

Akard Drearstone

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For my wife Nancy

CHAPTER ONE
A Free Commune Concert
Saturday, May 17, 1975

Jim Piston carefully angled his clear acrylic bass through the cramped kitchen foyer and out the door behind the giant purple farmhouse. No way he'd ding this thing, even if it was his second best guitar. His head surged. He was dizzy. Damn Akard and his dope rituals! Why had he smoked all that stuff? There must've been ten people in Akard's tiny room, everybody in everybody else's lap. No way could he play now. Hell, he could hardly walk. What was all this sound out here? Millions of crickets in the waning light? Every leaf on every tree was indescribably clear, in fact the leaves were so clear they were scary, so much detail, every vein on every leaf visible from twenty feet away, too much to comprehend in the onslaught of sunset. It was still so hot. Was it really hot, or was he imagining it? Would night cool things off? *What were those crickets doing?*

Ahead on the commune's rutted parking lot sound men Richard and Craig had blocked out a ten-by-twenty-foot space for the drums and the amps and the mike stands. Wires to the instruments and the mixer panel formed a makeshift fence around this dirt stage, which backed up to a fence thickly twined with closed morning-glories. Akard sat on a stool tuning his lead guitar, talking to Harley at his electric piano. Beside Akard stood Katy in the tight white Oxford shirt Jim had fought all evening to look away from; even now the lower curve of a braless breast peeked through the buttons. Woozily Jim focused on the fourth band member, Pete, who absently tapped his drums, long silver hair ruffling in a breeze. The cricket sounds swelled.

Jim came around the corner of the farmhouse and gaped at a wall of chattering, squirming *monsters*. "Jesus God, what the fuck is *that*?"

Bearded Craig Stoker looked up from the mixer panel. "Whoa, dude!" he laughed. "Looks like we got a few more people than we planned for!"

Jim strained to make sense of what he was seeing. Hundreds of scruffy freaks crowded the ill-defined stage. They stood packed in the dried furrows of the huge dirt parking lot and spilled right and left across the infinite fields in the oncoming twilight. More were trudging up the five hundred-foot driveway. They even perched on the wrecked cars and the rusted tractor in the decrepit shed beyond the stage, its remaining boards, pierced by the setting sun, striking Jim as more like a fast pencil sketch than any sort of building. Dozens of people had somehow made their way to the second floor of the giant dark barn beside it. They leaned precipitously over high weeds, laughing and passing pipes.

"How the fuck we get this ... *many*?" Jim moaned.

"Hey, Jim!" Akard laughed, extending his free hand to the crowd. "Who'd a thought?"

Harley looked up from his keyboard, shirtless, ribs clearly outlined, his ball of frizzy brown hair matted on one side. Jim had never imagined he was so skinny. At least he wasn't passed out on his piano like last night, tongue hanging out, burbling nonsense, a bleeding needle mark on his forearm. "Man, there must be *hundreds* of 'em!" Harley cackled.

"How the hell are we gonna play--for--for--" Jim gasped, turning back to the crowd. "Jesus God, how did they all *get* here?"

Akard shrugged. "Beats me. You okay, man?"

"Yeah, yeah, I'm okay ..." Jim managed, knowing better than to question the holiness of the nightly stoning ritual in Akard's room. "Man, didn't we say this is just, like, for a few of our friends?" Akard slung his guitar to the side and Katy snuggled up to him, avoiding Jim's

accusing eyes. No! Not possible! Not after Jim had kissed her just yesterday afternoon--

"Hey, man, is this where the concert's gonna be? Huh? When's it start, man?" Jim turned to a skinny guy with an incongruously plump round face who idly swung a black camera with telephoto lens. Jim knew cameras and blinked at the expensive Nikon F2 this idiot held. The guy wore a Grateful Dead T-shirt, light blue jeans, and polished maroon boots. He had long strawberry blond hair, blue eyes, and a stubble beard. Some sort of photographer twit on an ego trip. Jim knew the type well.

"Christ, Akard, we can't have *shits* here," Jim said, jerking a finger at the newcomer, who proceeded to lift the camera, twirl the focus, and take four pictures.

"Who're *you*, man?" Akard said.

"Man, like I'm *Preston*, man. Preston Deltrang, man. Man, like I came for the show. This fuckin' place is out in the middle of like *nowhere*, man."

"We can't have this!" Jim repeated. "We're gonna be *recording*, for God's sake."

"How'd y'all hear about this?" Akard said.

"Who the fuck are *you*, man?" Preston said.

"Hey, I'm Akard Drearstone."

Preston's blank face got slacker. He leaned onto Akard and grabbed his arm. "You're *kiddin'* me, man."

"No, I'm *not* kidding you!"

"That's Akard Drearstone," Craig Stoker said, looking up from a tape deck on a card table. His hair and beard were so disordered that Jim always thought of him as a giant smiling ball of lint. "That's Jim Piston over there."

"Wow, man," Preston said, "you just didn't look what I figured Akard Drearstone would like look, man, y'know?"

"And I'm the legendary Harley Krishna," Harley put in, seated at his piano.

Only now did Preston register that he was standing next to famous musicians. "*Shit*, man, wow!" He moved to Akard and shot a picture of Katy with her arm around him. Katy wore the most erotic smile Jim had ever seen. He ached for her big round breasts, he was dizzy, he knew he shouldn't have gotten stoned, he always got paranoid on the stuff, here he was thrust into *catastrophe*--

"*Shit*, Akard! Just--*shit!*" Jim cried, pointing at the Nikon.

"Hey, it's okay," Akard said, long brown ponytail hanging absurdly to the right of his misshapen head. Not quite as skinny as Harley, he wore tight striped pants and a flowing white Indian shirt under a leather vest. "Look, I know we said we were gonna have just our people and a few friends from Austin. Somehow we got a few more, but--"

"A few? *A few?*"

"Yeah, me and the boys've got a great concert in front of us tonight," Harley chortled as Preston got into his face with the camera. "Gonna record some songs for our album. Right on the dirt here."

Several more unwashed freaks advanced. One, with an I.Q. of sixty, muttered: "Hey, when's the fuck the fuckin' concert's gonna fuckin' start? Huh?"

"Hey, man, everybody in Austin's gonna be here," Preston said. "I mean, like the word is *out*, y'know? Like it's in all the record stores, man. The directions were a little hard to follow, but ... here." He pulled a yellow flyer from his back pocket. "All the stores have these, man."

Akard took the flyer, then handed it to Jim.

THE AKARD DREARSTONE GROUP PRESENTS:

A COMMUNE CONCERT

Saturday, May 17, 7:30 PM
at the Drearstone Group's own commune
corner Hwy. 12333 and Appalachia Road
40 mi. northeast of Austin

FREE!!!!

"Christ, Akard, we're *ruined!*" Jim snarled. "Who put this out?"

"Shit, man, when's the concert gonna start?" a freak whined.

Jim followed Akard's gaze across the glowing yellow fields to a line of vehicles creeping along Appalachia Road in the hot distance. They lurched into the dirt driveway to find themselves jammed against an ocean of freaks. "Craig, do you think you could direct these people to move back from the amps here?" Akard said.

"Yeah, good idea," Craig nodded. "Then Richard and I need to finish setting up the sound."

"Hey, Eddie!" Akard called over to a commune member talking to some of the newcomers by the dying elm tree squatting in the middle of the driveway. "Can you see if you can get some people to direct the cars onto the fields? Let 'em just mash the grass down, no big deal."

"Sure, man," said Edward Emerson, a small, runty guy with a sharp wedge face, turning to push through the crowd toward the oncoming vehicles. When Jim had first come to the commune, he'd assumed Edward was a mindless thrill seeker who'd eat any and all drugs within reach. But there was a stern wise look in Edward's doped eyes. After Edward had helped talked Jim down off his disastrous acid trip a month ago, Jim had come to think of him as a courageous adventurer, a drug *saint*.

Of course, it had been both Edward and a twelve-year-old girl who'd talked him down, for hours, as Jim raved and raved. Both Edward and Jan had in turn seemed like God to Jim that long night. He'd given up psychedelics since then. He had to protect his mind. So what good was it to get stoned with Akard and the others tonight? Dope made him even more paranoid than LSD. Was that crazy or what? What on earth was he doing to himself?

"*Man ...*" Akard sighed, again surveying the oncoming cars. "Well, we can fit a lot of people out in the fields, I guess."

"Dammit, Akard, we could have *five thousand people* here tonight!" Jim cried.

"I agree it's a fuckin' logistics problem," Pete Sponge said, ambling over from his drums. He had a large gut but his thick biceps exuded taut power. His endless hair glowed like aluminum in the slanting sun. "We only have that one barrel of beer in the kitchen. And one fuckin' bathroom."

The crowd sounds swelled. "Hey, guys, gonna get started? Huh? Huh?" came a call.

Akard waved back. "Just settin' up the sound, man, it's cool." He turned to Pete. "Well, we just don't have beer for 'em. And they can just piss where they stand. He pointed to the surrounding three hundred acres. "We've got enough fields for that."

"Mama, I need to check on Horth," twelve-year-old Jan Pace said to her giant mother. Jim blinked; he hadn't registered that either of them were within the crudely fenced musicians' area.

"He'll be just fine, Jan, he's all the way on the other side of the farm," Crystal said. Jim

grimaced; she looked even more bloated than usual in that shapeless flower pattern dress.

Jan brushed long dark hair from her forehead. Jim saw she'd been perspiring. "Maybe Pete'll go with me?"

"I don't think I've got time," Pete said. "But I'm sure he's gonna be just fine. He'll barely hear the music over there."

"But all these *people*--"

"He'll be all right, Jan. Nobody'll wander over there."

"I'm gonna check on him in a minute. I'm worried about the stable. Did we really go over it? I was reading today that horses can catch their eyelids like on a nail or something and tear them."

"Oh my God!" Jim gasped at the image.

Pete nudged Jim and grinned. "It's cool, man. Jan just worries too much. Look, Jan, I know the stable needs some repair. That's why Horth's normally in the barn. But just remember this used to be a professional horse farm--the stable over there, the fences, everything was done right. I was looking for things that Horth might rub up against, and believe me, that stable's okay."

"That's right, Pete knows about these things," Crystal put in.

"I worry about him being *afraid*," Jan said. "Do we have time to go over there before the concert?"

"C'mon," Pete said, "you read that book on horse diseases and now you're upset over nothing. I'm sure Horth is having the time of his life over there."

"I'm gonna go over there. I never knew there was so much to worry about."

"You've learned a lot in two months. I think Horth feels well cared for. And Doc Norsen will be here tomorrow to check on him. Everything's fine."

Jan shook her head. "I don't know ..." Jim caught her eye. God, they were so similar, despite their age difference, so prone to the same anxieties. On the acid trip he'd told both her and Edward all his terrors, all his screw-ups. While Edward had certainly played his side of the God trip well, it was the twelve-year-old girl who'd really listened, who was sympathetic to a degree Jim had never experienced. She *understood* him. There'd been this weird bond between them ever since. Now her horse was alone out there, in the old stable on the other side of the farm where she and Pete had moved him this afternoon to keep him away from loud music. But she had the same fear as Jim. Five thousand fools showing up at her farm!

Well, Jim sure didn't share her love for horses. That huge gray monster, shitting everywhere! A couple times Jan insisted he help feed him, and he was afraid this feeding thing was going to be the price of retaining his odd friendship with her.

Bill Dunn clomped out of the house with a can of Budweiser. He was an obnoxious slob and Jim avoided the bastard whenever he could. Though Bill was huge, he wasn't muscular like Pete. Bill surveyed the crowd. "What's this I hear? You guys gonna hafta give a *real* concert?"

Akard shot the flyer over to Bill. "Bill, you got any idea who did this?"

Bill opened his beer with a hiss. "Shit, no. Hell, Drearstone, I thought you were gonna keep our location secret, man."

"Shit--*shit!*" Jim said. "Fucking dammit to *hell*, Akard!"

"Akard, man, you better tell your bass player to get himself together or he won't be able to play worth shit tonight."

"Aw, piss on it, Bill," Jim said. He didn't care that Dunn was twice as big as he was. If that son of a bitch ever tried to fuck with him Jim knew he could easily whip him. Bill was lazy and easygoing, but Jim's paranoia would quickly prove decisive.

“Listen, guys,” Bill went on, “everyone knows how great the single is, but take it from me, you don’t know *nothing* about being in a band until you’ve been performing regularly, night after night, in front of complete strangers.”

“Look, we’re not wimps. We’ve done a few gigs,” Jim shot back. “We’re just getting started. Don’t hand me this shit.”

“I guess fate brought your fans to you,” Bill said, waving at the wall of freaks who were inexplicably respecting a ten-foot-distance from the dirt stage as Craig and Richard fussed with amplifiers and wires.

“Goddammit, Akard, the whole goddamn state’s gonna be crawling up that driveway!” Jim cried.

“It’s--not so bad, maybe,” Jan ventured.

“I’m sorry, Jan, but this is *it!* We’re *ruined!*”

“Jesus God, Piston, get a hold of yourself,” Dunn said.

“Aw, fuck you, Bill! You think you know so much! Well, your goddamn band *sucks!* That’s right, it *sucks!*”

Bill shrugged. Jim wasn’t sure if he’d struck home. He did assume Bill had to be miffed about not being invited into the Akard Drearstone Group. Bill had his own country band called Forklift, which played weekends at some bar in Austin Jim could never remember the name of.

“Well, your acid rock shit sucks, too, if you ask me,” Bill finally replied, swigging his beer.

“Only Akard’s genius guitar keeps you guys going.”

“Aw, shit! What the fuck do you know? What the *fuck?*”

“Take it easy, Jimmy boy,” Bill said. “Your consciousness is really *uptight* right now. You’ve got a concert coming up in about two minutes, y’know.”

Jim had vowed long ago that a fifth member was *not* going to be added to the Akard Drearstone Group. Akard had wanted Bill to sit in on side B of their single, “Absolute Albatross Greasies,” but Jim had adamantly vetoed it. He wasn’t sure if Bill ever knew he’d been considered or that Jim had blackballed him. Akard had probably only proposed the idea for an old friend, but hopefully by now, three months later, he understood just how badly Dunn would’ve fit into the group.

“Country music ...” Jim muttered. “Jesus God!”

“Piston, you are a head case, man, you know that?”

Jim raised a fist. “You son of a bitch!”

“Uncle Bill, you and Uncle Jim have got to cut this out! Right now! You’ve got to be *friends!*” little Jan Pace pleaded.

Jim looked into her hurting brown eyes. “Aaah, he’s just out to screw up our concert because he’s so goddamn jealous.”

Bill grinned and folded his arms. “Suit yourself, asshole.”

“Well, piss on you, man.”

“Jesus, Jim, take it easy,” Akard said. “Bill’s just joking. No big deal. We’re just here to do a concert. It’s cool.”

Jim didn’t meet his eye because Katy was hanging blond and full-figured on the bastard’s shoulder. What had Jim been thinking yesterday afternoon? Kissing her again and again under the walnut tree? What had *she* been thinking? “Okay, okay, don’t have a heart attack, I can play,” he said, studying his dusty brown boots. “I just wasn’t expecting twenty thousand assholes here tearing the place apart.”

“Well, at least my smack is safe,” Harley said.

Akard turned to their keyboardist blipping on his piano. "Your *what?*"

"No problem, there's none in the house, man, I cleaned it out just like you said."

"You said that was the *last* of it last night," Katy cut in. "That it was all *gone*."

"I did?" Harley said.

"Jesus God, Harley, I told you we can't have heroin here!" Akard said.

"Aw, man, it's safe, man."

Akard looked at his guitar in disgust. "I can't *believe* this."

"I won't live in a heroin commune!" Katy said. "I just won't!" Jim was surprised by the outrage on her face because she always seemed to be beaming with secret delight. Of course he was on her side. Smack was dangerous shit and everyone at the farm was horrified by it. Some people had even demanded that Harley get the hell out, but right now Jim couldn't imagine anything worse than being cut apart by this marijuana stone. Thank God he had this beautiful woman in front of him to soothe his gasping lungs and overrevving heart. He couldn't help checking out her big round breasts barely held in place by that thin shirt, and her taut rear stuffed into snug gray jeans. She was twenty-four, a mystery woman who'd already been married and divorced. She was *the* woman, no question about it. She was *everything*. So why was he was going to pieces in front of her?

"Look, guys, there's no more smack in the house," Harley said. "I heard what you said, Akard, man, and I got it out this morning. Everything's cool."

"You told everyone you were gonna quit," Akard complained. "Are you in shape to play tonight, man?"

"Crystal, should Jan really be hearing all this?" Katy said.

The obese Crystal smiled. "She's okay. She's seen everybody on everything."

"Maybe you all need to get more fucked up," Bill pointed out. "I've never seen people so unprepared for a concert."

"Dammit, you fuckers already *gave* me enough fuckin' dope!" Jim cried.

"Huh. Akard, man, you said you were gonna *record* some shit for the album?"

"Yeah," Akard said, "Craig and Richard are setting up both tape decks."

"Shit, we could never use this crap," Jim cut in. "All these assholes who have to yell 'Yay!' and 'Far out!' all the time. It's disgusting. I thought we were gonna have a nice, *low-key* thing. Dammit to hell!"

"See, I buried my smack out in the fields," Harley said. "I'm sure that's all these shits want. They wanna find my smack and shoot it up. But don't worry, nobody'll find it. And if they do, man, I've got dynamite on the thing. I just blow it up! A whole kilo!"

Akard dug the end of his guitar in the dirt. "Yeah, right. Look, Bill's right, we need to get together and figure out how we're gonna handle all this." He pointed to the murmuring crowd ten feet away.

"No, really, I was out on Carter Road the other night and there was this company excavating or something, anyway, fuck me if there weren't two sticks of dynamite lying around. At least I think it's dynamite. They were blasting something, so I figured--"

"Wait a sec," Akard said. "You say you have dynamite? *You say you have a kilo of heroin out in the fields?*"

"Shit, yeah! Can't you see it? *Boom!*"

"*Jesus*, man, you said you were *quitting*. Just last night!"

"I tied 'em around the box! I figure, if anyone ever tries to bust me, I just light one of 'em and run like fuck!"

“Akard, man, we are *not* together,” Pete put in from his drum set.

“I’ll say!” Bill laughed. “Looks like you guys have about five minutes to get your asses in gear. Or you’re gonna screw up royally.” He scanned the crowd. “Hope this don’t fuck the commune up, Akard man. Now everybody knows where we live. It was cool when it just the Originals. Now we have shitheads like Piston here. Can’t hardly fit ’em in anywhere now.” He scanned the purple farmhouse at their right. “How many shitheads we up to now, dude?” he snickered at Jim. “Thirty?”

Jim grimaced. “Hell if I know.” He pointed to Akard. “Ask the head honcho.”

Akard shrugged. “I’m not keeping track. I’m not the damn president of anything.”

“Thirty’s about right, I think,” Jan said.

“Piston, you’re a shithead,” Bill grinned, gulping his beer. “But Jan’s not. She’s one of the Originals.”

“Aaah, fuck you,” Jim grunted. How this Bill asshole could say all this surrounded by a dozen people who were *not* Originals mystified him. Sure, a lot of people had shown up since January, like Jim. But Jim was a professional, he was the goddamn bass guitarist, and Dunn was nothing. Why was this fuckhead always on them about getting their act together? They knew what they were doing. They were famous enough for twenty thousand shitheads to invade the commune. At least Jim could agree with Bill there. It had been a cool four months here, but this fame thing had finally blown up in their faces. Could they really play tonight?

Bill snapped his fingers in Jim’s face. “Hey, dude, I hear ya and it don’t mean a thing to me. All I’m sayin’ is get your act together, asshole. You’re freaking on the dope like you always do. You have two minutes to straighten it all out, man.”

“Hey, assholes! When’s the fuckin’ concert gonna start, man?” came a cry.

“Yeah, man, we been waitin’ for like ... *hours*, man ...”

“C’mon, Bill, just ... go away,” Jim grunted. Why did Akard still put up with Bill? Akard had lived in the same house with the jerk for years. With him and the fucking Six Originals. Jim’s stomach turned; for a stoned moment the neck of his bass had morphed into an impossible three-lane highway crammed with lighted semi-trucks tailgating each other at a hundred miles an hour. He dizzily shook his head.

“He’s not really mad,” Akard said, punching Bill on the shoulder. “Just a little stage jitters. I’m sure we all have it.”

“I sure as fuck don’t!” Harley laughed. “Man, like this is all so *smooth!*”

Akard grimaced. “Yeah, smooth. Okay, guys, let’s clear the band area and get started. These people are getting restless.”

“Okay, I’m outa here,” Bill said. “Knock ’em dead, guys.” He grinned, downed the rest of his beer, and threw the can at Jim’s feet. “Get your act together, dude.”

CHAPTER TWO

Katrina Regan Journa

Jim considered punching the son of a bitch's lights out then and there but the sight of Akard and Katy embracing made him reel with dismay. He was only now admitting he loved her. But hadn't he known that from the moment she'd shown up at the commune? Yet somehow the Drearstone bastard had *gotten* her.

Then again, wasn't Katrina Regan Journa too good for Jim? She'd arrived a couple weeks ago from Austin and to everyone's surprise immediately evicted Rosser Cox and Patterson Melville from their room. Most of the newcomers were sleeping three or four to a room anyway, but Katy, an old friend of Pat's from UT, nevertheless let everyone know that she just wanted a place to hang out after her divorce. Somehow she'd convinced everyone that she needed an entire room to herself for an art studio.

This astonishing woman was too damn experienced for Jim. Yet one night they'd had a discussion, stoned out of their skulls, that opened their souls to each other, and somehow the first painting she'd done at the commune, a four-by-five-foot abstract in watery, oceanic acrylic, had wound up in Jim's room. Did it mean she cared for him? Was she just a friend, or more than a friend?

And then yesterday afternoon--kissing! Fully, passionately, by the walnut tree, where anybody could see them. Didn't that mean they were lovers? What on earth had just happened? Half an hour ago they'd all been getting stoned in Akard's damn pre-concert ritual and she'd been up there with Akard, on his mattress, the guest of honor. Meanwhile Jim had been exiled to the end of the room down by the kitty litter box, and all he could do was stare at Akard and Katy laughing, rubbing shoulders, and pushing the dope pipe into each other's mouths.

Why hadn't he seen it? Whichever woman wound up next to Akard on his mattress was Girl of the Week, didn't everyone know that? Scores of people came to the weekend dope parties, and Akard always had the prettiest girl in the group on his mattress. Richard had rescued Akard more than once from a jealous boyfriend. Although Jim couldn't see what women saw in Akard's lopsided head, his shoulder-length hair and messy beard, that silly leather vest he always had on and those ridiculous pointed boots, it was obvious Akard had the sexual charisma Jim lacked.

Jim stared morosely at the Lead Groupie bidding a long lusty farewell to the Lead Guitarist before the concert. He shook his head at the male and female tongues having at it inside their joined cheeks. This damn commune wasn't working out. Watching Akard take Katy like this confirmed it.

What had he been thinking when he'd signed the contract in February? Sure, the single had come out quickly and was getting a fantastic response. But was there any way he could get out of this damn house, get an apartment somewhere, and still play bass for the group? Get away from Katy and all the drug pressure and not be cut off from the life of the commune?

And he was so sick of Dunn yakking on and on about the Six Originals and how they used to have free run of three hundred acres of rural Texas land, ninety-five percent of which Akard had let go to seed after inheriting the place, even though at one time this had been the successful Drearstone Horse Farm.

Jim took a deep breath. "Okay, guys," he said, more to try to disengage Katy's mouth from Akard's than anything else, "we need to get it together."

"Yeah, you're right. I think we have time for one more round of dope," Akard said.

"Are you *kidding*?" Jim gasped.

“Really?” Richard said. “You have time?” But even as he said this he pulled out his nine-inch-long brass pipe and a clear bag of weed.

“Sure, man,” Akard said. “We all need to mellow.”

Richard fired up the pipe and passed it to Jim, who stared at it in panic. Too late, Jim saw the effete photographer Preston Deltrang snapping a picture of this. He turned to pass the pipe but found himself staring at Akard and Katy lip-locked again. Jim had to nudge Akard’s shoulder with the hot pipe to get his attention.

“Yeah, thanks, man,” Akard said, taking a huge pull and then inserting the pipe into Katy’s luscious red mouth.

Somehow Preston got the pipe next and smoked noisily. When he handed it to Jan the girl shook her head, though she took the pipe and handed it to her mother.

“Wow, man, don’t wanna partake, huh?” Preston said, raising his camera to shoot Jan passing the pipe.

“Oh, Jan won’t smoke,” Crystal said, smoking. “She’s only twelve.”

“Twelve and a half,” Jan corrected.

“Huh. I coulda sworn you was, like, y’know, *older*,” Preston said. “Believe me, honey, this is fucking *great shit*.”

“Free acid!” some freak hissed, wandering up and down the ten-foot-wide no-man’s land between band and crowd. “Sunshine, man, right here! Acid, man!”

Preston held his hand out. Jim stared as a little orange pill came to Preston’s palm, just like that, and for free. “Twelve, huh?” Preston said, mindlessly gulping the pill and staring at Jan’s chest.

Jan turned away. Jim knew he should call out Preston for being an asshole, but looking at it objectively, anyone could see that Jan was developing. It was easy to see how some guy might think she was older than she was. Something about that long dark hair and those melting brown eyes.

“Actually, Jan’s so cosmic she doesn’t need to smoke dope or trip,” Akard said. “She’s really quite advanced for twelve and a half.”

“She really is,” Pete put in. “She can discuss *anything* with you.”

“Uncle Akard!” Jan laughed. “You guys are stoned!”

“And she has an opinion about *everything* and won’t hesitate to tell you,” Akard added.

“Really,” Pete said. “If Jan didn’t exist then we’d have to invent her.”

“Uncle Pete!” Jan protested. “You guys--”

Jim passed up the pipe once more. What sort of shithead was he not to be able to smoke dope and relax with it? He was already way over his limit and the dense smoke was adding a contact high. He became aware of people sounds increasing in volume. It was a thundering waterfall. He’d fought hard all this time to keep from looking at that ocean of faces. Now he did and the crowd’s raw impatience and potential violence flooded his gut. “Man, have we all forgotten about the fucking concert or what?”

“What concert?” Pete said.

“Shit, are you *nuts*? Man, we’ve got a *concert* right now!”

Pete laughed. “C’mon, Jim, just kidding. We’re gonna have a great time.”

CHAPTER THREE

Regarding the Cinder Block Incident

“Christ, it’s *insane*, we’re *insane* to be doing this,” Jim muttered. Jan had never seen his jawline so taut. He wore a dark blue work shirt and tight jeans. Blue was his color. He was so handsome.

“No, it’s all right,” she told him. “You’ll have a wonderful time!”

He turned to her, eyes so raw and glaring she shrank back. “I can’t *handle* this! Any of it!” He marched to his own amplifier and jammed a cord into his clear bass. The feedback blare got the crowd cheering and Jim’s head jerked as if a bullet hit it.

“No, really, you’ll be all right,” Jan protested. But she’d failed to protect him. Why did these idiots take these drugs? They babbled dangerous nonsense. They *did* dangerous nonsense. Hadn’t Jim told her his head was too fragile for psychedelics? That he was going to lay off LSD and mescaline? But that sure didn’t stop him from smoking dope until he got paranoid.

The sun, low in the trees, was an intoxicating glare. Hundreds of freaks still streamed up the five hundred-foot driveway, shouting and laughing. Everyone held joints and pipes and beer cans. Jan was light-headed from breathing all this smoke. She’d had contact highs before and knew what being stoned was like.

She studied the crowd by the vast purple farmhouse and realized that any number of these stoned, tripping crazies could march right through the place where she’d grown up and blast it apart like a tornado. But Uncle Bill was inside and surely he wouldn’t let anybody mess around in there. Probably some other commune members would be keeping guard too, wouldn’t they? Thank God Horth was nowhere near. Jan scanned the far south fields in the waning light. Beyond the grove of mesquite trees, partly hidden by a rill of tall golden grass, lay the low dilapidated stable. It was too far way for anyone to want to climb up there for a view, she decided. And all they’d see anyway was the morning-glory fence and the backs of the musicians.

Her father Richard worked on the amps with Craig. Pete sat behind his drums, Harley touched his electric piano, and the freaks hooted.

“Hey! Drearstone Group! Drearstone Group!” someone shouted.

“We want Akard!” someone else cried. More cheering. “*We want Akard!*”

Jan turned to the beautiful Jim. “Look, it’s a concert!” she laughed.

Jim stared back in incomprehensible shock. “I ... I don’t know ... what’s going on.” Akard ambled over to tune his guitar with him and Jim struggled with the four big keys on his bass. The twangs and booms went out over the amps to intensified shouts.

“You’ll be fine!” Jan called over the crowd. “Maybe you can play some of your own songs!”

Jim shook his head. “What ... are you *talking* about?”

“The songs you’re writing at night!”

“I’m not writing any songs! Akard writes the songs!”

“Hell with that,” Akard grinned, ping-pong notes across to Jim’s thurbs. “The music for ‘Cop on a Ten Speed’ is fuckin’ *genius*.”

Jan nodded eagerly. The rehearsals for ‘Cop on a Ten Speed’ were among the loveliest experiences of her life. Nobody at the commune had ever heard anything like that before. One night they’d insisted the group repeat it six times. Though like all the rest of the songs “Cop on a Ten Speed” featured Akard’s poetry, it was the first music Jim had written for the group on his own. “No, he writes words, too!” Jan laughed.

“*No ...*” Jim protested. “I can’t write *words*. That’s insane!”

Jan shrank back. She'd hurt him! He had to really be suffering--and she never knew!

"C'mon, Jim, we all hear you banging on the typewriter every night," Akard said. "Everyone figures you're working on some lyrics. Don't worry about it. Bring 'em to the group whenever you're ready."

"You should know better than that," Jim said, fingering a few notes. "I'm just messing around, sorta like ... stream of consciousness bullshit ... just blowing off steam or something. I can't write fuckin' *song lyrics*."

Jan had no idea the wonderful Jim was so shy. Jan had peeked into his room a couple times, a tiny square next to Akard's closet, with a light bulb hanging from a wire above a double bed that took up ninety percent of the room. Rough yellow boards, still smelling like fresh lumber, formed two of the walls that Akard and Richard had built in February for the newest band member. The other two sides were the rotting brown wood of the outer wall of the house and the separating wall from Akard's room. There were no windows. The floating gaseous colors of Katy's huge painting, dominating the dark wood opposite the door, made the room livable. Jim had also tacked up drawings by other commune members, including an Akard Drearstone original, a picture of a three-headed dog.

When Jan realized she'd memorized Jim's room she knew she was in love. This was the real thing. Of course she was too young for it. She was going to wait six years, until she was eighteen, to tell Jim about it. She'd made up her mind. It was all planned.

She could hardly bear to see him suffering because of these stupid drugs. But wasn't Jan also feeling the effects of the insanity drugs? And hadn't she failed Horth as well? Here she'd gotten a contact high and forgotten about him. He must be terrified, locked in the old stable, battered by all this noise. She was ashamed to go to him. He'd hate her for being messed up.

Should she try anyway? Take him some sugar, brush him, give him another blanket in case it got chilly tonight? But he *had* to love her, didn't he? She looked past the morning-glory fence, woozily lost as to which way to proceed. Wait--the path by the walnut tree, okay ...

But freaks roamed in the three-foot weeds behind the musician's area, and Jan knew they'd follow her down that path. They'd break into the stable, jump on Horth and try to ride him. They'd kick at him and break his legs! No, she wouldn't be able to get away until it was dark.

The cheering was mindless. The yahooing built as Akard plugged in his bright red lead guitar, Katy at his side, brushing back his messy long brown hair for a final kiss. Sure, Jim had let his blond hair grow long, but not disgustingly long and ponytailed like Akard's. And Jim would never grow such a sloppy beard. He had such a clean sharp jaw. Jan didn't understand the obsession with covering your face with hair. Her friend Diane loved long hair, long facial hair, chest hair. They'd spent many hours in the barn brushing Horth and discussing everyone's hair and jaws. Diane had already confessed she was totally in love with Akard Drearstone. Jan had to smile at the naïvety of Diane's crush.

And then there was Akard's head. Jan supposed that having a malformed head was a sign of genius. In the simple days, back when she was young, back before all this had started, it had been just the six of them: Jan, her parents, Akard, Bill, and morose Harray Andreall, long gone from the commune. But it had been Harray screaming for them to take cover in the high summer last year, the weeds by the barn over six feet high.

Jan had been walking with Akard through weeds a foot over her head. She was lost in an ocean of green when a thrilling WHOMP! shook the grass two feet to her right.

Akard, stoned out of his skull, giggled: "Man, what're these weeds *doing*? What're they *doing*?"

At regular intervals the waving weeds, some even higher than Akard, would shiver with an uncanny WHOMP! Akard laughed at another WHOMP! Jan felt a WHOMP! a foot to her left.

Then she heard the kitchen door slam and Harry Andreall crying: “Get away from there, you idiots! Jesus God!”

Jan looked straight up to a last cinder block tumbling end over end in the clear blue sky. She followed it, paralyzed, as it struck Akard on the side of his head in a shower of blood.

Jan was hysterical. She’d thought he was dead. Everyone thought he was dead.

It turned out that a stoned visitor, one of Bill’s musicians, keyboardist Henry James, a nasty bearded skinny guy Jan had always detested, had climbed to the second floor of the barn, found some cinder blocks, and had been stonedly inspired to toss them into the sea of grass below.

Akard survived with a fractured skull and two months in the hospital. He had health insurance from his Georgetown print shop job and never tried to sue Henry, pointedly forgiving him and maintaining that the cinder block toss was “weird and dangerous conceptual art.” Jan had always wondered if Akard was serious about that. Of course the shivering, booming grass *had* been eerily beautiful before that final block fell.

But Jan was sure the Cinder Block Incident had done brain damage when Akard next announced that he was forming a rock group with his old UT buddy Pete Spangler, who claimed to be a drummer but who hadn’t played in the ten years since high school, and who’d changed his last name to Sponge in the middle of an acid trip in February.

She was even more sure when Akard chose one of her father’s drugged-up mechanics at his shop, Harley Krishna, as his keyboardist. And everyone humored the battered, probably brain-damaged Akard when his ad in some music magazine brought Jim Piston, a complete stranger, in from Houston.

And while her parents and the three bachelors had always joked about this being a commune, after January people had begun flowing in and it really *was* a commune. Jan’s home had changed. Uncle Akard had transformed into something unrecognizable. Hadn’t Uncle Bill maintained that there’d always been something powerful and strange in their formerly quietly eccentric roommate that the Cinder Block Incident *had* to bring out? But who could have foreseen the Akard Drearstone Group, “29 Stairway,” and the dizzy beginnings of national fame?