

Chapter One

IT WAS RAINING PRETTY heavily as Sal made his way from the parking lot into his band's rehearsal space, a large, old building that'd been converted into dozens of separate sound-proof rooms, for bands, artists, and musicians to practice their craft. So Say The King, Sal's band, practiced every Monday, Wednesday, and Thursday, from around five until midnight, sometimes later. Almost like a second job, each member of the band showed up after their day job ended, often carrying a drink or two along with a meal for the evening. Sal knew it was going to be a long night when he entered the room. Greg raised his beer to say hello and Sal could tell from the look on Paul's face that this wasn't Greg's first of the night.

Sal had been friends with Greg for most of their lives and no two guys in the band knew each other as well as Sal and Greg. They'd been working on music together since their early teen years and as their band, So Say The King, since their early 20s. While Sal, Derek and Paul took the band seriously, none of them took it quite as seriously as Greg did. Greg often went off on what Sal referred to as a "mood" where he'd push the rest of the band members harder and longer than usual, insisting that if they didn't make it, they had nothing to fall back on.

Sal stood at five feet ten inches and was in good shape. His dark brown hair was long enough that he often slicked it back, where

it would stay by itself. He was full-blooded Italian and proudly so. His skin was tan, his eyes dark, his eyebrows full. He usually had a 5 o'clock shadow. He'd just turned 31 not long ago, but you'd never have guessed his age from looking at him.

"I think we need to work some more on the chorus for 'Night Before Dawn'," Greg said. "I don't think it's quite there yet."

"We spent most of Monday night working on that," Paul groaned. "Can we work on something else? I'm getting sick of that chorus."

"Well perhaps you can come up with a better bass line so it's not so boring for you," Greg snapped back.

"Guys, let's take a breather, huh? We literally just got here. Let's step back a minute and try to work out a game plan for the night. You know it's going to get hectic when other bands start showing up," Sal said.

Sal was usually the peacekeeper when tempers got a little hot under the collar. Sometimes he wondered how therapists managed to try to solve problems all day every day. After most rehearsals where the guys would argue, he would feel like shit when he left.

He was right this time, as usual. They had the distinct advantage of usually arriving at the rehearsal space before the majority of other bands did. While mostly soundproof, music would often bleed from one room to another, making it more difficult to have a conversation.

Sal sat atop his guitar amplifier, sipping on the Coke he'd bought himself from the vending machine.

Greg, Derek and Paul all opened one of the beers that Greg picked up for the night. Sal, being the one member of the band who didn't drink, knew that if it was going to be anything like last time, he was going to end up driving at least one of the other guys home, or most likely, all three. He didn't mind though; he sometimes enjoyed taking care of the guys.

Despite Paul's protest, Greg insisted starting on "Night Before Dawn". They looped through the chorus into the bridge for what seemed like an eternity. Sal, as he often did, sang the lyrics he'd been writing in his head, while listening for the changes that Greg proposed to the music they'd been working on for the past few weeks, trying to spot the time changes that Derek was adding in, and listening for any licks that Greg tossed into the mix. Sal may have had the least experience in the band, but the others recognized that he had the vision. He heard the songs before they were complete and gave a lot of input into the orchestration of the song. Derek often joked that Sal was a musical prodigy, that he could see the song on the paper without even realizing it. Sal didn't always agree. Unlike many people with his talents, Sal was humble, almost to the point of embarrassment because of how shy he was.

By the time other bands started showing up, it was around 7:30pm. At one point there was a break in the music coming from all directions around them and in between takes of "Night Before Dawn". It was so quiet that you could hear the rain bouncing off the tin roof. Paul suggested they take a break to have some dinner. Greg, usually liked to work through dinner, but decided that Paul was right and put down his guitar, a beautiful Paul Reed Smith Artist IV that his parents had bought for him when he graduated college. Greg babied his guitar like it was his child. Sal was a bit jealous. Working at Starbucks didn't exactly afford one a lavish lifestyle, but it paid the bills and gave him the flexibility to rehearse three nights a week, which he liked.

The guys all sat around the room. Derek on his drum stool, the others on their amplifiers. As usual, they didn't say much. They had the tendency to only talk about music when they were at the studio.

After dinner, the guys progressed more on the chorus from “Night Before Dawn” working until close to midnight, at which point Greg pointed out the time and the fact that he was a bit tipsy.

“Okay, let’s call it for the night. We’ll pick up on the chorus to bridge on Friday,” Derek said, as he turned to the whiteboard on the wall behind his drums, making a note of what they’d work on next.

“You guys want a lift?” Sal asked Paul and Derek.

“I’m all set, I’ve got the van,” Derek responded.

“If you’re going by my place, it’d be nice to not have to run down to the T,” Paul said.

“No problem. You’re on the way to Greg’s anyway,” Sal said. “Let’s go.”

Greg waited for the others to leave the room, shut off the lights and fans and made sure the door was locked behind them as they left. Two by two they walked down the long hallway towards the stairs, listening to other bands through the walls and doors.

Chapter Two

SAL'S APARTMENT WAS JUST a short ten minute drive from Greg's. After dropping Paul and Greg off at home, Sal got back to his place just shy of 1:00 a.m. He loved this time of night, the world was quiet and serene, his mind usually clear, the neighbors in houses and apartments around him long since asleep. When he didn't have to wake up for an early shift, Sal spent his late nights in near darkness writing, overanalyzing, and dreaming of a better time he knew was coming.

He entered his one-bedroom apartment as he always did: flipping on the overhead light by the door, illuminating the majority of the 400 square feet. He tossed his keys, wallet, and iPhone onto the small table that sat to the right of the front door. Sal maintained the same routine when he gets home every night. Keys, wallet, and iPhone go on their table next to the day's mail. His jacket gets hung on the same hook, his shoes go in the tiny closet by the front door. He often defends himself saying that he's not obsessive, he just likes things to have their place.

His apartment was by no means fancy, but a typical one-bedroom apartment in downtown Somerville, Massachusetts, where many struggling musicians opted to live. It was close enough to the city, but far enough away from city rents.

His living room was sparse with a television on an IKEA stand, a small couch big enough for Sal and one other person, and a desk where his iMac sat along with numerous stacks of paper. By the foot of the desk sat a plastic legal-sized container with hanging folders. In the folders resided every lyric that Sal had ever written. From the very first song he wrote when he was eleven years old to the most recent from just last night. He kept every song meticulously, saving a handwritten copy and a typed copy which were each held together by a single staple, then paper clipped to one another, and sorted alphabetically in each folder.

After stopping in his kitchen to grab a drink, Sal made his way to his desk. Sliding the keyboard back out of the way, he grabbed the pad he'd jotted ideas down on for "Night Before Dawn" last night. He grabbed his favorite pen — a blue Pilot Dr. Grip that he'd had specifically for writing and had filled its ink cartridge a dozen times — and turned on his desk lamp. Before beginning his writing process, he made his way back over to the front door to shut off the overhead light. He liked to write in near darkness.

He always started off the same; all electronic devices are off; left leg folded up onto the chair with the foot tucked against the right leg; all extraneous items moved off the desk. Once he was settled into his desk, lights dim, Coke at the ready, he began reviewing his lyrics for "Night Before Dawn" from the night before. Almost feverishly, he began crossing out lines, rewriting parts of the chorus again and again.

"This has to be perfect. This is the song," he muttered aloud.

Sal was a perfectionist when it came to his lyrics. He loved to write songs that let the song's listener try to figure out what the song is truly about. It was his method of connecting with the audience and something that he'd prided himself on after so many years writing.

He got up from his desk and walked laps around his couch while trying to think of the perfect chorus. Sal swore that So Say The King would be the only band that he'd ever be in, and that he'd give everything he had to make it. He told himself that he'd worked too hard, come too far, and invested everything he had to start over.

He began questioning everything he'd written thus far, the longer he spent working on the lyrics, the less satisfied he was. Lyrics that he wrote in a matter of minutes, plowing straight through to the end, always seemed to be better. "The less you think, the better the end result," he'd tell himself from time to time. For some reason "Night Before Dawn" had him stumped. Perhaps it was all the pressure that Greg had put on this particular song. Perhaps it was that the band wanted to perform it at a gig they had booked in a few weeks — just a quick half hour set at a less-than-famous spot where bands from Boston often played. He knew that he had to finish the lyrics before Friday and was beginning to beat himself up over it.

Before he knew it, his alarm was going off. It was ten in the morning. Sal woke up in a very common place for him — the couch, still fully clothed, television on, and his pad of paper on the small IKEA coffee table in front of him. He glanced down at the legal pad and found that he'd scribbled out most of what he'd written last night, before he passed out.

He groaned at the sight of the scribbles and got up, shaking his head.

Chapter Three

FRIDAY WAS SAL'S FAVORITE day because Jess would make the entire band dinner at she and Greg's place. Sal saw so many great qualities in Jess and in her relationship with Greg that he was sometimes jealous. They were lucky to have found each other and fallen so deeply in love, so quickly. He hoped that someday he'd have that same feeling. Greg and Jess had met the first day of sophomore year in high school, but didn't start dating until after college. They were getting married a week from tomorrow.

Derek and Sal showed up to Jess and Greg's apartment around quarter to five, as they usually did. Living not far from one another, Sal usually picked Derek up. Paul snuck in with just a few minutes to spare, barely making it before the five o'clock cutoff time. Jess was a stickler for showing up on time. If you were five minutes late, she wouldn't open the door for you. She said being prompt taught you lessons in how to manage yourself later in life. As usual, Jess had crackers and cheese waiting and handed everyone a drink as they arrived. By day she was a successful blogger for a number of websites; by night she was the typical housewife despite not yet being married. She worked more than any of the guys did, she just happened to be able to do it from home in her pajamas. Sal was especially jealous of that fact. Jess rushed around in her 1950s-era apron that had little pockets on the front of it, bouncing from here

to there, topping people's drinks off while the timer gleefully ticked away in the kitchen.

"What's on the menu for tonight?" Paul asked.

"It's the third Friday of the month. We always have Mexican on the third Friday of the month," Jess replied.

"You're like a calendar," Greg laughed as he grabbed her around the waist and pulled her into him.

"Honey! The meat!" she exclaimed as she pulled herself out of Greg's arms and ran back to the kitchen.

"Oh! I almost forgot. My friend Samantha is joining us tonight. One of the sites I write for just hired her and it turns out she lives in Medford, too. We've been chatting over IM and e-mail for weeks, so I figured I'd invite her. She's probably lost, I'm going to call her," Jess yelled from the kitchen.

"Oh sure, her friends can show up late, but you guys are two seconds late, and you're out in the cold," Greg joked.

"Her friends are probably cuter than we are," Sal said, laughing.

"She'll be here in a sec, she's coming up the stairs now," Jess reported as she rushed back into the kitchen.

As if on cue, a knock came from the door.

"Greg, honey, let Sam in, will you?"

"Yes, dear," Greg responded. "I'm on it."

Greg made his way across the apartment which was substantially larger than Sal's and opened the door. Samantha came in, shaking Greg's hand as she did. There were some pleasantries exchanged, but Sal couldn't hear them from where they were seated in the living room.

"Samantha! You made it!" Jess called from the kitchen in an excited girl voice.

"It's so nice to meet you in person," Samantha responded as she made her way farther into the apartment to greet Jess.

“Wow, she’s hot,” Derek said, nudging Sal’s shoulder.

Sal was following Samantha across the room with his eyes. His mind raced and he immediately wanted to be closer to her. Even to just sit next to her at dinner. He felt that if he wasn’t close to her, something bad would happen. It was an instant attraction. A school-boy crush.

Sal guessed she was around five foot five, very trim and it was obvious that she exercised. Her long brown hair flowed down to the middle of her back. She had the most electric blue eyes that he’d ever seen. They seemed to brighten the room. She was wearing a button down blouse that accentuated how slim she was. Her dark pants combined with the lowly-lit room made it hard to make out her full figure, but Sal liked what he could see. Her lips were small and thin, but fit perfectly on her symmetrical face. Sal found himself staring harder than he knew he should.

Samantha had offered to help Jess finish the preparations for the meal and the two walked into the kitchen. Checking the clock on his phone, Sal knew that dinner would be ready in a few minutes. Jess was like a well-oiled machine. Guests arrive at five, dinner is served at quarter to six.

With minutes to spare, Sal knew he had to somehow signal to both Paul and Derek that they must sit next to each other across from he and Samantha. At a table designed for six, when Greg and Jess sat at either end, there were only four seats left available, two on either side.

“Oh, how rude of me,” Jess said from the kitchen. “These are Greg’s bandmates.”

As she called out each of their names, Derek gave a nod and Paul a smile. Sal actually waved and immediately wished he could delete the movement like a line from his lyrics. “*What is wrong with me?*”

he thought to himself. He took a moment to compose himself — shook his head briefly, closed his eyes for a second — and stood up.

“It’s nice to meet you, Samantha,” he said as he crossed from the living room to the dining room table.

“You too. I’ve heard so much about all of you guys from Jessica,” Samantha responded.

“Jess, do you need a hand with bringing anything to the table?” Sal asked.

“Um, sure. I guess we could use some help,” she responded, looking at him quizzically as Sal made his way to the kitchen.

Jess proceeded to hand him sour cream, mixed cheese, and guacamole and shot Greg a look. Greg had been with Jess long enough that he knew what the look meant and immediately jumped up from his recliner to make his way over to the kitchen.

After he dropped off the round of items Jess had given him, Sal looked around for an excuse to reenter the kitchen and made his way to the fridge.

“You guys need another beer?” he Paul and Derek.

They both nodded and Sal turned to Samantha.

“Anything special you’d like to drink?”

“I’ll just grab some water,” she said.

Sal made his way from the fridge back to the table and placed a beer for Paul and one for Derek on the opposite side of the table from where he planned to sit next to Samantha. Surely this would work.

Jess proclaimed that dinner was ready and everyone that wasn’t already in the dining room made their way over. As Sal had hoped, everyone took their places. Paul and Derek sat across from him. Jess and Greg took their seats at each end of the table.

Samantha made her way to the empty chair. As she approached, he stepped back and pulled out her chair for her. A smile crossed her face and Sal even noted a hint of a blush.

“Well thank you,” she said.

“My pleasure,” Sal replied as he sat down.

“Dig in,” Greg said from the head of the table and everyone complied.

“Sam, did you see that piece that Mark published today?” Jess asked.

“I did!” Sam said. “I figured you saw it and were going to say something.”

Sal caught himself looking to his right to see Samantha as she looked to her left to talk to Jess.

“Mark has terrible grammar and the editors never correct him,” Jess informed the guys who were a bit lost.

“It’s so terrible because these stories go out without any real editing, like they’re afraid of Mark!” Sam laughed.

At one point during the conversation, Sal and Sam caught each other’s eye and looked away quickly like children on the playground during recess.

Sal’s plan of seating her on his right lead to a comedy of errors as they bumped elbows throughout the evening. She being left handed and he being right handed lead to them bumping elbows each time one of them tried to pick up their taco. Each time it happened, Sal turned red and Samantha giggled a little bit to herself.

“Don’t forget what you’re in charge of for next weekend,” Jess said out loud. “All of you.”

“Don’t worry honey, everything’s going to be perfect,” Greg assured her.

“How long have you worked with Jess?” Sal asked Sam semi-privately.

"A few months now," she said as they bumped elbows again.

"I'm so sorry," Sal said. "I guess we didn't think this seating arrangement through that well."

"It's okay," she blushed.

The conversation around them seemed to fade away to a dull roar as Sal got engulfed in his chat with Sam.

"What do you do?" Sam asked.

"I work at a Starbucks. It's not the best job, but I survive."

"Jess says you're the singer and that you guys are really good."

"Yea, I play guitar, too." Sal said.

"That's pretty cool."

At the same moment, they both reached for the sour cream resulting in another awkward but adorable moment of clumsiness. Rather than dwelling on the moment, Sal scooped some onto her plate for her without missing a beat.

"Have you been playing long?" Sam asked.

"Most of my life and most of the time that I've known Greg we've been a 'band'."

"You do the writing too?"

"I do, I write all of the lyrics and the band works on the music collectively."

Sal got lost in her eyes for a moment and seemed to stop hearing the words she was saying. He was so focused on how blue and beautiful they were that he realized he'd not heard Jess at the end of the table calling his name.

"Sal? Sal?" Jess called out, louder and louder.

"Huh? What?" he replied, his friends laughing.

"I was just saying how I thought you and Sam would get along well, but it seems like you've taken matters into your own hands."

"Sorry, we were just chatting. I didn't mean to ignore the rest of you." Sal apologized.

As dinner wound down, Sal found himself wishing he'd spent more time talking to Sam. The smaller conversations that they'd had as a group sufficed to help him get to know her, the way she spoke, the movements she made when she talked. In some small way, he knew that Jess had brought her there to try to set them up together.

Before everyone left, Jess reminded them of their responsibilities for the wedding next weekend again. Everyone got little laminated cards with their tasks, due dates, and phone numbers.

"Oh, and I invited Sam. She'll be coming by herself," Jess said, staring directly at Sal.

His eyes lit up a bit at that news.