, I got trapped at an emergency faculty meeting that dragged on for over an hour, so I was late getting home to change, which means I wasn’t ready to go when Neal arrived.”

Jessie was about to interrogate Zoey (with Neal’s best interests in mind, of course), but Sean and Paul, apparently uninterested in Zoey and ready to leave, strolled over to their motorcycles and brought the once dormant engines to thunderous life.
“We’ll catch you over there,” Paul shouted before roaring after Sean in a veil of noise.

With Zoey and Neal joining Jessie in the cab of her decades old red and white Ford F-150, Jessie sped off in the direction of the recently opened club where the band would be playing that night. “So,” she started simply, “Neal told me you’re a teacher. How do you like it?”

Zoey, sitting in the middle of the bench seat, angled her long legs into Neal’s portion of the floor to avoid interfering with the gear shift. The tangle their gangly limbs created on the passenger side of the cab, though comical to Jessie, put Zoey at a slightly awkward angle for talking, but she answered readily.

“The hours are crazy, especially when there are papers to grade, the pay isn’t immense for the work involved, and several of my colleagues seem prematurely burnt out. But I love it.” Zoey craned her neck to look at Jessie when she spoke, and Jessie met her gaze as she paused at a stop sign. Zoey’s deep green eyes sparked as she elaborated.

“Much of the time my students seem bored or like they’re only in class to kill time until something better comes along.”

Jessie cringed inwardly, thinking of her own time in school. All she’d wanted to do was get out and experience anything other than another lecture or a math test.

“But now and then I’ll catch the moment of understanding. I’ll actually see their faces change as they grasp some concept I’ve been droning on about, and it’s magical. I feel so alive and influential but at the same time insignificant. I can’t quite explain it, but it makes all the bad stuff fade into the background.” Zoey blushed and then continued, “Speaking of droning on. I’m sorry. Sometimes I forget what a dork I am for loving school.”

“It’s all right. You were almost making me regret not going to college,” Jessie offered. Zoey’s love of teaching reminded Jessie of her own mother’s commitment to her students. Jessie saw a hint of what would draw Neal so strongly to Zoey, and she put a checkmark in the “pro” column of her mental Zoey checklist.

“Thank you.” Zoey smiled genuinely and placed a hand on Jessie’s arm in thanks. Jessie felt the warmth radiating from
Zoey’s hand. The cab fell silent for a moment as Neal pulled Zoey to him and kissed her.

Uncharacteristically irritated by the impending make out session, Jessie interjected with the first question that popped into her head. “So, what do you do for fun?” She grimaced at the cliché she’d just uttered, but again Zoey seemed eager to respond.

“The usual stuff—books, movies. I run a lot.”

“You run? Voluntarily?”

“Yes,” she laughed. “I ran track and cross-country in school. It’s what paid for most of my college education actually, and now I just feel off if I don’t put in at least twenty-five miles a week.”

“Ugh. I was late to soccer practice once,” Jessie recalled. “Coach Sullivan made me run sprints until I puked. I have never been late for anything else in my life.”

“My baby sister thought I was nuts too. She gave me a shirt that said, ‘My sport is your sport’s punishment.’ But then her sophomore year of high school, she joined the cross-country team, so I had to get her a shirt just like mine.”

“I used to watch the girls running after school,” Neal jumped in. “That was no punishment.” Neal’s wide grin and flirty wink let them know that he was only partially being a pig. Zoey playfully slugged him in the ribs anyway.

Jessie, enjoying the conversation more than she had anticipated, put another checkmark in the “pro” column of her Zoey list before asking, “How did you and Neal meet? He didn’t say.”

“It’s a funny story actually. I was on a date with another man—”


“Neal just sauntered up and asked me out. I thought that kind of audacity should be rewarded, so I said yes.”

“Didn’t your date mind?” Zoey’s flightiness startled Jessie.

“He was so busy with a ‘very important business call’ that I’m not sure he noticed when I said goodbye and left with Neal.” Neal chuckled and said something about the other guy’s
loss being his gain. She wondered what Neal could possibly be thinking and was still dumbfounded when she pulled into the alley behind the club where Sean and Paul were waiting to unload the gear.

Zoey grabbed a guitar as atonement for her tardiness and followed Sean and Paul into the club, expressing an interest in witnessing the technical side of the music business. Neal watched them enter the building then pounced on the opportunity to talk to Jessie alone.

“Well?”

He seemed eager to hear Jessie’s opinion, an eagerness that Jessie did not share. She understood the complicated laws of dating and friendship and knew that what Neal was really asking for was Jessie’s approval. The potential problems that could spring from her total honesty were innumerable, so Jessie simply said, “She’s okay.”

Neal’s face, so full of joy a moment before, fell instantly.

“You don’t like her.”

“I’ve spent twenty minutes with her. I don’t know her well enough to not like her.” Jessie stepped carefully.

“But?” Neal asked as he began unloading the truck. He knew Jessie well enough to know that she was keeping quiet about something.

“But I’m worried.”

“About what?”

“About you, dummy. What if you get hurt?”

Neal set the amp he held on the ground and looked directly at Jessie. “You’re a good friend, but you don’t need to worry about me, Durango. I’ll be fine.”

“I bet What’s-His-Name thought the same thing before Zoey changed her mind middate,’” Jessie hadn’t meant to say that, but now that she had, she didn’t regret it. Neal seemed surprised by her words, which merely strengthened Jessie’s resolve to urge Neal to protect himself and his emotions. Someone had to. “I guess she seems nice, but doesn’t it bother you that she left her date with another man to go out with you? She just jumps from one warm body to the next. What kind of person does that? She
sounds like a—” She stopped herself just before the word *puta* came flying out of her mouth. She had already said more than she should have, and there was no way Neal would forgive her for calling his new girlfriend a whore.

“Like a what?” Neal asked, his voice tight.

“Like a flighty person.” Neal’s posture relaxed a little, indicating to Jessie that he wasn’t mad at her. “Just make sure she’s someone you can really trust your heart with.”

“That guy she was with was an ass who only cared about himself. I’ll be fine,” he repeated.

“I hope so,” Jessie relented. “You’re too much of a wimp to handle heartache.”

Neal hugged Jessie, a thanks for her concern and a sign that he wouldn’t hold it against her. “Do me a favor,” he said. “Get to know her. I think you’ll really like her if you give her a chance.”

“If it will make you happy,” Jessie said, “I will get to know her better.” She grabbed the amp he had set on the ground and headed inside the club.

Ears ringing and eyes watering, Zoey prayed the night wouldn’t be a complete waste of time. The first band, whose name she’d missed, had seemed some sort of punishment for unknown sins. The singer—and she hesitated to call him that—had shrieked near-incomprehensible lyrics over intense (and apparently intentional) feedback while the drummer had beaten forcefully on anything within his reach. The next group had been no better, and despite the comparatively mellow sound of the band currently on the stage, Zoey’s head still pounded from the initial onslaught. Paying minimal attention to this, the third in a line of mediocre to awful bands walking through their sets, Zoey hoped that Neal’s band would at least be tolerable so she wouldn’t have to break up with him just to avoid another night like this.

Nuclear Boots had performed a number of times since she’d started seeing Neal, but other commitments had always prevented her from attending. And the fact was she shouldn’t even be there tonight—the mountain of essays she’d collected
earlier in the day taunted her with its overwhelming need for corrections. But Neal had looked so excited and eager when he’d told her about the show that she’d agreed to attend in spite of her workload.

Now, as she stood between Maureen and Carla—the other band girlfriends—she regretted her decision. The volume of the music made conversation next to impossible (though Maureen and Carla didn’t seem to notice), and Neal had wandered off because they were up next, so she bought herself another beer and waited for her agony to end.

Easily seeing the stage over the heads of those in front of her, she clapped politely as the third band cleared out, and she sighed, preparing herself for the worst, when she saw Neal and the others walk onstage for the quick transfer of instruments before they began. She’d watched their initial preparations with curiosity, having never before been privy to the backstage world of music and had been fascinated to learn that, for speed’s sake, all of the drummers from the several bands playing that night would be sharing the same drum kit. Each drummer provided his or her own sticks, snare and cymbals, which could be switched out much more quickly than breaking down and assembling an entire drum kit for every band. The concept of musicians using each other’s instruments seemed odd to Zoey when Jessie had kindly if not patiently explained it. Now, as she watched the band, impressed by the speed and professionalism of their setup, she understood how it simplified the process for everyone. Impossibly soon they went to their respective places and, without preamble, began to play.

Zoey was pleasantly surprised by the sound that reached her ears. From the times she’d heard him sing in her apartment, she knew Neal could carry a tune. But now he infused his songs with passion, demonstrating an impressive vocal range that included a low, sexy growl. She paid minimal attention to the other members of the band, noting with little interest how the near river of sweat running down Sean’s face belied the laid-back calm typical of a bass player. Likewise Paul seemed totally at ease and unaffected, but his hands, in unceasing motion,
produced a steady stream of notes that ranged from surfer rock to the crunching assault of near heavy metal. It was all so perfectly rock and roll.

It took Zoey until the third song to shift her gaze to the drums. After that her eyes seldom veered from that focal point. Jessie moved fluidly, precisely, filling every inch of the song with percussion, and though her movements seemed unpredictable, every beat fit the music. Far from merely providing background noise or just keeping time, she tackled each song with ferocity, driving the music forward, and when, on one song, she blended her high Spanish vocals with Neal’s deep English, her strong, pure voice provided a sharp yet pleasant counterpoint to the rest of the music. Though Zoey had no clue what Jessie sang, the sound of the words, the rhythm they created within her, moved her.

The real beauty of Jessie’s musicality, though, lay not in her movements or in the muscularity of the sound she produced, but rather in her face. Her expression indicated an intense focus and revealed the absolute carnal joy she felt making music. Her passion ignited a corresponding joy in Zoey that she felt to her extremities.

Song after song Jessie maintained this intensity as song after song Zoey’s focus zoomed in on her, scarcely shifting to the other members of the band. She watched Jessie gulp down water from a plastic bottle as Neal talked to the crowd, but his words barely registered she was so anxious for the next song to begin. Two and a half minutes later Carla’s catcalls jarred Zoey from her daze, and she joined the hearty applause of the crowd around her. She watched impatiently as the band cleared the stage for the next group, eager to approach Jessie and congratulate her.

Jessie watched Neal, who stood front and center, looking out at the crowd, good-sized and raucous for a Wednesday. Slightly to his left Paul switched guitars for their final number, and opposite him Sean took a long swallow of beer and wiped sweat from his forehead with the hem of his shirt. At the very front of the crowd Jessie spotted Zoey in a group with Sean’s and Paul’s
girlfriends and their small but loyal fan base. Jessie drank deeply from her water bottle, condensation rapidly coating its outside. As always she would wait until after the show to drink. Setting the bottle down, she returned her focus to Neal. “If it’s all right with everyone, we have one more song for you.” The crowd made its approval known, and smiling, Neal said, “Here’s an old one called ‘Lady Truck Driver.’”

With that Jessie let loose a torrent of sound, setting a fast pace for this song Neal had written after he’d learned of her brief stint driving the big rigs. Two and a half minutes later, a decent amount of applause greeted Jessie’s ears, and she and the guys began the speedy process of breaking down their gear and clearing the stage for the next band.

Once finished, Jessie, hot, tired and full of excitement, made her way through the congratulatory crowd to the bar for a much-deserved drink. She gulped down a full third of her beer, but it did nothing to dissipate the heat within her. Feeling a tap on her shoulder, she turned, anticipating the usual encounter with some random male fan who thought she was a really great drummer for a girl. The backhanded compliment—typically followed by pointers and friendly advice—she now received with a wry “Thanks.” Recognizing the futility of her efforts, she’d long ago given up arguing with anonymous male egos.

So she was surprised when she instead faced Zoey, who had come up behind her. Before the show, Zoey had seemed fascinated, asking questions of all of them about their preparations, and here she was again, ready to talk to Jessie once more. Jessie wondered if Neal had also spoken to Zoey about getting along with his friend. If that was the case, Jessie would do her best to play nice and see the good in Zoey.

“So that’s Nuclear Boots?” Zoey took a drink from her beer. Jessie nodded and took another swallow of her drink. “What did you think?”

“Well, Neal told me you guys were good,” Zoey answered. She leaned close so that Jessie could hear over the cacophony of the bar. “But Neal doesn’t seem to be the best at self-critiquing, so I didn’t know what to expect.”
“And?” Jessie grew impatient to know what this woman thought of her music. Zoey’s answer would weigh heavily on Jessie’s ability to like her.

“And,” Zoey leaned even closer as the crowd around them increased in volume. Her lips were inches from Jessie’s ear as she said, “You were incredible.” Her cool, smooth fingers lightly touched Jessie’s forearm as if to emphasize her point. The touch sent chills through Jessie’s body even as an unsettling warmth spread across her stomach. “You’re kind of like early R.E.M. meets The Pixies with hints of The Ramones and The Jam.”

“I’m impressed.”

“Don’t be. When I found out that he was in a band, I asked Neal about his musical influences.”

“He told you all that?” Zoey nodded emphatically. “Typical.”

“What?”

“Except for Kim Deal—who I love—he didn’t mention any women. What about Patti Smith or Kathleen Hanna or Carrie Brownstein?” Suddenly peevish, Jessie practically shouted, “God, he couldn’t even mention Joan Jett or Chrissie Hynde or Debbie Harry! What’s with that?”

“He’s a guy.” Zoey shrugged as if in apology for her boyfriend.

Shaking her head, Jessie grumbled. “I know. It’s just so frustrating. I’ve been working on the boys’ musical education for four years now, but I don’t know if I’ll ever break through their testosterone wall of sound.”

“Well, good luck with that.” Zoey laughed, and Jessie felt herself warming up to Zoey again.

Silence descended upon them once more. Jessie cast about her mind for something to say, but Zoey spoke first. “So, who came out to support you tonight?”

“The guitar player from my last band said she was going to try to make it, but I haven’t seen her yet. Other than that, just some friends, no family. It’s not really their thing.”

“No boyfriend lurking around here somewhere?”

“No,” Jessie answered and crossed her arms over her chest, feeling defensive, irritated and inclined to dislike Zoey again.
“I’m sorry.” Zoey seemed to understand her gaffe instantly. She bit her lower lip and scrunched her face in an oddly becoming apologetic expression. “I shouldn’t have been so presumptuous.” Zoey’s face reddened a little, and she looked around uncomfortably. Smiling she spoke again. “You’re probably better off anyway.”

Still irritated Jessie asked, “How’s that?”

“Well, men can be incredible assholes.” Just then, Neal came up behind Zoey and grabbed her around the waist, pulling her to him. In spite of herself, Jessie laughed. “This guy, for example,” Zoey jerked her thumb over her shoulder at Neal, “I asked him to go to one little poetry reading with me, and he acts like I’ve signed us up for couples day at the spa.” Neal was nuzzling Zoey’s ear, clearly not listening to her complaints, and she gently pushed him away with her shoulder. “Yet he regularly torments me with football games, basketball games and threats of baseball.”

This didn’t surprise Jessie, who had been subjected to Neal’s extreme sports fanaticism almost from the start of their friendship. They hadn’t even moved in together before he’d dragged her to watch the Cubs. She’d quickly lost what little interest in the game she had to begin with, but it had been such fun watching Neal’s childlike enthusiasm as he cheered and engaged with other fans. She found herself eager to attend the next time he invited her, and now they went to at least three games a season together. She hadn’t acquired a new appreciation for baseball or Neal’s favorite team, but she had so much fun with him that not even the Cubs could ruin her good mood.

“I made plans with my sister a month ago,” Zoey continued, “and she just informed me today that she’s going to have to work. I don’t really want to go alone, but will my boyfriend go with me? No. See how lucky you are to not have to deal with this crap?” Zoey playfully slapped Neal’s face as his lips made their way down her neck.

“When is it?”

“A week from tomorrow. Why?”

“Well, if you’re desperate for company, I could go with you.” Neal, who apparently had been listening, sent Jessie an
appreciative smile. Who knew? It might even be fun. Zoey was at least more interesting than Neal’s other girlfriends.

“Really?” Zoey’s face lit up as she smiled. “That’s wonderful. It’s at six in Andersonville. I could meet you there around five thirty. We’d have plenty of time to get good seats. Would that work?”

“Why don’t I just pick you up?”

“I don’t want to impose.” Zoey again scrunched her face in an apology. “But since you suggested it, I’d love a ride. I can leave work around five. Is that okay?”

“Sounds great,” Jessie answered, and Zoey wrapped her in an appreciative embrace that caught her off guard. Feeling a little uneasy, Jessie escaped the hug and murmured an excuse about finding her friends.