

# High Notes Are Murder

## *One*

The thick, humid air in Brogino's Bar & Grille smelled of smoke, beer and bodies. By early evening, sixteen of the club's regulars had staked out the stools in the lounge. Late-comers who wanted to be part of the bar action had to stand three-deep around them while Rocky, the night bartender, kept them entertained by demonstrating his ability to slide a mug of beer the length of the bar with enough backspin to keep it from slipping off the edge. The ten tables spotted across the dingy lounge filled up quickly as diners left the adjoining restaurant and settled in as if it were their own living room. Couples with dancing on their minds arrived before the music started, ordered the one drink they would nurse for hours, and nabbed seats at the piano bar, waiting impatiently for the piano player to begin.

Liz Hanlon thought the phrase "piano player" in this joint was a joke. She didn't feel much like an accomplished musician whenever she reached for a chord on the decrepit instrument in the corner and had to work around the four broken keys. A five-year-old couldn't plunk out a version of Chopsticks on it without hitting a clunker. When Liz took this gig, she knew she'd have to sideline her classic repertoire of Cole Porter and Michel LeGrand songs. This crowd wanted pop radio hits, "regular

music" as owner Sam Brogino called it. But it was the piano that bothered her most. No matter what the song, she had to force her fingers into unnatural positions just to get any sound at all. She felt awkward and clumsy as she struggled to keep the rhythm steady, like racing for a bus wearing one five-inch high-heel, and one running shoe.

Singing and playing at the same time, a technique that requires two rhythmic patterns to be performed together, had never posed a problem for Liz, but on this piano it was damn near torture. No wonder she went home with aching muscles from neck to waist.

The piano was deceptive. It looked like a grand, but that was another joke. It was a cheap spinet pressed against a makeshift wooden table which had been cut into the shape of a full grand, and painted black. To her ear, it sounded like a bad soundtrack from an old western movie, and although she flashed her congenial smile with its distinctive dimple to encourage friendly chatter and more requests-part of the gig-she longed to be singing from the stage of The Hollywood Bowl. Four years at Berklee College of Music in Boston, and ten more on the L. A. musical roller coaster of one-nighters, but the steadiest gig she'd found so far was Brogino's Beef and Barf. Another beer joint that looked, sounded, and stunk like all the rest. Even her smile couldn't completely hide her discontent.

The room felt hot and muggy. She wore a dark red silk tee supported by delicate shoulder straps, not because she wanted to dress provocatively, but because by midnight the heat in her crawl space behind the piano was oppressive. A brass wall lamp above her threw off such intense heat the tips of her auburn hair fell against her bare shoulders in limp ringlets. The amber light created a golden glow around her full, round face, and more than one drinker had commented on her "halo."

"That's me," she joked, "Saint Liz."

An elderly man drinking brandy called out, "I surely hope not, 'cause we ain't lookin' for no saintly activity when we come here!"

Customers close by joined in the laughter.

She'd had other gigs, of course, but Brogino's kept Liz Hanlon from living in her car. Four nights a week she pounded out "drinking songs" that kept Sam's cash register ringing.

"What would you like to hear?" she asked over the microphone.

Requests bombarded her: "Snowbird!" "For The Good Times!"

"Neil Diamond!" a woman with stiff, yellow hair shouted from the dance floor. "Something slow and sexy."

Liz set the drum machine to a rhythm with a "headache beat," and watched the dance floor fill up, reminding herself of why she was here: she was broke. Piano bars didn't pay much, but short pay was better than no pay.

Sam Brogino sauntered out of the kitchen with a blood-stained apron tied around his potbelly and a pissed-off pout on his lips. He squeezed between two drinkers and leaned his sweaty face close to Liz's microphone.

"How come it doesn't sound like the record when you play it?" he snarled.

Her eyes snapped open. The dancers stopped.

"They're called CD's now, Sam, and did you ever think it might be your piano?" she said, noticing the hairs protruding from his nose. "Half the keys don't even work!"

"Use the other ones," he said.

"Why don't you do us both a favor and turn this thing into firewood?"

Sam waddled back to the bar, and she watched him wipe his palms on his greasy apron and shake hands with Corky,

a regular who insisted on the same bar stool each night. Corky kept two beer mugs overflowing at all times. His nose and cheeks were bright red, and Liz had nicknamed him Rudolph.

"You ought'a lighten up on her, Sammy," Corky said. "She sings like an angel."

Sam laughed. "Give it up. You'll never get her in the sack."

"All's I'm saying is that it's her we come to hear every night. You give her a hard enough time, maybe she takes her music somewhere's else."

"Piano players're a dime a dozen," Sam scoffed, returning to the kitchen.

Liz finished the song just as Rocky, the bartender, picked up a white envelope from the bar and squinted to make out the writing.

"Hey, Liz!" He held up the card.

She started toward him. "What's that?"

"Got your name on it."

"Okay, who's the smart-ass?" she said, before noticing the same slanted handwriting she'd seen a few nights ago. She grew uneasy as she tore it open. Rocky continued placing damp-dried glasses on the shelf.

"I turned around and there it was."

She looked at the men inhabiting the end of the bar. "Anybody see who left this? Corky?"

They shook their heads. "Better not be from another guy," Corky said. "I hate competition."

"The world is your competition, Corky."

His friends broke up.

"Hey, you gonna play or what?" someone shouted.

Liz squeezed back behind the keyboard and slid the card out of the envelope. The cover was a glossy photo of a sleek, black grand piano with a single red rose on top. The same handwriting was inside:

*Ignore Sam. I will rescue you from him soon.*

A chill slithered through her. Two days ago, she'd gotten a similar card: *I always get what I want. And I want you.*

Someone's idea of a sick joke, she'd told herself, and she'd tossed the card in the trash. She reminded herself to have Rocky walk her to her car when she left.

"C'mon! Let's hear somethin' we can dance to," a man yelled, clicking the heels of his cowboy boots.

She dropped the card into her purse and set a drum beat. Couples bolted onto the dance floor, but Liz had a hard time concentrating. She was certain a pair of eyes watched her maliciously. Her hands trembled as they moved across the keys by rote. She stared deep into the crowd, wondering which of them might have sent the card, and why.

The smoky haze stung her eyes. She felt relieved when she spotted Danny Amata's shiny, blue-black hair. Danny was a close buddy, and a twenty-eight-year-old musical success story. He was a first-call drummer for movies and television recordings, and always the top choice of any arranger. Usually, a sexy young bod clung to his arm, but tonight he was alone. Liz watched him order a beer with the same flirtatious flip of his hair he'd perfected on pretty girls in his teens. He wore a black silk shirt that matched the sheen of his hair, and his face exuded a tenderness when he smiled. *No one should be born that cute.*

He leaned over the piano bar and pretended to flash the seductive smile of a guy on the prowl. "Hey there, gorgeous, what time d' you get off?"

"Hey, Danny! What brings you out on a rainy Wednesday night? And dateless at that."

"Thought I'd see how you were doing," Danny said. "And to give you the news before it hits the streets—I've met someone special. I think she might be the one."

Liz looked skeptical. "With you they're all 'the one'."

Danny took a corner table, and she played for over an hour, working the crowd into a dancing frenzy as they shouted for more.

"Do Billy Ray Cyrus!"

"No! Dolly Parton!"

She sang until she was hoarse and her back ached.

"Back in fifteen," she announced, and hit the taped music button. She grabbed her purse and headed for Danny's table. He pulled out a chair for her. "This place, it's—"

"Early cave man. Good recommendation you had there, buddy."

He shrugged. "You were broke. Come on, you can slum it for a few weeks. It pays the rent."

"I've been paying the rent for ten years. When do I get to move on to health insurance?"

Danny was the most flamboyant member of her band, and Liz marveled at how well-informed he was about the city's music scene.

"Don't get a swelled head over this," he said, "but I hear people talking about you all over town. Not just about your voice, about the music you're writing, too. You're getting hot."

"Really." Trying to be supportive, sometimes Danny came off sounding like he was full of it.

"Really. It's just a matter of time. You're in that gray area."

"What's that, the ozone?"

"You know what I mean," he said. "Our group's played

some good showcase nights, and now the big clubs know your name. It's going to pay off soon. Besides, don't you always say it's better to be playing than sitting around talking about it?"

"Yeah, yeah. I love singing, I love composing, but I'm thirtysix, and I'm working in an upholstered toilet!"

"You see upholstery in this joint?"

His good mood made her laugh at herself.

"C'mon, you're being negative," he said. "You do a damn good single."

A single. "One person struggling to do the job of three or more. I played singles in Boston. I came to L.A. to put a killer band together."

"You did!" he said. "What 'd ya call the three of us, chopped liver? What's the matter? I've never seen you so down. You ought to be glad you can accompany yourself. Lots of singers can't work unless the club can afford a group."

"I guess I'm just afraid that places like Brogino's are as far as I'll ever get in the music business."

"We're all afraid of waking up someday and finding there are no more gigs," he said. "With so much music being recorded by computers now, my studio gigs are fewer all the time."

"I didn't know that."

"Hey, you won't believe who called me awhile ago," he said. "Gina. She told me to meet her here."

"Gina?" she said, astonished. "Gina McCurdy?"

"Yeah." He frowned. "C'mon, you two aren't still giving each other the silent treatment, are you? She's your cousin, for godssake."

A year ago, Gina moved to Los Angeles, and stayed at Liz's apartment until she found a job and a place of her own. By the end of the second week, she was hitting dance clubs till dawn and sleeping all day, not even pretending

to look for work. Liz asked the owner of a club called Germaine's West to give Gina a job, but soon Gina was bringing customers home and sleeping with them on Liz's hide-a-bed in the living room. One night Liz took Gina out for dinner, hoping to settle their disagreement, but after several drinks, Gina began making sexual advances toward strangers. Liz was embarrassed, then infuriated. Finally, she'd yelled "slut" across a crowded bar. Gina and her clothes were gone when Liz woke in the morning.

The next call she had from Gina was three months later from the L. A. County jail. Gina and her new boyfriend were charged with running a scam on elderly couples, bilking them out of \$50,000. Liz's brother, Carl, a Los Angeles attorney, worked to get the money returned and the charges dropped to keep Gina from having a police record. Liz and Gina hadn't spoken since then, but in recent months, Liz had begun to feel badly about the way they'd left things.

"What's she coming to this dump for?" Liz asked.

Danny shrugged. "All I know is there's some good news in the works, and she wants to see the look on your face when you hear about it."

"Gina's idea of good news is a rich guy with a vasectomy."

"Hey," he said, chuckling, "she told me to meet her here, I'm here. Really, Liz, I think she's trying to patch things up with you."

Liz nodded, thoughtfully. "I'd like that, too."

Danny squinted at the puffs of smoke hanging in the air.

"They could rename this place Brogino's Smoke and Choke. It's so thick, your baby-blues don't even show from back here."

"Sam's not big on fans," she said. Her allergies to smoke, dust, mold, and other unknown substances had been in high gear since her first night. She reached into her purse for a tissue. The white envelope fell to the floor.

Danny picked it up. "What's this? Fan mail from one of the toothless drunks at the bar?"

"Some weirdo," she said, looking into the crowd. "Take your pick around here."

"Really? A secret admirer from here sent you a card?" he asked, reading the inscription.

"More like a fruitcake who wears tin foil to bed to ward off invaders," she said. "Last week I found another card in my teaching room."

"Someone snuck into Walter's studio?"

She nodded. "At first I figured it was for another teacher. No name on the outside, but inside it announced that he's used to getting what he wants, and he wants me."

"That takes balls," he said. "You think this dude's here now?"

Her eyes scoped the room. "It feels like it."

"I'll keep an eye out while you're playing. Don't worry."

She tucked the card into her purse. "So who's the new sex kitten?"

His face lit up. "The new bartender at the Stop." The Midnight Stop was a local hang-out for musicians and night club workers. "Her name's Tiffany, and she works days."

"Sounds like you're dating a lamp. How long have you been seeing her?"

"About a week."

"Forsaking all others, I see. Watch out, you'll be meeting the family soon."

"Okay, be a wise-ass," he said. "It's easy for you, you've got a sure thing with Ben." As he spoke, he took

his eyes off the crowd and noticed her fingers wrapped around a glass.

"Hey, where's your ring?" he asked, making a quick search of her hand, then her face.

Ben Parkhurst had been the steadiest lover she'd had in years, pursuing her relentlessly, and making no secret of his desire to marry her.

"What happened?" Danny asked.

"It's hard to explain. I guess we were both wrong. For each other, I mean."

"What the hell does that mean? Ben's nuts about you."

"He was. I'll never find anyone like him, but it's about music," she said, "my career. He can't stand it."

"He decides this now? You were a musician when he met you."

"I guess he thought he could convert me to Harriet Housewife."

Danny frowned. "Or he's afraid people will call him 'Mr. Hanlon' if the spotlight's on you, and not him. What a stupid move."

"He said he wanted a 'normal' life, not one where reporters are parachuting into the backyard for a sneak photo. He wants a wife to follow his career, not the other way around."

"Macho bullshit." Danny's hand patted hers. "Don't worry, either he'll come around or he's not the right one. 'Cause you," he said, shaking his head, "you gotta make music."

"He won't come around."

His eyes narrowed. "Why? What happened?"

She sighed. "We were in a restaurant, and he explained that since I've been knocking around 'all these years' and I haven't made it yet, I should throw in the towel and marry him!"

"Uh-oh. That temper of yours. You didn't slug him or anything?"

"I thought about it. I threw the ring instead. It landed in his shrimp scampi."

"And?"

"I walked out."

"I thought he understood the music business better than that," Danny said. "Some of the most accomplished names are in their forties before they're recognized. Even their fifties."

"There's a rosy picture."

"It'll never take you that long. You'll be kissing these third-rate dives goodbye soon."

She wanted to agree with him, but telling him about Ben re-ignited an old, tormenting fear. "I keep seeing myself as a feeble old woman sleeping alone in an abandoned car."

"He's nuts! So are you! Have you talked to him since?" he asked, his eyes roaming across the room.

"I started to call him a couple of times, but—"

"Hey, Liz! It's for you," Rocky called from behind the bar.

She looked up; he was holding the phone in the air. She checked her watch. "Quarter to twelve. Who's calling me now?" She pushed back her chair.

Rocky stretched the phone cord across the bar for her. "Guy says he's your manager."

She took the phone, relieved. "Hi, Marty. What's up?"

Marty Steinhauser spoke slowly and formally, starting every conversation by clearing his throat. "Forgive me for calling so late, Liz, but I got a call from the owner of Germaine's West."

"Sonnie?"

"Yes. He's got some exciting news. I told him you'd stop on your way home tonight. Is that a problem?"

"What's this news that everybody in town seems to know

but me?"

"He wants to tell you himself."

"At least give me a hint."

"You'll see," Marty said, merrily. "Pick up the contract, and we'll talk tomorrow."

"Contract? C'mon, Marty, don't leave me hanging."

"Have a good night." He hung up.

Germaine's West was one of L. A. 's most prestigious night spots, a room known for showcasing talent. Last year, shortly after Marty became her manager, Liz and her quartet had performed there for one week, but they'd never received the hotly desired call back.

She hurried back to Danny's table. "The owner of Germaine's wants to see me. What's going on? How come Gina knew about this?"

"Ask her yourself when she gets here."

She looked at her watch, then at the crowd. "I've got one more set to do. Why don't you two stick around and come with me?"

"He asked to see you, not me."

"Don't be ridiculous. Sonnie's not interested in me. Not that way. And besides—"

"Besides, what? Sonnie's a cool guy. And he's in a position to do you a lot of good."

Her jaw dropped. "Are you saying I should sleep with him just to get a good gig?"

Danny chuckled. "No, but he's obviously interested in you, and he's not exactly a nobody. You blow him off like he's pond scum."

"I do not," she said, starting back to the piano. "You're missing a very important point. Well, two, actually. First, Sonnie is married, and second, he's a club owner. My God, he's not even—"

"Not what?"

"Not even my type."

"Uh huh. In that case, Gina and I'll tag along."

Back at the piano, Liz was singing about horses and old trucks while she pictured herself on the stage again at Germaine's West.

At the edge of the dance floor, two couples moved to the beat. Looking beyond them, Liz saw Gina come through the battered door. She walked up behind Danny, threw her arms around him and greeted him with a long kiss that nearly knocked him off his chair.

Gina looked different to Liz. Her dark-haired beauty was intact, but she had gray circles under her eyes, and her cheek bones were more prominent. She wore tight black jeans, black boots, a white lace shirt, and carried a handbag trimmed with tiny white faux pearls. Her cousin always did have exquisite taste, Liz thought. Liz played her last song glad she'd have a chance to clear the air between them.

She gave Gina a hug, then began packing the last of her music. "You look great, Gina," she said, nodding toward the white handbag. "What a beautiful purse."

"Thanks. I've got to admit, Liz, you're still the best singer around."

Liz smiled at her. "I'm really glad you came in. I guess I should have called you before this."

Gina waved her hand in dismissal. "Wasn't your fault. You just need to lighten up on people a little. Let'em be what they are."

Liz stopped. "Excuse me?"

"Like me, for instance. You were always on my case about how much I drank, or who I drank with."

"That's not how I remember it!"

"That's exactly how it was. Admit it, you're a great musician, but you're a tight-ass. Music's all you care about. You ought to have a little fun sometime."

Danny saw Liz's annoyance flash. "Hey, come on, you two. We've got to get to Germaine's."

"Yeah, Gina, what's all this good news stuff?" Liz said.

"You mean how come I heard about it before you?" Gina countered. "Because I'm not afraid to hang out with folks. I don't rush off after the gig like you do. I relax with people, let 'em talk if they want."

"You let 'em do plenty of other things, too," Liz said under her breath as she turned back to unplug her equipment.

"You'd kill to have my social life!"

"That's not a social life," Liz yelled, "it's a reputation!"

Gina stepped forward, starting to swing. Danny jumped between them and caught her arm in the air. He looked down and noticed Liz's fist poised to return the punch.

"Knock it off!" he cried. "What's the matter with you two? You've got the whole room staring at you."

Liz spun around. Several regulars gawked at them. She cooled down and looked at Gina, remembering the childhood secrets they'd shared and wondering what had become of them.

"I'm sorry. We just see things differently."

Gina's fist unfurled. "Yeah. Come on, let's forget this crap."

Liz packed her microphone and picked up her keys. "Right. I could use some good news. I'll take my car and meet you there."

Liz waved goodbye to Rocky and they headed for the door.

"You probably won't believe this, Gina, but I really am glad you came in tonight."