

Thunderbowl

Orca soundings

Lesley Choyce

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Chapter One

“I’m nervous,” Drek complained as we drove toward The Dungeon, a local nightclub famous for its live music. It was going to be our first real public performance. Al was driving the old Dodge van that his grandfather had left him when he died. The floorboards were so rusted out that you could look down and see the road.

“Be cool,” Al said as we turned a corner and two mike stands fell over. “Forget there’s anybody out there.”

“Yeah,” I said. “Just pretend we’re still back in your basement practicing.” We had practiced until we were perfect.

Steve Drekker plays synthesizer and Alistair Cullen is on drums. My name is Jeremy, but Drek and Al call me Germ. I play a mean guitar. I started out playing air guitar in my bedroom. Now it’s the real thing. My old man is still kicking himself for buying me the guitar. He saw me in my room one day. I had on the Walkman, cranked wide open. I was jumping up and down whaling on my guitar. The only problem was that I didn’t have a guitar. I was just pretending. But I could feel it. It was me playing those riffs. So my father went out and bought me this dumb nylon-string guitar.

I took lessons for three months. The dude who taught me thought I should get into country music. I told him, no way.

So I sold the nylon, sold my bike and a bunch of CDs. With the money I bought an *el cheapo* electric and a crummy little amplifier. It drove my mother nuts. She started going out to the movies with my old man just to get away from the noise. Even my dog stopped hanging out in my bedroom.

And then one day I saw this ad posted in the music store. “WANTED: Lead guitar for new band. Must have experience and be into alternative music.” Hell, I had experience coming out of my ears. I’d been listening to music for years. And I was into any kind of music they wanted me for.

Fortunately for me, Thunderbowl wasn’t into rap or country or oldies. I knew just about every song they threw at me. And suddenly I was one of them. What I didn’t know was that the band was going to get me into so much trouble.

There are only three of us but once we crank up the amps and start rocking, you’d

think we were an army. Drek has all sorts of tricks with the keyboard. He has patches and loops and an orchestra packed up in there and a jungle full of animal noises. If you want to hear what it sounds like to be taking off on the space shuttle, just ask Drek to play it back on a digital loop at full volume.

Drek is a tall, nervous guy who wears glasses. He's probably an electronics genius, but he'd rather drink beer and get into fights. Figure that one out.

Alistair Cullen is shorter than I am, but he really tips the scale. He's a heavy dude in the truest sense. If you call him Alistair and say it funny, he grabs your feet and yanks them out from under you. I made fun of him once. Now I know what it's like to be kissing concrete. From then on I just called him Al. Al shifts his weight from side to side as he walks. Despite his size, he's built like a tank.

If you were to look at us, you'd say we don't look like an alternative band. In

fact, Stewy Lyons didn't let us audition when we first asked for a gig at The Dungeon. But tonight was the Battle of the Bands. Any band could enter. Any band could win.

"My hands are sweating," Al said suddenly. "I can't play with sweaty hands."

What's going on? I began to wonder. These two were shedding their tough-guy skins before my eyes.

"You drive, Jeremy," Al said. "I want to just hang my hands out the window and let them dry off."

I didn't know whether to laugh or cry. Thunderbowl was cracking up. We were going to be an absolute flop. Al pulled over to the curb and got out. He came around and opened the door on my side.

"I don't trust Drek driving my van. Last time, he smashed two brake lights. It cost me twenty-five dollars. You drive," he said to me.

I sat for a second without saying anything. "Uh, guys," I began, "I have a confession to make."

Al was shaking his hands in the air. Sweat was literally dripping off. Drek was staring straight into the windshield, his mind fixed on something none of us could see.

“I can’t drive,” I said. “At least not legally. I haven’t got a license.”

“Who cares?” Al yelled at me. “Just drive.”

So I got out and walked around, sat down in the driver’s seat and started the van. I popped the clutch and we lurched out into the traffic. I almost ran over a man walking a pit bull terrier.

“Where’d you learn to drive?” Al grunted.

“I told you, I didn’t.”

“Maybe you should try shifting,” Drek advised in a shaky voice. I was going pretty fast for first gear. The engine was roaring like it was about to explode.

“Oh, yeah,” I said. I shifted, grinding my way into second gear without using the clutch. It sounded like I was trying to cut a battleship in half with a chain saw.

“Nice work, Germ,” Al criticized, still hanging his hands out to dry.

I decided it was time they knew my real age. I hadn’t really lied before. They just assumed I was older. I didn’t ever come out and say anything. I just thought we’d never get to play a place like The Dungeon anyway. They served all kinds of booze. I wasn’t old enough to drink, so I wasn’t old enough to play there. “What I’ve been meaning to tell you...” I began again.

“Brake,” Drek interrupted in a low, uncertain voice.

“Huh?” I asked.

“Brake!” he screamed into the windshield.

“Oops.” A stop sign had appeared out of nowhere. It wasn’t my fault. I slammed the middle pedal, hoping that it was the right one.

It was. Nearly half a ton of musical hardware slid forward into our backs as we came to a screeching halt. With my nose squished up against the glass I

watched a Pepsi truck squeak by in front of us, inches from the bumper. I figured I had done pretty well.

“I’m only sixteen,” I announced. “They won’t let me play The Dungeon even if we do win.”

Whoever won the Battle of the Bands was going to get a contract to play four nights a week. The money was good and The Dungeon had the wildest audience in town. But now my little secret was out. And now the dream might not come true. Not for me. Not for any of us.

Drek gave me a look of despair. Al just glared at me from across the van. He was rubbing a bump on his head where a flying mike stand had connected with the back of his skull.

“Drive,” Al said in that low, threatening voice of his. “From now on you’re nineteen. And you better play that damn guitar like your life depends on it.”

I wasn’t in any position to argue with him.