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Chapter 1

Massachusetts, 1993

Daria's Shoes in the Glen Heights Mall is blasting The Lipstick Rays, my sister Nina's band. On display near the entrance is a pair of black, twenty-eye Doc Martens I would die for. Like the same boots Nina wore when she played her last show at Heron Hall, the local music dive. They caught my eye on the way out of Guitar City, where I had just bought new strings for my Gibson with my best friend and bandmate, Michelle.

The boots gleam in front of me, inviting me to touch them. I run my fingers over the smoothness of the leather veiling the steel tip and causing the toe to jut out slightly. Nina's guitar on "Left Behind" is abrasive and loud, but her bluesy voice softens the roughness.

"You left me in this ditch. Thinking I wouldn't stand and run."

The smell of the leather clings to my face as I listen. This is the song the Seattle record company executive fell in love with two years ago, when he watched the Rays play TT the Bears, a tiny club in the Boston area, and offered them a record deal worth

millions of dollars. The label would pay all the band's living expenses while they recorded their debut album in the Pacific Northwest.

Their demo, *Beyond the Black,* shifted from Boston area college radio airplay to heavy rotation on local rock and alternative stations. Fans began flocking to their shows, clamoring for a piece of this emerging talent.

Radio called the Lipstick Rays "a local treasure" and said Nina's voice would "touch a nerve and break your heart." "Fast... loud... melodic... it's all here," read an article titled '*Goddess in the Church of Rock 'n' Roll*' which ran in *The Boston Globe*. That piece ignited a spark that spread throughout the country, following their music as it traveled across the U.S.

Word quickly spread that the Rays would be the next big grunge act, the current sound taking over rock radio—raw, distorted, and stripped down. *Grunge* was a term Nina and the rest of her band despised.

"We're a punk band," she would say in interviews when asked to describe their sound. "I can scream, and that's what matters."

She always underestimated the power of her own voice. Sure, Nina could scream and take you down with her to the depths of pain in her heart, but she could also be soulful and hit the right note like a tuning fork. Even though she never embraced the grunge label, it was hard to ignore the comparison to other successful bands of the era. The Lipstick Rays were making waves and creating a buzz in the industry, becoming the band to watch.

Nina was more than a musician—she was a force of nature. What started out as a childhood passion became an obsession and then a lifeline. The way she connected with the audience was almost magical, drawing them into her world with each note

she played and every word she sang. Nina had a talent a lot of other lead singers didn't, and it wasn't long before people began to notice.

Even in our childhood, her determination set her apart. She would spend hours perfecting the guitar riffs, which would define her style, often neglecting sleep and food. In the beginning, she would spend hours learning to play, fingers bleeding, her small hands struggling to form the chords. Tears of rage and exhaustion brimmed in her eyes.

Giving up wasn't in her nature. She would put the guitar down, wipe her eyes with the back of her hand, pick it up, and start over. Her fingers stumbled, but Nina kept going, over and over, until the notes flowed smoothly. I would often watch her practice in the basement, the air damp and the concrete cold, while she transformed frustration into flawless rendition.

"Why do you keep playing, even when it hurts?" I asked her one day. The rain pounded against the tiny basement window, casting a gray hue on her. She had been at it for hours.

Nina paused, fingers still on the strings. "Because it's the only way to get better. You have to push through the pain to find the music inside you."

That fierce determination never stopped, and it wasn't long after when the Lipstick Rays were filling the basement with their raw, unpolished sound. She encouraged her bandmates as hard as she pushed herself. Nina's journey from our basement to the brink of stardom wasn't just about talent, but her hard work and unbreakable spirit.

The memory fades. I come back to the present and find myself still caressing the leather of the boots. The scent of the material is intoxicating and takes me back to the night before Nina's band was supposed to fly out to Seattle and seal the deal with

the record company. They played their goodbye show at Heron Hall, the rundown local nightclub where they got their start.

Well-known Boston rock clubs like the Paradise and Local 186 had booked them for gigs, and they graced the same stages as national acts like the Pixies and Sonic Youth. This made it a little surprising when Nina and the band brought it back that night to the place where they had incubated, instead of making a big exit somewhere on Lansdowne Street.

Their homage to the old mill city thirty miles north was a cover of the catchy Boston anthem "Dirty Water" by the Standells. They made it their own by slowing it down to an almost ethereal ballad, changing Boston in the lyrics to Heron, and making the crowd go wild. They tore through that grimy low-ceiling rock club like they were headlining Woodstock, Nina dancing in the roots from which she came.

The band belted out their rendition of that song, and the atmosphere in Heron Hall crackled with energy. The audience, a mix of loyal fans and curious onlookers, swayed and sang along, caught up in the bittersweet moment of farewell. The crowd ate out of Nina's palm before the night ended.

I stood right beside the stage, behind the amps, so I could be close but where Nina couldn't see me. My arms were crossed in front of me like a bored roadie, my emotions a tangled mess.

Watching Nina, a commanding presence in the spotlight, caused a pang of resentment to strike my heart. It wasn't just about her success or her departing from our hometown—it was about the way she had left me behind without a second glance.

Instead of cheering along, I wanted to yell at her. Scream that she was a phony, have her stop singing so I could finally speak my truth. Jump up on stage, shake her. Instead, I let the music swell around me. Nina was beyond reach now. I hadn't spoken

to her since a Lipstick Rays show the year before, when I had begged her to come home.

"I've put it all behind me, Chloe," she said, staring into a little compact in her hand, piling mascara onto her already long, dark lashes behind the stage. "I've started a new life, and you need to do the same." She snapped the mirror closed and walked away.

I stood there frozen, the sting of her words tightening in my chest. My throat burned with everything I wanted to say but couldn't.

At the farewell show, while I watched Nina command the stage, her harsh words echoing in my mind, a familiar knot formed in my stomach. The anger and resentment I had felt toward her had been stewing for over a year, intensifying with each passing day. She had abandoned me, leaving me to deal with the aftermath of our crazy home. How could she simply put it all behind her and move on?

Now there were countless nights alone in our childhood bedroom, staring at the ceiling, enduring the deafening silence. No more Nina practicing guitar to keep me awake—not that I ever minded. All I could think about was Nina... did she ever think about me?

The crowd around me cheered. They saw her as a rock goddess, a shining light in the music scene. But to me, she was my sister, and she had turned her back on me.

When the last of Nina's distortion flowed through the amps, she thanked her fans, and the band broke from the stage. I waited near the back door, my heart pounding in my chest, while I prepared to confront her. She needed to understand the pain she had caused, the emptiness she had left in her wake.

When she finally emerged from backstage, her face glistened with sweat, and her eyes shined with the adrenaline of the

performance. Our eyes met. For a moment, it felt like time had stopped, and we were just two sisters, with our complicated history hanging between us.

"Nina!" My voice was barely audible over the buzzing crowd.

She hesitated, and her gaze softened.

I swallowed the lump in my throat and continued, "We need to talk."

A mix of emotions crossed her face before she turned away and stepped out the door to join her band. They ran through the streets of Mill Stone, handing out their self-recorded demo to everyone they saw and laughing about how they would soon be filthy rich rock stars.

I kept my distance, peering from the alley like a stray cat while smoking a cigarette and kicking around a makeshift crack pipe of charred aluminum on the ground. While Nina was talking to a group of kids, our eyes met again. She broke the gaze by looking away, then took a drag from her own cigarette.

A silent goodbye. I was crushed, consumed by a desolation I'd never known before.

I turned my back on the jubilant Nina and made my way down the dark alley, unsure when I would see her again. Though I was pissed, if she had called out to me, I would have run to her.

Back at the mall, from the speakers above my head, the extensive vamping of minor-key tonalities ends the song in a sultry, lingering scream of "Goodbye" and transitions seamlessly into Hole's "Violet." People often compared my sister to Courtney Love, but Nina had a far wider vocal range.

I caress the leather of the boot in my hand and turn to Michelle. She's admiring herself in the mirror, with a pair of white canvas flats on her feet.

"Aren't those a little lame?" I ask.

A salesperson sneaks up behind us. The pungent floral scent of the gel slicking back his hair stings my nostrils, and I cough. Through his thick glasses, our eyes meet. His hands fidget in the pockets of his pressed khakis. Aside from the offensive hair products threatening to make me pass out, he's not intimidating.

"Anything at all I can help you with?" he asks, giving me the plastered grin all retail employees have mastered.

"Do you have these in a woman's size five?" I shove the boot at him.

He grasps it with both hands, falling back like a kid awkwardly catching a ball in gym class.

"Usually not in this brand, but I'll check." He examines it with hesitation from all angles and I play the part of someone trying not to get their hopes up.

He waltzes off to the back of the store. Once I'm sure he's out of sight, I lunge for the only size seven at the bottom of the stack and snatch it away without knocking over the rest of the boxes. It's like I have just won a game of Jenga.

"Let's go," I mutter to Michelle, tugging her long arm.

She slips her shoe back on. Her lanky stature forces her to hold the bass guitar low and close to her knees when she plays.

"Are you crazy? There's a camera right over there," she says through clenched teeth. Michelle nods toward the little flickering red light tucked away on the right side of the wall, above a shelf stocked high with boxes.

"Come on," I whisper.

She stops and looks back at the door.

"He's back there looking for shoes. He's not watching a movie." I squeeze Michelle's wrist. Her arm is limp in my grip, and I wonder where my fiercely strong friend went.

Michelle is understandably hesitant, but I need these boots.